Reflection Statement

'Mythrepresentation' explores notions of revisionist myth-making within selected works[53] of Margaret Atwood. It reveals mythological narratives as potent tools utilised by patriarchy to authorise their dominance over women and suggests that they conflate the multifaceted nature of female identities and expression into the repressive dichotomy of angel/monster. Margaret Atwood has revised these narratives from a female perspective to 'evolve a gynocentric language that counters constructed images of women'[54] producing a space where women can articulate their individual and distinctive experiences.

Greco-Roman mythology and the ancient epics of Homer have always fascinated me. However, through my studies in English, I began to question the subject positions women occupied within these narratives. Female plurality has been silenced by an oppressive chorus of male heroes and patriarchal gods. Utilising the time of relaxation that the Christmas holidays afforded me, I decided to binge the first season of The Handmaid's Tale. I was hooked. I immersed myself in all things Atwood, beguiled by her trademark wit, fervent cynicism, and her brutally blunt use of language. Her thematic preoccupation with the mythological is salient in her diverse corpus; she sees these narratives 'as foundation stones for new renderings that find their meanings within their own times and place.'[55]

This serendipitous revelation enabled me to amalgamate various spheres of interest, demarcating my inquiry into Atwood's revisionist project. My work was undoubtedly a

---

[53] Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (New York: Canongate, 2005); Atwood, "Circe / Mud Poems."
[54] Major Work pg. 6
[55] Atwood, "The Myths Series and Me," p.1.

passion project, with my attraction to gender constructions catalysed through my English studies.

The comparative study of Austen and Weldon allowed me to understand the power of female writing in challenging the restrictive social constraints[56] assigned to women and supplemented my exploration of Atwood's reappraisal of gender formulations in mythology. The repressive female archetypes of 'angel' and 'monster,' - a seminal dichotomy deconstructed in my work - is a common trope through my English studies. Arthur Miller exemplifies this dichotomy through contrasting Elizabeth - the devoted wife - against Abigail's 'endless capacity for disassembling' positioning Abigail as a scheming and wicked woman. Perfect female chastity and fertility finds potent form through *The Tempest's* Miranda; the ideal object of the patriarchal gaze (O, if a virgin, and your affection not gone forth, I'll make you The Queen of Naples.)[57] I was prompted to ask myself a pivotal question that lies at the very core of my work: How does an archetypal Miranda, Elizabeth or Abigail re-invent herself when her existence is constructed and produced through a phallocentric lens?

Perhaps the answers can be found in the works of Kate Millet[58] and Helene Cixous.[59] Here, I procured my understanding of critical feminist neologisms such as patriarchy, phallocentricism, gynocriticism and *écriture feminine*, shaping the diction of my work.

---

[56] Fergus contends that Austen's work 'created and sustained a market for domestic fiction by women,' challenging the Regency Era belief that, for women, 'publishing her own writing could threaten a woman's reputation as well as her social position.' Jan Fergus, "The Professional Woman Writer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 13, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521495172.003.

[57] William Shakespeare, Linzy Brady, and David James, *The Tempest*, Third edition, Cambridge School Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 37.

[58] Millett, *Sexual Politics*.

[59] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa."

Ostriker's 'Thieves of Language' and Rich's 'When We Dead Awaken' formed the foundation for my theoretical examination of revision. Ostriker's observation that 'It is thanks to myths we believe that women must be either angel or monster,' engendered my selection of 'The Penelopiad' and 'Circe/Mud Poems' as my core texts, allowing me to investigate Atwood's revision of various archetypes of female subjectivity in myths: Penelope as 'angel' and Circe as 'monster.' This research was highly influential to my Major Work, enabling me to apply feminist principles and theories to my examination of Atwood's works. Ostriker's reflection that revisionist myth-making possesses 'no faith that the past is a repository of truth[60],' sparked my research into postmodern theory. Postmodernism's rejection of objective truth and its espousal of the multiplicity of narrative discourse is salient in my examination of Atwood's 'obfuscation of absolute truth' in *The Penelopiad.* Jameson's 'Postmodernism'[61] and Lyotard's 'The Postmodern Condition'[62] provided me with an outline of postmodern theory, assisting in my understanding of pastiche and parody.

Ostriker's postulation that revisionist myth-makers use experimental forms and features to mirror new meanings being transmitted through their works,[63] incited my investigation into innovative textual forms. In my reading of past candidates' Major Works[64], ficto-critical forms were a reoccurring trope, described as a fluid and hybrid style which merges traditional academic writing and fictive elements, 'enabling creative freedom and flair otherwise limited within traditional critical responses.[65]' The literary territory occupied by ficto-criticism holds

---

[60] Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language," 87.
[61] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 11. printing in paperback, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005).
[62] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
[63] Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language," 82.
[64] Sally Rodzen, "The Craft of Translation," in *Young Writers Showcase 13: A Selection of Outstanding Writing by Young Australians*, 2014; Student Number: 29525337, "Undressing Gender Performativity" (n.d.).
[65] Student Number: 29525337, "'Undressing Gender Performativity' Reflection Statement" (n.d.), 2.

the possibility for a myriad of perspectives to exist simultaneously, 'enabling the interrogation and the shifting of the normative boundaries of the academic essay'[66] offering 'opportunities for the expression of new knowledge…in ways that the more closed and traditional systems of criticism and analysis do not.'[67]

My form serves a dual purpose. It functions as a practical application of revisionist myth-making, and it supplements and enhances the themes and concepts of my critical analysis. Simultaneously, it carries out a self-conscious meta-criticism, where it re-evaluates traditional scholarly writing as a way of representing knowledge within the academic world.

The 400 words of my poetry are far weightier than the word count suggests. In the framing poem sequence, 'A (Test)imony of Woman,' the persona is constructed by a series of nefarious tests, confined to an existence as 'enclosed, liquid, in a glass test tube,' symbolising the constructed nature of women in myths. This characterisation extends to the final poem, where the persona is forced to construct her world out of the language of her oppressor's prescriptive rhyme scheme. However, paralleling the concerns of revisionist myth-makers, she defiantly talks-back to the institutions that have restricted her existence and use of language; 'You expect me to rhyme?' She evolves a free-verse form, symbolically, transforming into a phoenix, where its mythological connotations of rebirth and restoration display her extrication from the patriarchal realm of mythology. She is able to construct her own mode of language in which to exist, creating her own form of mythopoeia, mirroring Atwood's revisionist project.

---

[66] Anne Brewster Brewster, "Fictocriticism: Pedagogy and Practice," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 2013, 90.

[67] Donna Maree Hancox and Vivienne Muller, "Excursions into New Territory: Fictocriticism and Undergraduate Writing," *New Writing* 8, no. 2 (July 2011): 148, https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2011.564632.

The placement of my poetry is consciously crafted, working in tandem with my analysis to heighten the concepts being explored in my critical writing. For example, 'The Chorus Line: Arachnids are Cunning Creatures' supplements the preceding analysis of Penelope as 'the invisible spider,'[68] reinforcing my analysis through practical application. Concurrently, it introduces the Maids' function as 'a retort to Penelope's omniscient and omnipotent narration,'[69] establishing my argument for the following section.

The implementation of scientific motifs and analogies in my poetry is not inconsequential. By utilising these motifs, I deconstruct the binary between the arts and sciences, bringing to the fore the plurality and relativity of knowledges within epistemology. My Major Work poses provocative questions of itself. It asks, How is it that we perceive, construct and disseminate knowledge within the academic world? Why has the essay format been legitimised over other forms of writing in academia? Inspired by my exploration of truth in *The Penelopiad*, my form reflects a postmodern sentiment in the rejection of objective truth, acting as a self-conscious reappraisal of the academic essay as a purported work of immutable truth.

The introduction to a multitude of textual mediums within my English studies has enhanced my understanding of unorthodox forms, allowing for the formation of my ficto-critical style. My critical investigation of Yeats influenced the production of my poetic voice, augmenting my knowledge of poetic features and conventions. The hybridity of generic forms in *The Left Hand of Darkness* has allowed to me apprehend the postmodern rejection of a 'linear and

---

[68] Major Work pg. 12
[69] Major Work pg. 17

mono-logic schematisation of reality,'[70] foregrounding the re-evaluation of epistemology that takes place through my form.

Aligning with my experimental form, the intended audience of my work are those interested in innovative modes of literature. An understanding of Homer's Odyssey is required, specifically the narratives of Circe and Penelope, as well as a prior comprehension of feminist terms. The foreknowing of these conditions enhances the audience's reception of my work. As such, my primary audience are those working in feminist fields of academia and particularly those who are attracted to explorations of gender constructions within literature.

I envisage my work being suited to an experimental publication such as *Overland*. The journal's mission statement reveals a preoccupation with 'showcasing brilliant and progressive fiction, poetry, nonfiction and art,'[71] fostering the creation of innovative forms of writing. Overland's audience would be receptive to my experimental form and content and attracted to the interrogation and re-evaluation of epistemology that takes place within my work.

I am incredibly proud of the work I have produced; it has enabled me to pursue an inquiry that has thoroughly piqued my interest. I conclude my Major Work with an ambiguous rhetorical question, 'Do you know what happens to fire and glycerine?'[72] What happens is not clearly defined. This ambiguity allows a multiplicity of simultaneous possibilities, where, as Lauter contends, 'since [the persona] does not articulate her dream fully, we are encouraged

---

[70] Major Work pg. 7
[71] Jacinda Woodhead, "About Overland," accessed August 18, 2018, https://overland.org.au/about/.
[72] Major Work pg. 34

to dream it ourselves.'[73] This perennial question extends across the boundaries of gender, where the audience is exhorted to ask this question of themselves and their constructed lives. In a modern world, what are the cultural mythologies that control our behaviour, beliefs and lives? What power do they have over us? And significantly, what power do we have to change them?

So, I leave you with one final question. Do *you* know what happens to fire and glycerine?

---

[73] Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers*.

Bibliography (Major Work and Reflection Statement)

Atwood, Margaret. "Circe / Mud Poems." In *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry, 1965-1995*.
London: Virago, 2010.

———. *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960-1982*. Toronto : Etobicoke, ON:
Anansi ; Distributed in Canada by General Distribution Services, 2000.

———. "Spotty Handed Villainesses: Problems Of Female Bad Behaviour In The Creation
Of Literature." 1994.

———. "The Myths Series and Me." PublishersWeekly.com, November 28, 2005.
https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/
37037-the-myths-series-and-me.html.

———. *The Penelopiad*. New York: Canongate, 2005.

Brewster, Anne Brewster. "Fictocriticism: Pedagogy and Practice." *Journal of the
Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 2013, 89–92.

Carter, Angela. "Notes from the Front Line." In *Shaking a Leg*, 26–30. Ed. Jenny Uglow.
London: Chatto & Windus, 1997.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen.
Signs 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93.

Fergus, Jan. "The Professional Woman Writer." In *The Cambridge Companion to Jane
Austen*, 32–57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521495172.003.

Hancox, Donna Maree, and Vivienne Muller. "Excursions into New Territory: Fictocriticism
and Undergraduate Writing." *New Writing* 8, no. 2 (July 2011): 147–58.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2011.564632.

Howells, Coral Ann. "Five Ways of Looking at 'The Penelopiad.'" *Sydney Studies in English* 32 (2008).

———, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction: 'The Pastime of Past Time.'" In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 11. printing in paperback. Post-Contemporary Interventions. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005.

Johnston, Gordon. "'The Ruthless Story and the Future Tense' in Margaret Atwood's 'Circe/ Mud Poems.'" *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études En Littérature Canadienne* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1980). https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/7942.

Jung, Susanne. "'A Chorus Line': Margaret Atwood's Penelopiad at the Crossroads of Narrative, Poetic and Dramatic Genres." *Margaret Atwood*, 2015, 22.

Kapuscinski, Kiley. "Ways of Sentencing: Female Violence and Narrative Justice in Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad." *Essex Human Rights Review* 4, no. 2 (2007).

Khalid, Saman, and Irshad Ahmad Tabassum. "The Penelopiad : A Postmodern Fiction," no. 1 (2013): 13.

———. "The Penelopiad : A Postmodern Fiction." *The Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences; Peshawar* 21, no. 1 (April 2013): 17–28.

Kroll, Jeri. "'I Am A Desert Island': Postmodern Landscapes in Margaret Atwood's 'Circe/Mud Poems.'" *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 96, no. 1 (November 2001): 114–34. https://doi.org/10.1179/aulla.2001.96.1.008.

Lauter, Estella. *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women*.

> Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *Libidinal Economy*. Theories of Contemporary Culture.

> Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

———. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Theory and History of

> Literature, v. 10. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Neethling, Gabrielle. "Margaret Atwood's Exploration of Homer's Penelope in Her Novella."

> *English Academy Review* 32, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 115–31.

> https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2015.1086162.

Occhiolini, Alessandra. "Mired in Mud: Circe, Atwood, and the Female Mythmaker," 2016.

Ostriker, Alicia. "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking."

> *Signs* 8, no. 1 (1982): 68–90.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English* 34, no. 1

> (October 1972). https://doi.org/10.2307/375215.

Rodzen, Sally. "The Craft of Translation." In *Young Writers Showcase 13: A Selection of*

> *Outstanding Writing by Young Australians*, 2014.

Salas, Gerardo Rodríguez. "Close as a Kiss: The Challenge of The Maids' Gyn/Affection in

> Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad." *Margaret Atwood* 7 (2015): 17.

Shakespeare, William, Linzy Brady, and David James. *The Tempest*. Third edition.

> Cambridge School Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Student Number: 29525337. "Undressing Gender Performativity," n.d.

———. "'Undressing Gender Performativity' Reflection Statement," n.d.

Woodhead, Jacinda. "About Overland." Accessed August 18, 2018.

    https://overland.org.au/about/.

Yeats, W. B., and Richard J. Finneran. "The Second Coming." In *The Collected Poems of*

    W.B. Yeats, Rev. 2nd ed., 1st Scribner paperback poetry ed. New York: Scribner

    Paperback Poetry, 1996.