

REWRITING MEDEA

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TONI MORRISON
AND LIZ LOCHHEAD'S
POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES

MARIANNA PUGLIESE



Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton

Rewriting Medea: Toni Morrison and Liz Lochhead's Postmodern Perspectives

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PREFACE

Ever since Euripides, the story of Medea has attracted artists and writers who have wanted to reflect on the unfathomable, mysterious nature of the maternal instinct. Medea's infanticide, read as an ambiguous and contradictory cultural act, has made her a central figure in world literature, which has constantly gone back to her in books and plays from antiquity down to the modern day.

Starting from some considerations on the symbolic significance of the Female archetype and mythological symbolism in psychoanalysis, I have tried in the opening chapter to provide some tools for interpreting the themes involving the literary figure of Medea, who is certainly the most recent chronological development of that archetype. In the later chapters I have tried to analyze how these themes have been re-used or positively re-booted in our day by Toni Morrison and Liz Lochhead. These two late-twentieth-century versions of the myth analyze not only infanticide, but other basic features of the figure of Medea, such as gender and race, in relation to the Euripidean model and in the light of the various socio-anthropological and political questions linked to the historical and social condition of these women who were redefining the contours of the story in their works.

The original plot has been rewritten and readapted, and with it infanticide has been reworked and corrected. In Euripides' tragedy infanticide was treated as principally a cruel act of revenge, and only secondarily as an act of love towards her children, while the twentieth-century re-readings, working in the shadow of feminist theory, often regard it as an act of kindness and solicitude. And so Medea becomes the loving mother of *Beloved*, who kills her children to save them from a fate crueler than death, and who, for this noble reason, can only be proclaimed innocent; or the woman with the strong foreign accent who, in Liz Lochhead, reflects the national political conscience and encourages a fresh, strong sense of cultural identity.

The characteristically male features of a dogged desire for vengeance and an obsession with striking the enemy that has humiliated and offended her so deeply, bring Medea close to the great heroes of Homer and Sophocles. She is animated and driven by virile feelings

that the literary tradition had almost exclusively attributed to the heroic, strong, courageous man: in other words, the dominant male. It is precisely the male, aggressive component in her behavior, the subversive cultural element, and the ambiguity of the sexual roles in her story, that make Medea an extremely modern and significant prototype figure, whose socio-anthropological aspects continue to interest critics and infuse the twentieth-century re-writings. Aimed at illuminating the alterity of the ancient world, or seeking to universalize some features of the classical text in modern culture, the contemporary versions of the myth of Medea considered here tend to see the distinctive act of the myth – infanticide – in absolute terms as a moment of tragic retaliation, and identify Medea as a positive figure.



Unlike the system of bibliographical reference adopted for every other work cited in the text, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison will be cited by title alone. For Euripides' *Medea*, unless otherwise specified, the translation used will be that of Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963). For every other quote, unless otherwise specified, the translation will be mine.



I would like to thank all those who have contributed in different ways and at different times to the writing of this work, *in primis* Franca Ruggieri, without whom none of this would have been possible; Sarah Dunnigan, for her helpfulness and encouragement; my parents, to whom the work is dedicated, for their love and unconditional trust; and, last but not least, Mino, the wonderful love of my life.

INTRODUCTION

The very modernist idea of still being able to enter into debate with the tradition and establish a rapport of original creativity with it has given way in the post-modern age to the recycling of narrative material from the past in the bitter awareness of having arrived too late. For post-modern authors the relation with tradition has become just a burden to be carried, in the certainty of no longer being able to say anything that has not already been said. When the concepts of creativity and originality fail, art can no longer offer itself as ordered, harmonious form, but as a mere work of combination, re-reading and revision.

Modernist deconstruction, which offers to dismantle the logocentrism of western culture – its seeking an original, fixed meaning in the word and in reason – was, above all, the result of prizing everything that had been regarded as marginal and secondary, and in rethinking all the binary categories of traditional metaphysics. The dichotomies of two terms with antithetical meanings and connotations – binary hierarchies in which the first term always has positive centrality, while the second is relegated to a marginal, subordinate position – were dislocated and critically reconsidered before being re-presented from a different perspective. The concept of a unitary system was violently attacked in the name of apolysemic, heterogeneous poetics: multiplicity of sense at the expense of any claim to a single interpretation of the text, though this never meant absolute arbitrariness of interpretation. Giving up the tools of thought dear to humanism and the Enlightenment meant trying to go beyond the *λόγος* to reach the *μῦθος*, not with the idea of repudiating it, but of seeking common, shareable ground with it.

Modernist deconstruction was always accompanied by the desire to construct new narrative paradigms. Post-modernist texts, by contrast, emerge from fusing scraps of texts from the past and adroitly assembling citations drawn from the most disparate sources. While there was still a strong desire to break with the past in modernist experimentation, as well as the need to create new forms that could

interpret reality, the parodies and pastiches¹ of post-modernism are dominated by the game of combining the parts that have been assembled and that are always open to infinite, hybrid exchanges of mutual assimilation. Yet, a citation produces an extremely original relation between the text and its model: in the process of revision, the original text is so deeply assimilated to the new one that any distinction between copy and original is no longer possible².

Linda Hutcheon, who has thought long on the characteristics of post-modernist writing (1985: 11 and ff), sees parody and the overturning of models as some of its fundamental elements. The poetics of the second half of the twentieth century gave the categories of modernity a radical and relativist rethink, the concept of sense becoming plural and expressing itself in dissonance and fragmentation. The relation between what Genette calls hypotext and hypertext (1982) – between the text and its model, between source and citation – becomes the element that gives back meaning to writing. The direct line of descent is broken and new perspectives open up the text in new directions of sense; writing becomes an open, polyphonic space, in which the relation of reverent or irreverent subordination to the model gives way to a relation of total freedom, in which, as Borges recalls, it is now the writer who shapes his precursors, his work modifying the conception of both past and future (1963: 108).

No writer's work can be judged by and in itself; we need to understand it in its relation to its predecessors, and place the author in an already existing order that was concluded before the new work appeared, but which can be subverted or modified with its arrival. The continuity between old and new lies precisely in the new balance that has just been found: anyone who shares this idea, noted T.S. Eliot, will not be surprised to see the past modified by the present just as much as the present is inspired by the past³. Literature has

¹ In his canonical essay on literature in the second degree (*Palimpsests*, 1982), Genette makes a sharp distinction between parody and pastiche: the former consists in the transformation of a single text, while the latter in the imitation of a class of texts.

² In fact, one of the first definitions of pastiche was that of a hybrid work, halfway between copy and original. (See Hoesterey, 2001, chap. I).

³ «No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead» (*Tradition and the individual talent*, 1922: 49).

always fed on literature, and takes form in the relation that texts enjoy with the other texts that have preceded them. This is the idea of «intertextuality» (Kristeva, 1980) as an open system of citations that make of the new text a dynamic, changing place in which the word denies and recreates, re-codifies and re-establishes, and is fully defined and understood⁴.

In this scenario, the intertextual relation that twentieth-century literature re-established with Greek drama became particularly profound, given the alterity and remoteness of the earlier cultural system. New anti-totalitarian modes of experience and writing were sought that would not be enslaved by the model, but would be part of an unceasing dialogue between equals. The awareness that literary truth can only exist in intertextuality – in the multiplicity of texts that make it up – withdrew myth from the coercive referential reality of the event and projected it into an alternative reality in which we can distance ourselves from the mythical happening and the primary text that represents it, recreating it in a narrative game that involves and implies the author's subjectivity. No longer conditioned by reverence and imitation, the relation with the classics became more complex, expressing the need to say again what may already have been said, but to always include a gap, and always reveal a difference.

The dialectic relation between text and model further benefited from contributions from other fields, such as psychology and anthropology, and other artistic genres, such as the cinema and the theatre, which have brought the ancient world closer and helped it reverberate in the constraints of the present. Disciplines that were originally far removed from critical and literary practice *tout court*, like Marxism and psychoanalysis, began to be applied to literary themes and motifs, playing a fundamental role in focusing and defining a genuine thematic criticism⁵.

The initial championing of difference gradually gave way to a hybrid vision of identity, at which point literary theory – from feminist criticism to Afro-American studies – could show how close-knit was the texture of social discourses with which literature interacts. The literary text became a means by which one could elaborate a concept

⁴ Julia Kristeva re-christened Bachtin's dialogism with the technical term, intertextuality (1975: 445-482).

⁵ Yet, it must be admitted that, for all the efforts of literary theorists, it is almost impossible to find a single definition for this discipline and establish an apparatus of canonical rules to delimit it.

of cultural, ethnic and sexual identity, conceived as a social, and therefore composite and mutable, construction. The myth of Medea, more than others, seems to intercept some of the most pregnant themes in contemporary culture, particularly the contrast between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, the recent post-colonial debate and the speculations of feminist theory; and it is that which explains its extraordinary popularity.

But we must make a quick distinction between the relation with the myth and the relation with the primary text that represents it: in the specific case of Medea, with Euripides. Twentieth-century artists, with tirelessly prolific creativity, often tended to supplant the ancient text and re-shape the myth directly, often going back to its most archaic forms. In this way, the myth became the equivalent of a literary theme, one that could be dismantled into various thematic nuclei that, one by one, could proliferate further themes.

In this sense, Freudian aesthetics has made an important contribution to thematic criticism: after the ostracism it had suffered in the years of Structuralism, it has recently been revalued, to the point of having acquired a respectable position in literary criticism⁶. The great discovery that the unconscious has a logic and a language of its own, and that it can therefore be systematically interpreted despite the apparent illogicality of its manifestations, was exploited by the great artists who, in Freud's wake, distorted the most intimate, primary fantasies and dressed them up in literary clothing. The identification and interpretation of the themes in the works of an author were not limited to the sphere of intentional hermeneutics, but extended to the fascinating and terrible horizons of the unconscious. In this sense, thematic criticism established a profound relation with psychoanalysis and the pre-symbolic area of the consciousness where *reverie* – an author's poetic activity – begins. It transcended the false conception of analytic theory as no more than a hymn to the freeing of unconscious, repressed drives, and its contribution to literary criticism, particularly in its numerous studies of the imagination and the symbolism of myths and the extra-literary significance of archetypes, has continued to be strongly felt in recent times. Although it has been modified by later schools and attacked by cultural studies,

⁶ For bearings on thematic criticism, see D. Giglioli (2000) *Tema*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, W. Sollors (ed), (1993) *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, London, Harvard University Press, and C. Segre, *Tema / Motivo*, in *Avviamento all'analisi del testo letterario*, (1985) Torino, Einaudi.

Freudian aesthetics continues to be inexhaustibly suggestive for those who want to attempt a diachronic explanation of the presence of the same themes and myths in different ages and different cultures.

The various motifs of a myth are linked to the principle moments in the history of its reception, and, so, to the various authors who have salvaged them by remixing the quantities: Euripides, who was the first to fix Medea as the literary prototype of the conscious and deliberate murderous mother; Seneca, fascinated by the supernatural character of the witch of Colchis, whose traces would be followed by renaissance and baroque writers; and then the authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Grillparzer onwards, who tended to respond to the barbarian from the East who acts out her tragedy as a foreigner living in Greece. These *topoi*, which, respectively, represent the figure of the woman in love, devastated by the overwhelming power of eros; the demoniac figure linked to the superhuman dimension of witchcraft and magic; and the barbaric foreigner from the distant East who arrives in a strange and hostile land, were the basic themes of the myth, which became frames of cultural reference.

The myth of Medea is retold in the light of one of its thematic centers: placed center-stage, it is offered as an explanation of the infanticide, which, in a psychoanalytic perspective, is an example of Kleinian envy. The children are killed because, through them, she really wants to attack someone else – to be precise, the father who generated them. Sacrificing them allows Medea to genuinely interrupt her husband's line of descent, depriving him of his heirs by the infanticide, and symbolically interrupting his happy life by a vicarious substitution that satisfies her desire for vengeance. In the last analysis, the mother ends up turning on her child the aggression and conflict that she actually feels for the father, and that both external circumstances and her own inner dividedness prevent her from turning directly against him. In this way the child becomes the means to create suffering for or attract the attention of the person who is the real object of her hostility. Her hatred for the man who has betrayed and abandoned her is directed at the child who is the physical embodiment of the fruit of the union and is, for the mother, certainly a less fearsome antagonist.

However, in the infanticide's gesture we might glimpse the mother's hallucinatory desire for total possession of her children, with the obvious exclusion of the father, almost as if the child had been gen-

erated by parthenogenesis. In this sense, Medea's act would seem perfectly explicable, in obviously unconscious terms, as the need to retake possession of what is perceived as her own and that is actually experienced as total possession by the other. In this case too, the killing of the children coincides with the exclusion of the father figure from a deep, intimate relation that is the exclusive experience of the mother and her offspring. The all-absorbing bond between them is re-established through the symbolic return of the child to the maternal womb; in any case, the mother's re-appropriation of her children happens at the paradoxical price of their death.

The affinity between feminism, post-modernism and psychoanalysis consists precisely in its resistance to a fixed, and often stereotyped, identity, such as, for example, the equation Medea/murderous mother: the theme of the lack or loss of identity, which is often combined with that of physical monstrosity or sexual ambiguity, is frequent in contemporary female re-writings, and confirms the importance of the transfiguration of characters in the literary scene. A relation with tradition, which is in any case problematic and difficult, was historically precluded to women. Regarded as endemically weak and subaltern beings, their complex existence was for centuries recounted through often deceptive images created by the male culture that ended up taking the place of their deeper reality. The desire to fill this void and build on the ruins of the past a legitimate tradition of their own that might illuminate the shadowy areas of Western culture and at the same time free female creativity by exploiting their subjectivity, opened a debate about revising the prescriptive concepts of tradition and canon. Rejecting codified forms and genres, and starting from their position as outcasts, women therefore made difference the center of both their narrative and their poetics. And so ideological criticism of patriarchal thinking, on which the traditional idea of literature was based became the theme of a new form of writing that argued against, and offered a concrete alternative to, this thinking. Literature confronted existence and, opposing the ideological officialdom of power in all its forms, created effective strategies for repeating what had already been said – but subversively; using gender clash to examine significant moments of social life, literature became a hermeneutic tool of the present.

After centuries of a pitiless, diabolic Medea, the twentieth-century re-readings of the myth, particularly those by women, took a different path Euripides and Seneca, offering alternative solutions that were often mirror images of them. These re-readings of the myth by

women seem particularly significant as they produce a new echo of the original that resounds unfamiliarly, with surprising effects.

And so Euripides' Hellenization of the savage Medea became an anti-colonialist, anti-modernist, anti-Western assimilation of the barbarism and alterity of the foreigner, while Seneca's witch became a good, powerful healer. The crisis of the *λόγος*, typical of much of post-Enlightenment modern culture, therefore found itself in accord with the story of the barbarian woman who, because of her ethnic diversity, is deranged by her meeting with the Greek hero and the culture he represents. In the two re-readings presented here, the myth of Medea becomes, respectively, a political tool to denounce colonialism and overturn the dominant categories, and a revalued anthropological model of a barbarism that should be assimilated and sublimated by modernity; in both, the exaltation of a pre-symbolic vital force that calls up our ties with the Earth and the mystery of existence.

Freed of any frame of reference, the new voices of the women who write and re-write the myth move forward like unfettered slaves who have at last stopped seeing themselves in terms of their origins, and can set up a dialog that releases them from solitude and isolation. The killing of a child by a mother was, and remains, the subversive gesture *par excellence* in relation to the norm or reality expected by the collective imagination; in doing it, the person concerned, the mother, as woman, re-confirms her abjectness *par excellence*. Needing to redeem the figure of Medea and, so, restore her dignity and depth against all the prejudices that have relegated her over the centuries to the status of a terrible murderess, authors such as Liz Lochhead and Toni Morrison have rehabilitated her, wholly or in part, as a social and mythical subject, giving her a new position in the secular dimension of history through the timelessness of myth.

Medea: Symbolic Implications of the Myth

1. The Myth: Oral Tradition and Literature

Finding a satisfactory definition of myth is no easy task, but, as the etymology of the word suggests, myth is a transmitted narrative, a traditional story: for the ancient Greeks μῦθος was simply the «word», the «story», almost a synonym for λόγος or ἔπος, with the simple difference of being neither directly nor rationally demonstrable –indeed, completely unverifiable. Yet, myth's claim to truth, which, as truth, fulfills a social and collective function and is understood as a genuine moral story, follows from its intention to tell a story that is fundamentally sacred and universal.

In other words, a myth tells how, thanks to the deeds of supernatural beings, the cosmos, or a part of it, came into being. It is the narrative of a creation, of how something was produced or began to be, of how a part of inchoate reality became an object through the attribution of a name, and of how man then tried to explain to his reason its profoundly unfathomable nature. It provides an explanation and also a guarantee of the validity of the elements that make up the social, intellectual and moral patrimony of a culture: it projects into a more or less distant past the psychological needs of a society, setting them in a sacred context that legitimizes it. Paraphrasing Hans Blumenberg (1991: 25-58), a myth is the primitive elaboration of man's fear, the result of exorcizing his existential anguish and mastering the episodic 'tremenda' of recurrent cosmic phenomena. A myth is therefore a metaphor, something that is «placed before» the object of direct action, to keep at bay or simply weaken what humans sense as an uncontrollable danger.

The product of an archaic mentality, myth is often dominated by magic thinking: things, animals and natural phenomena seem to be animated and humanized, and metamorphoses of every kind are

possible in it; gods, heroes and men come together as a single whole in which the sacred and the profane act in absolute continuity. A myth is a narrative of fantastic and legendary events about divinities and ancient heroes or relations between man, nature and what is supernatural, and it is in some way linked to religious beliefs. Myths probably derived from the need to provide universal answers to the human questions about the mysteries of the cosmos and life, embodying natural phenomena, historic events and states of mind in concrete, palpable figures that can mirror the human condition. Myths, like fables, have been interpreted as the creation of a primitive humanity endowed with a lively imagination, but, unlike fables, they are not just tales of pure imagination: they have a sacred character and so require an act of faith. They are, above all, truth, or a way of approaching the truth that is particularly valid when we are entering regions not susceptible to exploration by rational thought.

Through narrative, then, myth seeks to reveal universal being, and for this reason it can be presented as a sacred story whose very origins are supernatural; the telling of a myth releases a message whose origin is lost in the mists of time and space: a message that comes from no specific sender, and for this very reason soon becomes part of tradition. Yet, every myth requires a means of transmission that, sooner or later, is fixed in more or less definitive written versions. At this point literature intervenes as the authentic keeper of the myth, which, otherwise, would often be lost and, so, unknowable. What would have become of Ulysses without Homer, or Oedipus without Sophocles? The myth always reaches us in the mantle of literature, becoming in turn literature itself.

In his essay on methodology entitled *Les Etudes de Thèmes* (1965) Raymond Trousson thought he could recognize a literary theme whenever a motif that seemed like a concept or an intellectual construct was fixed and defined in one or more characters, and whenever these characters then gave life to a genuine literary tradition. Like many other mythical figures, then, Eteocles and Polynices, Oedipus and Medea should be regarded as literary themes rather than literary myths, illustrating, respectively, the opposition between two brothers, incestuous love, and the betrayed barbarian who becomes a murderous mother. Yet, there is striking divergence among scholars in attributing meaning to these basic semantic units in the literary texts which can be called themes or motifs. In general, we tend to regard a motif as a smaller thematic unit, which represents an element of content, a situation that is part of the narrative totality of a

story, which is generally identified as the theme. For Ceserani, Domenichelli and Fasano (2007) the two terms are not subject to precise definition and are interchangeable. Although authors such as Cesare Segre (1985) and Elizabeth Frenzel (1962, 1976) have tried to give complete definitions of the two terms, the terminology has remained fairly tangled, and the difficulty in reaching an agreed definition of theme has remained fundamentally unsolved.

In recognizing the principle of the universality of myth in the adaptability of some of its constituent elements⁷, thematological studies define the relation between mythology and literature in terms of a fertile re-codification of the narrative material that, moving in different expressive codes, modifies its own textual status and is transformed from an ethno-religious tale into a genuine literary text. Only then would we want to call it a real literary myth, in the sense of a narrative that the author can freely manipulate and transform, giving it new meanings that bring out most fully its dynamics for that age.

The polysemic and universal nature of myth, which allows it to be constantly re-functionalized and to find itself at home in any age, is determined precisely in the intersection between mythical story and cultural history. The presence of ethno-religious myth in literature comes about through a process that Genette describes as transformation rather than imitation (1998: 7, 8) – that is to say, through the re-codification of the narrative material, which originated outside literature but is not extraneous to literature's creative processes. This process of transformation requires creative and often original intervention on the hypotext, in the course of which various interpretations can be adopted that more or less radically transform the hypertext in making the hypotext newly relevant, and therefore make possible innumerable rewritings of the myth and innumerable variations.

2. The Female and the Great Mother

In seeking to interpret the rewriting of the myth of Medea as a wholly female experience – of the heroine herself and of the three authors of these daring transpositions of the myth – I have had to make

⁷ Kerényi defines these aspects as archetypal models that, when enhanced with elements of a given culture, give rise to myth. Specifically, he speaks of «mythologem», which is the mythical material that is constantly reassessed, remodeled and shaped, like an endless river of images (1969: 15).

some remarks on the archetype of the Female which the mythical figure of Medea, the terrible mother, certainly calls up. Consequently, I have been unable to ignore the description of the Female, in the sense of a universal principle present since the most distant times, which Erich Neumann and analytical theory have provided in relation to the importance of the Archetype in the psychic life of the individual and in the collective unconscious⁸.

In *The Great Mother* (1955) Erich Neumann sees the *Female Archetype* as having an *elemental character* and a *transformative character*. The *elemental character* is the aspect that tends to keep everything that arises from and is contained in the female fixed and immobile. The elemental character's tendency to conserve, which has generally positive associations and is expressed in functions such as nurturing, offering protection and warmth, contrasts with the transformative character of the Female, an often negative expression of movement and change, novelty and transformation.

Both these characters, however, are carriers of the ambivalence that is typical of the Female Archetype, and of every Archetype in general, which, with a shift as sudden as it is paradoxical and inexplicable, allows positive and negative phenomena to be confused in an indistinct, ouroboros fusion⁹, reminiscent of the still undifferentiated primordial archetype. The Archetype's dynamism allows a phenomenon to shift into its opposite in ways incomprehensible and mysterious to the consciousness, which dissolves before its luminous fascination and so is unable to discriminate. «The tendency to relativize opposites is a notable peculiarity of the unconscious» (Jung, 1981: 36), which works by symmetries and generalizations¹⁰, with no respect for the logical principle of identity and non-contradiction formulated by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*. The archetype is an inner image, invisible and indescribable, a pre-existing mythological presence in the collective unconscious, universally known because intimately human.

⁸ See also Jung (1956, 1981).

⁹ The *Ouroboros*, symbolized by a circular serpent eating its tail, «is the symbol of the original psychic situation, in which man's consciousness and ego are still small and undeveloped» (Neumann, 1981: 29).

¹⁰ See Matte Blanco, *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets* (1975), in which he adds eight more characteristics of the unconscious to the five already formalized by Freud, tracing them back to two fundamental principles: that of symmetry and that of generalization.

The primordial image, the primordial symbol¹¹, then, is simply perceived by the unconscious and not yet thought or transformed into a concept by the consciousness: essentially mythical and instinctual, the primeval image can be faithfully represented only in the language of images and symbols. The positive elemental character of the Female, in Neumann's sense of a nature that generates and nourishes, protects and warms, deriving from the most immediate human experience – what we can see in the relation between mother and child – is flanked by the elemental negative character of the Female, more hidden and less evident, that derives from an inner experience, secret and unconscious, yet equally significant in constructing the Female archetype. So negative features too have a role in defining the Female and the maternal: «danger and distress, hunger and nakedness, appear as helplessness in the presence of the Dark and Terrible Mother» (Ibid: 149). Thus life and death, birth and destruction, are intimately linked with each other; and that is why Neumann calls this fearsome, terrifying Female «Great».

The first great manifestation of the powerful, limiting hostility of the Great Mother manifests itself when the elemental, solicitous protection of the womb gives way to expulsion into the transforming world, an event as necessary as it is violent and traumatic. The first great rejection by the mother is felt by every individual at the moment of birth: and being born thus becomes the cause of every ill¹². If birth is perceived by the new-born «as a rejection from the uterine paradise» (Neumann, 1981: 68), what makes birth possible – pregnancy – is the first way in which the mother can probe her transformative character. The woman transforms both her body and her child's, and this transforming character therefore appears from the start as «connected with the problem of the *thou* relationship» (ibid: 31), the dialectic relation with what is other than oneself. In fact, it seems that the maternal instinct is not a universal feeling, but develops only secondarily in a woman, when it brings advantages and can

¹¹ The function of the symbol in this sense is indicated by its etymology: *σύμβολον* < *σύμ-βάλλω*, I put together).

¹² «Nasce l'uomo a fatica, ed è rischio di morte il nascimento. Prova pena e tormento per prima cosa; e in sul principio stesso la madre e il genitore il prende a consolar dell'esser nato». (G. Leopardi, *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, 1831), («Man struggles to be born, and birth is the risk of death. The first thing he feels is pain and anguish; and from the very start his mother and father console him for being born»).

act usefully. Maternal love is not so much a primary instinct, as the consequence of the establishing of a relation, or rather the feeling that grows up in a relation. Not nature, then, but experience and the socio-cultural context of experience, develop a mother's feeling for her offspring: the first and most instinctive reaction of the mother when faced with her new-born baby is often that of rejection and repulsion.

In Neumann's view, the development of patriarchal values meant also a cultural bias in favor of consciousness – and the male gods of light and the sun – at the expense of the archetype of the Female, the personalization of primordial semi-goddesses like Circe or Medea reducing them to little more than wicked witches, their power and splendor debased. As a result, the negative dimension of the Archetype now seems primordial or unconscious, and the unconscious is symbolized as feminine. The unconscious, like the moist, subterranean world of the woman's womb and the belly of the earth, shapes, generates and transforms, and for this reason it is symbolically female. In a numinous, symbolic place, secret and archetypal, then, «anguish, horror and fear of danger» (Ibid: 147) are hidden, and the fecund womb of the mother and the earth becomes the deadly, devouring uterus of the tomb.

Thus, to be able to understand and visualize the horror of such an inhuman, terrifying anguish, and to try to explain how much more *monstrous*¹³ it seemed to him, man¹⁴ had to resort to mythical images with which he could exorcize his fear: and so, fantastic, chimerical female images¹⁵, from the Gorgons to the Erinyes, from the Furies to

¹³ The adjective «monstrous» >lat. *monstrum* (what is presented, what is manifest, visible) refers to what surprises in its presenting itself, what fascinates and frightens at the same time, as well as the wonder and disquiet when faced with what is not immediately understandable or verifiable.

¹⁴ In this connection see Patrizia Adami Rook, *Le due Femminilità: la crisi della coscienza femminile nel sogno e nel mito* (1983) where, in sharp contrast with Neumann's theory, the author claims that the Great Mother and the Female are specifically male unconscious images and not human in the wider sense; they are simply some of the many representations of woman made by man, and so cannot be regarded as Archetypes or self-depictions of the Female.

¹⁵ Yet, representations of the Terrible Mother often possess phallic characteristics and male attributes that make them still more fearsome in their castrating power and make her an almost bisexual or sexually amorphous being. Citing some examples taken from the pre-Greek world (3500-1750 BCE), we need only recall the Gorgons, with their boar's tusks, and the

Medusa, embody in their fascinating monstrosity and the menacing forms of witches, magicians and vampires, the most intimate, obscure, fearsome and powerful side of the Female.

3. The Mystery of Female Fluids: Weakness Becomes Strength

The transformative, creative character of woman, which is fundamentally disquieting, negative and uncontrollable, therefore seems all the more disturbing, the more it appears to be intimately connected with the deep-seated mysteries linked to the blood: menstruation, pregnancy and the production of milk. The woman is an uncontainable mass of emotions and contradictions, of devastating drives and messy, confused fluxes that need to be held back in the chaos from which they arise. In this sense, the phantasm of fluids, which analytical theory has reflected on extensively (Freud, 1905 and Klein, 1957, 1975b), tries to explain the irresistible power of female excitement by identifying a subtle link with the fluid emissions that burst from the woman's body in the same overwhelming and uncontrollable way.

The woman, whose sexual being displays deficiency¹⁶, the result of an atavistic, congenital deprivation, seeks to fill this great void of hers with the inexhaustible *more* of the other sex, or to compensate her lack with the too much of herself, which thus becomes excess and overflowing. Eternally inscrutable and mysterious, strange, and, so, seemingly hostile (Freud, 1918), she risks contaminating the man with her femininity, and it is this that frightens him¹⁷.

snake-haired Medusa: teeth, like snakes, are certainly symbols of the destructive nature of the Female, as well as qualities almost exclusively connected with male power.

¹⁶ According to analytical theory, a woman's sexual identity is determined by an initial emasculation. The castration complex, or rather, the «female masculinity complex», as Freud himself redefined it in the *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex* (1924), derives from the woman's renewed fear of being deprived of her penis, imagining she possessed it before losing it by castration. (Freud, *Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes* (1925), *Female Sexuality* (1931), *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (1899), *The Sexual Enlightenment of Children* (1907), *On the Sexual Theories of Children* (1908), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*).

¹⁷ The complex of female castration becomes a genuine fear of castration in a man, who fears losing his penis, usually because of a female figure, as once again a possibility in the future.

A male immature in his development, who experiences himself only as male and phallic, perceives the Feminine as a castrator, a murderer of the phallus [...] intensifies the terrible character of the Feminine. Thus the Terrible Goddess rules over desire and over the seduction that leads to sin and destruction; love and death are aspects of one and the same Goddess. (Neumann, 1981: 172)

The memory or the renewal of the threat of emasculation «arouses a terrible state of emotion in [the boy] and forces him to believe in the reality of the threat which he has hitherto laughed at. This combination of circumstances leads to two reactions, which [...] will [...] permanently determine the boy's relations to women: horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her» (Freud, 1925: 251). The woman's strength arises precisely from her weakness and absence: yet, corresponding to her lack of sperm will be her production of milk, and her turgid and excretory breast will make her so unattractively phallic and fearsome in the eyes of a man that she will become a real threat to him. Milk, then, no longer seen as merely nutriment for the child, but as orgasmic fluid of sensual pleasure and power, of force and vitality, feeds the man's castration fear, his terror of being emasculated by a plausible «*other*», with whom he needs to compete, if he is to survive. In addition, as he can only be born but cannot give birth to a new creature, he remains fixed in the first moment of his birth, that single happy event on which any attempt on his part to rejoin his mother will depend, until death alone allows him to recover the original oneness by returning to the darkness that had generated him.

Only women give birth, and the male cannot grasp the sense of this specific mode of being. Being a mother is a wholly female way of being, unknown to the man, who seeks in vain to understand its mystery, just as he tries in vain to resist the deadly rage of which a woman is capable when she decides to avenge a wrong done her. The power and mystery of creation are female, numinous secrets, before whose obscurity the man can only withdraw helpless.

Being born means separating, managing to detach oneself from the mother so as to be able to exist: but giving birth means having to separate, and for this reason it is doubly painful. In giving birth, a woman dies and is reborn, because she becomes a mother and knows what it means to experience separation as a moment neces-

sary for the *individuation*¹⁸ of the new being. Nevertheless, she has none of her creature's dejection, but only the omnipotence and force of the creator, able to destroy her creature without hesitation or pity. «When the mother goddess avenges herself, the female will not allow herself to be fertilized, or she aborts her fruits» (Adami-Rook, 1983: 59); she is willing to repeat the sacrifice and destroy the fruits of her own womb, thus becoming the mythical monster-hero in which every woman can recognize herself and from whom she can learn (Eliade, 1958).

The archetypal relationship between death and birth is intensified by their symbolic connection with loss and sacrifice, and fertility forms a unity with sacrifice of the phallus, castration and blood. (Neumann, 1981: 202)¹⁹

Paraphrasing Sheridan Le Fanu, there can be no bloodless sacrifice, and the sacrifice required by any act of love, any act of creation – whether physical or artistic – is necessarily a blood sacrifice²⁰.

4. The Ambivalent Nature of Milk

Like writing, breast-feeding is such a carnal experience that it cannot be forgotten, either by the child or by the mother. The child will go on yearning for a woman's breast in future, as it will remind him of a pleasure he has already experienced; while the mother, who in certain forms of depression connected with weaning identifies the baby as a vampire, prolongs the breast-feeding, almost as if she wanted to put off forever the moment of a fundamentally impossible separation.

The Great Mother returns with all her cannibalistic power to devour her children, in a primal, indistinct desire for self-preservation (Freud, 1914), and the drives of the Ego, whose only end is the preservation of the individual, ride roughshod over the sexual drives, which aim at the preservation of the species. Considering the classic split between a «good» breast, which feeds and protects, and a «bad»

¹⁸ Actually, woman escapes the *principium individuationis* as her body is not etymologically «in-dividual», though it can become two from one.

¹⁹ See also Freud, 1905.

²⁰ «Love will have its sacrifices. No sacrifice without blood» (Le Fanu, J. S., 2000: 123).