



*Degré Second*

STUDIES IN FRENCH LITERATURE

## 5. Mythic Choices in Conflict in Yourcenar, Hébert and Desvignes

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Myths tell stories and the stories they tell contain attitudes about the genders incarnated in the mythic characters. Myths bear the mark of history. As invaders and new ideologies conquer a land, the mythic stories change to satisfy the new masters and to rationalize and justify changing social practices. Sometimes the more recently established mythic choice of a society never succeeds in fully extinguishing a previous, contradictory choice. This earlier choice lies entrenched in its people's national and/or poetic consciousness and in times of crisis may arise as a solace and as catalyst for growth or change.

If we accept the mythological hypothesizing of Robert Graves and Joseph Campbell, a culture's mythic choices are rarely clear-cut. Graves systematically uncovers a prehistoric matriarchal mythic paradigm and its correlative ritual behind the well-known polished facades of the later versions of the Greek myths and the Hebrew creation myth of Adam and Eve.<sup>1</sup> Matriarchal myth postulates the primacy of the Great Goddess or Great Mother as creatrix and organizer of the universe. The ritual of her worship included the annual sacrifice of the king, who was the Goddess's consort and subordinate to her, and his replacement by a new king who would suffer the same fate at the end of the year. This ritual expressed the primitive belief that life could only proceed from death, in a revolving ritual emulating the cyclical change of the seasons. The willing extinction and symbolic resurrection of the God/king and his cyclical union with the Goddess/queen ensured the perpetuation of all aspects of life in the natural environment. Without this ritual it was believed that spring would not follow winter, neither humans nor animals would be fertile, and crops would die.

Aside from the gruesome aspect of male sacrifice, which entailed castration, burning or drowning, and dismemberment, Goddess worship had the salubrious effect of underlining the solidarity of all manifestations of life, the sacredness of sex, the inextricable link between life and death, and the power of the feminine. Goddess religion allowed for the simultaneous existence of opposites, especially as far as the feminine is concerned. Woman was creatress and destructress. She was Queen of the Heaven and Earth Mother. She was lover as well as mother and mediator of the cosmic and creative forces.

Later patriarchal versions of the myth seek in revenge to neutralize the powerful feminine, desexualize her, and compartmentalize her into a series of weaker goddesses. The Father becomes enthroned as the supreme creative force and the heroic masculine, ego-dominating mode is stressed. Woman is merely a vessel who nourishes the father's seed. The Hebrew creation myth likewise excises the feminine from the sacred power source, allows man to bear the first woman from a rib in his body, as Zeus bore Athena from his head,

and blames she who would have knowledge and power for bringing sin and death into the world.

When writers use mythic stories or patterns to structure their texts, whether consciously or unconsciously, they choose between contrasting mythic paradigms, the matriarchal and the patriarchal, with their inherently different gender visions. When we analyze French literature and popular folklore, patterns and practices emerge pointing to both types of mythic choices. While a patriarchal tradition based on Greco-Roman influence has dominated, a matriarchal countercurrent has also existed owing in part to the particular strength of Goddess worship in France. The literature of courtly love celebrated submission to, and desire for, the exalted Dame. The Romantic poet was inspired by his muse and his poetry expressed a yearning for a return to the mother (to nature, to sentiment and emotion, even to the tomb). The surrealist poet through union with woman, hoped to attain a privileged, unfettered realm of reality.

Each of these instances of the resurgent feminine principle in male-authored literature came in times of social upheaval (the Crusades, the Revolution and its after-shocks, and World War I) which allowed for a shuffling of the gender status quo and permitted a breakdown of social and literary constraints and conventions. As Otto Rank has stated, "every revolution which strives for the overthrow of masculine dominance shows the tendency to return to the mother."<sup>2</sup> This mother, perceived with longing and anxiety alike harks back to the physical mother of infancy, (what Dorothy Dinnerstein has called the "magically powerful goddess mother of infancy"<sup>3</sup>), but also to the perpetuated archetype of the love/death goddess of prehistory. The French artist's choice of matriarchal myth stems then both from the universal resurgence of the feminine in times of crisis and from the particular survival of archetypes and folk practices associated with his people's ancient worship of a powerful female deity.

An analysis of *L'Oeuvre au Noir* by Marguerite Yourcenar, *Kamouraska* by Anne Hébert, and *Les Noeuds d'argile* by Lucette Desvignes allows us to trace the Great Mother's legacy through the prospective of contemporary women writing in French. These writers are particularly interesting for the excellent quality of their texts as well as for their differing national origins (Belgian/French, French-Canadian, and Burgundian French respectively). In their works we witness simultaneous and conflicting matriarchal and patriarchal mythic choices. The primary mythic choice, deriving from the author's personal and historico-cultural circumstances, is undermined by a secondary mythic choice, a sort of mythic denominator. The chafing of the two creates conflict and thus the dramatic tension of the novel. Each of these authors uses the notion of the return to the mother, either as primary or secondary mythic choice, for the solace, liberation, and growth that their male literary forbearers had sought. None neglects the necessary element of sacrifice. But each uses matriarchal myth in a unique way suited to her personal vision.

In the case of Marguerite Yourcenar, personal history preconditions her primary mythic choice. Yourcenar's mother died nine days after giving birth to her only child. Raised by her father exclusively, guilty and angered by the death of her mother as Linda Stillman has suggested<sup>4</sup>, and unconsciously fearful of the mortal dangers of childbearing (her grandmother and great-grandmother had also died following childbirth)<sup>5</sup> Yourcenar tends to deny the feminine. Her work is self-protective, self-effacing, "fathered-identified." She strictly adheres to historical accuracy and legitimate, authoritative, masculine modes of expression. Male protagonists personify her most important literary visions.

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Female portrayal amounts to a betrayal as women are both quantitatively and qualitatively reduced in Yourcenar's work. They typically suffer tragic fates as scorned lovers or death-bound nurturers. Maleficent female mythical beings (who lure men only to destroy them) abound. Yourcenar clearly prefers simple, passive, nurturing creatures to embody the feminine in women.

A patriarchal mythic choice then governs *L'Oeuvre au Noir*; specifically, the kabbalistic myth of Adam Kadmon, or man alone before the advent of Eve. However, as we might expect from Yourcenar's Belgian/French national origins, shards of matriarchal mythic material lie buried in her psyche. But the matriarchal must become transfigured in an acceptable way to her predominantly male-identified literary imagination. So it is within her male protagonist that Yourcenar resolves her conflicting patriarchal and matriarchal mythic choices.

Zénon, the heretical alchemist and doctor of *L'Oeuvre au Noir*, is the illegitimate son of a suffering, scorned woman (a recurrent type as we have noted). Zénon spends his childhood abandoned by his mother. Deprived of the positive experience of the nurturing, good mother, Zénon views women either indifferently or in their devouring archetypal aspect. The animus traits of intellectuality and rationality dominate him; he develops a rigid persona, a hardened mask, to protect his vulnerable ego.

However, while living his solitary masculine ideal and rejecting women, Zénon develops the mythical feminine within himself. As an alchemist, he belongs to an all-male celibate society; but, as Eric Neumann says, the practitioner of this occult art draws on his feminine, chamanistic side.<sup>6</sup> As a doctor, he practices the healing arts associated with the feminine for millennia. As evidence of his female mythic identification, the serpent for him is a symbol of wisdom and immortality, not the maligned, evil creature of patriarchal myth.

The metaphor of fire characterizes Zénon's mythic ambivalence. Although, as an alchemist, he devotes his life to the mastery of the furnace-enclosed masculine fire, raging feminine fires seem to haunt him. Bonfires from the earliest times in Europe marked fertility rites associated with Goddess worship; but in the Renaissance they were converted into the patriarchal purifying fires of the witchcraze. Drawn to the male contemplative fire, Zénon is also lured by a series of these raging feminine fires which might be said to stand for his anima rising. He is also to be sure terrified at the prospect of being burned at the stake.

Breaking down *L'Oeuvre au Noir* into its component parts, we witness first Zénon's external quest to be "plus qu'un homme" and second the circular return to his native Bruges where his feminine self makes increasingly strident demands. He comes to realize that his quest must be internal requiring disintegration and reformulation of the self as in ancient goddess myth. Zénon plunges into the abyss, primeval symbol of femininity central to "l'oeuvre au noir." There he dissolves his too rigidly defined patriarchal self through a return to his own feminine depths. Like the philosopher/king of alchemical tradition whom Jung has described, Zénon arises from the transmutation process purified and selfless, reborn from the Mother and reflecting her essence.<sup>7</sup>

Zénon's psycho-alchemical death and rebirth through the feminine repeats itself in the imagery of his actual death by suicide. First, he projects the image of a spirit child through a psychic self-fertilizing and begetting. Next, he visualizes a sun bleeding into the sea. This vital reabsorption into the watery depths is a maternal death according to Bachelard. Zénon drowns the consuming fires of his anima through the metaphoric merging with Mother. Finally, the sun rises out of sea in a radiant rebirth beyond sexual



difference. Transported from the mortal human field to the celestial realm of light, he makes the final ecstatic leap beyond the ceaseless cycle of deaths and births where day and night meet and contradictions are resolved.

Turning to *Kamouraska* by the French-Canadian Anne Hébert we now encounter a powerful matriarchal mythic choice undercut by the conflicting demands of a passively-defined femininity in a patriarchal society. Since Québec has mythologized the strong, fertile, nurturing mother who holds together the fabric of society, it is not surprising to find that matriarchal myth dominates the fiction of one of her writers. In a letter to me, Hébert avowed her belief in the power of women and the influence of strong women who surrounded her in childhood. Probing her work, it becomes clear that Hébert wishes to empower women at the expense of men. In order to do so, she rejects the specifically French-Canadian maternal myth and delves more deeply into her inherited French psychic structures. There she resuscitates the ancient mythic female whose sexuality overrides her maternity. The structure of her narrative follows the paradigm of the archetypal goddess whose new consort must kill the old king, like the model of the original Clytemnestra myth.

Hébert's use of matriarchal myth resembles Yourcenar's in that both invent protagonists who plumb the unconscious mind in search of self-enlightenment and rebirth. But, where Yourcenar portrays a disembodied feminine in the male psyche, Hébert empowers *woman* herself through the mythic feminine. Her protagonist, Elisabeth, who has murdered her abusive husband through the proxy of her lover, twenty years later during a drug-induced sleep re-imagines the original events surrounding the murder scheme, for which she is subsequently acquitted. Throughout the text she is caught between her patriarchal role as irreproachable and submissive wife of her second husband, M. Rolland, and that of her matriarchal, authentic self who lusts for freedom and union with her chosen lover. In her unconscious imaginings she sheds the guilt of her murderous act and labels it a sacred rite. In her "king must die" mentality, Elisabeth links love and death in an equation inherited from her most primitive matriarchal foremothers. Justice, she asserts, can be established only by fire and the blood of sacrifice. The identity with Goddess ritual is so complete that she connects the fertility of the land with the murderous rite. Unlike Zénon, who succeeds in being purified and reborn through the feminine, Elisabeth never integrates the empowered feminine encountered in her unconscious with her conscious self. Awakening, she learns that her second husband, whom she had thought near death, is quite imperiously alive. She condemns herself to the perpetual role of submissive wife of patriarchy as her Goddess self dies. She sacrifices the powerful, but deadly, matriarchal role not only because the old king lives, but also because of her own apparent dis-ease with the empowered feminine. Her mythic conflict remains permanently irresolvable; the resurgent Goddess is suppressed for the sake of security in a patriarchal world.

In striking contrast to the use of matriarchal myth in Hébert and Yourcenar, Lucette Desvignes valorizes the creative and nurturing side of the feminine, the sacredness of sex, and the unity of plant, animal and human life. Male sacrifice to the feminine is replaced by a more pernicious patriarchal demand for sameness from generation to generation which denies its sons independence and the possibility of creativity and renewal.

*Les Noeuds d'argile* springs from Desvignes's balanced childhood in the harmonious landscape of her native Burgundy, where in folk practices and beliefs vestiges of a matriarchally-based *religion de la terre* still exist. Threatened in her teens by the discordance and horror of the German occupation, an authentic aspiration toward

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reconstruction and a profound belief in the need for tenderness between individuals informs her work. She creates characters with positive elements of both sexes within them and propounds the joy of merger. Her protagonist Marrain, a young potter financially dependent on the older generation of family potters, is a man with an unrepressed feminine side.

Desvignes's androgynous primary mythic choice is based on the model of a paradisiacal vision of the myth of Adam and Eve. Eve's nurturance and the close inter-relatedness of the couple ensures that Eden is indeed a paradise. Life, for Desvignes, attains its apogee during those moments when the self is transcended and essences, whether plant, animal, or human, merge. For Desvignes, genders do not need to be in conflict; they can and should be mutually supportive. Woman in her nurturing function remains central to survival, when she is lost or abandoned—the male dies.

Marrain and his young wife Jeanne live in a perfectly symbiotic state. Theirs is the rare, joyously depicted marriage of modern literature. Marrain's equal-marriage ideal overthrows the patriarchally-prejudicial account in Genesis. His personal mythology resembles the couple-based mythology prevalent in pre-Christian Burgundy. Symbiotic merger, which manages to retain and reinforce the integrity of the self, exemplifies Marrain's (and Desvignes's) vision.

Unfortunately, through his secondary conflicting mythic choice, Marrain drives himself from Eden. When he becomes a father, he identifies with the classical version of the Hercules myth and its exaggerated notion of masculinity. Instead of exploring his feminine creativity in a sacred act of devotion, he strikes out on a masculine quest to discover the formula for a certain blue glaze his wife's uncle had promised and failed to give him and which he feels he needs for the family's financial security. Instead of overthrowing the sacred king (represented by the old generation of potters) to establish his new reign on the matriarchal model, he obsessively searches for the same blue glaze. The quest kills him—a result of his forsaking the androgynous symbiotic ideal for the solitary masculine quest. In his final moments, however, he does return to the aesthetics of merger expressing his and his author's predominant mythic choice.

Each of these authors weaves into her text an ancient gynocentric mythical design which symbolizes the continuity of life and death and the role of sacrifice. A common matriarchal thread runs through the texts without binding them into a unified feminine fabric. The style of each author is distinguished by her personal and national origins. Yourcenar's mythical feminine serves men; it allows for male psychic rebirth while disenfranchising real women. Hébert empowers woman herself, but erects a monument to destructive female power which becomes even more exaggerated in subsequent works. Desvignes extols nurturance and merger, expressing the earth religion of her region and her desire for equilibrium, while deploring a senseless sacrifice, now connected to patriarchy's inflexible demand for paternal reproduction. Lucette Desvignes's message, notwithstanding the pessimistic conclusion, is the most human since she depicts an equalitarian ideal where love and compassion are the true sources of joy in that difficult project we call life.

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