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D. H. Lawrence and the Medusa: The Bible, Mythology, and Quarrelling Couples in the Leadership novels

Shirley Bricout

- 1 The feminist quarrel with Lawrence over his alleged promotion of masculine supremacy has been disputed in many ways. Kate Millett actively seeks out hidden motives to explain why focalization happens to bear on female characters, when she writes, “It’s through a feminine consciousness that his masculine message is conveyed” (239). She quotes Simone de Beauvoir, who regarded Lawrence’s writings as counselling manuals for women (Millett 239). Closer to Anaïs Nin’s view that Lawrence’s “intuitive intelligence sought the *core* of the woman” (49), Lydia Blanchard, writing in 1975 at the height of the period of radical feminism, commented that the author “was extraordinarily sensitive to the problems of women” (432).
- 2 My intention here is to offer alternative interpretations to accredited phallocratic readings of scenes which depict quarrelling married couples in *Aaron’s Rod*, *Kangaroo*, and *The Plumed Serpent*. To do so, I shall take into account the many borrowings from the Bible and mythology which are woven into the narratives and I shall try to assess the extent to which they convey Lawrence’s controversial views on marriage and on women. Quarrels, called “verbal conflicts” in socio-linguistic studies, are qualified by researchers as “unique among speech activities, because participants overtly display and focus upon the fact that consensus on a matter worth talking about has broken down” (Vuchinich 119). They are the linguistic enactment of a power-struggle within a space shared by the contenders. In my study here, this space is called matrimony. While the quarrelling characters seek to verbally redefine their matrimonial space and the distribution of power within this space, at the level of the writing, the biblical and mythological borrowings endow the text with its modernist features, turning it into an *artistic* space where language is disrupted and subverted.
- 3 Most feminist readings of those Bible and mythological stories alluded to in Lawrence’s novels recall Hélène Cixous’s stance in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), where she argues

that the Gorgon as a female figure was utterly crushed by male supremacy. Such feminist views provide valuable leads through which to explore the following issues: if indeed the protagonists of a quarrel aim at crushing the discourse of the Other, what then does the feminine Other have to say in the Lawrencian narrative? Is she subjected to textual erasure during the exchange, as feminists claim she is in the Bible and indeed in many Greek myths, or does she have a voice?

- 4 As the motifs of immobility, petrification, and androgyny emerge from the scenes, I shall consider to what extent Lawrence manages to find in the dynamics of language, and notably in its reflexivity, the means to qualify the balance between the sexes which he so firmly believed in.
- 5 The first quarrel scenes I shall study are to be found in *Aaron's Rod*. They depict Aaron's confrontation with his wife Lottie when he comes home a few weeks after abruptly leaving his family.

Lot's wife and the Medusa

- 6 From an onomastic standpoint, Lottie's name brings to mind Lot's wife who, during the family's flight from Sodom, looked back longingly at the city. According to the book of Genesis (XIX, 26), she was subsequently turned into a pillar of salt, transfixed in her desire to stay. Significantly, the two chapters of *Aaron's Rod* which stage the quarrel scenes are entitled "The Pillar of Salt" and "More Pillar of Salt," thus making explicit reference to the Bible account.
- 7 The story of Lot's wife, who is unnamed in the Bible but is called *Ildith* or *Edith* in some Jewish traditions, has attracted much attention from feminist critics, with studies ranging from the issue of the obliteration of the female right to make decisions to the anonymity of female characters in the Bible (see Reinhartz). In *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*, Alicia Suskin Ostriker argues that over the last century "the Bible [has been seen] as the very foundation of women's oppression, and biblical texts as exemplifying the process whereby patriarchy constitutes itself through the rejection of female power" (164). Yet "if our object," she continues, "is to retrieve from the palimpsest of patriarchal narrative what the narrative attempts to bury and deny, we may seek for traces or tracks of the female story" (164-165). Similarly, the French feminist critic Hélène Cixous reconsiders the myth of the Medusa in order to depict the oppression of women which results from man's denial that woman is "much more than a non-man." What if women, she asks, "have only to stop listening to the Sirens –for the Sirens were men – for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. She's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (355).
- 8 For the purpose of the present study I shall recall that, according to Homer's account, the mortal Gorgon named Medusa was herself originally a victim of male violence, since she was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. Blaming the Medusa for sexual misconduct, Athena turned her into a repulsive monster with hissing snakes in lieu of locks of hair. But above all, she was a monster whose gaze changed men into stone. Only by looking at her reflection in a mirror could one avoid such a fate (Graves 127). In more recent interpretations of the myth, the Medusa is said to have died petrified when seeing her own reflection in the bright shield that Perseus cunningly held up to her (Leeming 65-67). Revisionist feminist critics who seek to reveal the "subtext of

female erasure” therefore foreground the cultural constructions of the masculine and the feminine in the myth (Ostriker 164). According to their analysis, the Greek hero slaying the Gorgon is shown to undermine matriarchal power in order to promote a patriarchal society (Birnbaum 213, Leeming 60).

- 9 Mythological and Bible scholars often point to a striking feature shared by Lot’s wife and by the Gorgon. Indeed their respective gazes are both linked to petrification and are both therefore taboo, whether the character is looking back or is being looked at. So bearing in mind this significant parallel between Lot’s wife and the Medusa, I shall show that the borrowings which Lawrence resolutely weaves into the ill-fated homecoming scenes in *Aaron’s Rod* aestheticize feminist concerns, in what is a modernist, mirror-like – or *specular* – text.
- 10 The first time Aaron comes home, he remains hidden in the shadows when he catches sight of his desperate wife who is crying with anger and disbelief, as depicted in the following passage: “Aaron, who had stood motionless as if turned to a pillar of salt” (AR 44). What is conspicuous in this first homecoming scene is how Lawrence accommodates the borrowings in terms of the symbolism he wishes them to convey. By reversing the motif of the biblical account, it is now Lottie’s husband who is transfixed by *his* looking back. Moreover, the second time Aaron pays a visit home, the semantic chains of immobility and tears, through which longing is expressed are intertwined, thus setting intertextuality into play so as to sketch a modernist depiction of the strained encounter with his wife. The text provides numerous instances of this thematic network, with indications such as the following: “she began to cry, sobbing,” “tear-stained face,” “he sat in the chair near the door without moving,” “started to cry again,” “Aaron waited,” “burst into tears, weeping bitterly” and “he sat still” (AR 125-126).
- 11 I would suggest that immobility is further depicted here thanks to features germane to those of the Medusa. First, the image of the snake is conjured up when the wife’s tearful complaints immobilize and hypnotize Aaron. The text reads, “The strange, liquid sound of her appeal seemed to him like the swaying of a serpent which mesmerises the fated, fluttering, helpless bird” (AR 127).
- 12 Also, while physical immobility points to the strong unstated feelings that “the breakdown of consensus” in the relationship has kindled (Vuchinich 119), the transfer of the motif of petrification onto the male character can point to the fact that the role of one spouse is socially determined by that of the other. The transfer of immobility onto the male character operates like a mirror and endows the text with a *specular* function that not only offers each spouse a reflexive image of his self but that also refers the reader to his or her own reality. Only once, earlier in the novel, is Lottie *directly* granted a bitter point of view when Aaron dresses to go to the pub: “He had an unfair advantage – he was free to go off, while she must stay at home with the children” (AR 14). But because of the mirror effect, I would argue that the woman’s voice can be heard throughout the homecoming scenes struggling against her socially constructed femininity. She is fighting the *doxa* of phallocratic ideology, the petrified *doxa* being, incidentally, metaphorically compared to the beautiful Medusa-turned-monster by Roland Barthes in his sketches (122-123).
- 13 Therefore, while the act of looking back is associated with Aaron’s homecoming, and while the act of being looked at is mutual and reflexive, both gazes register the charge Lawrence is making against the rigidity of a social construct. This modernist text, with

its dialogic intertextual and specular features, challenges not only patriarchal ideology. It also challenges feminist phallographic readings, since dialogism operates between the mythological and Lawrencian texts and also between the despairing selves of the quarrelling couple. Thus the dialogic dynamics of the borrowings, far from petrifying the text, preserves the alternative possibilities of new readings which could well give woman a voice. Therefore my contention is that without turning into a proto-French-feminist promoting an *écriture féminine*, Lawrence, like Barthes, addresses “the problem of breaking through the convention [the *doxa*] to communicate something original” (Leeming 64).¹ Lawrence’s original stance consists partly in his urging caution about the emerging women’s movements of his day, when he writes, for instance in his essay “Given Her a Pattern,” that “man is willing to accept woman as an equal, as a man in skirts; [...] the only thing he won’t accept her as is a human being, a real human being of the feminine sex” (Lawrence 2004, 163). So while attempting to express a new concept of freedom for women, he also strives to discover the aesthetic means through which to challenge previous forms of writing, thanks to the modernist novel.

Suppression of the female voice

- 14 Nevertheless, the Lawrencian text can also be found to drastically erase the woman’s voice, when the author uses the novel as an experimental space through which to stage phallographic ideologies. By way of transition to the final quarrel scene that I wish to discuss, I shall now examine an instance of the forcefully suppressed female voice.
- 15 In *The Plumed Serpent*, Carlota is the Catholic wife of the leader of an Aztec revival who is fighting to the death her husband’s ideas. However, the more her opposition to the revival grows, the more her voice as a woman is stifled by the many quotes from the Bible she resorts to in order to beseech her husband, don Ramón, to put an end to his activities. The phrases “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity,” from the book of Ecclesiastes (I, 2), become her *leitmotiv*. However because Carlota lives for and through her repeated entreaties – and thus through language only – she becomes an allegory of Catholicism in its defiance against the Aztec cult. Her death, which in the novel takes place just as a Christian church is desecrated, is also depicted through allusions to Jesus and, more specifically, to biblical verses that are related to his crucifixion. She poignantly drags herself on her knees up to the altar and cries out, “Lord! Lord! Forgive! God of love, forgive! He knows not what he does” (PS 343), citing Jesus’s plea during his martyrdom, as recorded by Luke in his Gospel (XXIII, 34) which reads: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”
- 16 The quotations, inscribed in the rigid interpretation of the Bible by the Christian community, come to invade the Lawrencian text, thereby impeding, petrifying the intertextual dynamics. Interestingly, in his essay “Apocalypse,” Lawrence expounds the view that “the Bible is a book that has been temporarily killed for us, or some of us, by having its meaning arbitrarily fixed. We know it so thoroughly, in its superficial or popular meaning, that it is dead, it gives us nothing more” (60). Again foregrounding the idea of immobility, Jacques Derrida later suggests that when one says “‘this means that’, [...] one essentializes the text, substantializes it, *immobilizes* it” (384, my emphasis). In the same way, Carlota’s embodiment of a monological understanding of the Bible petrifies her, when she tries to rekindle her husband’s Christian conscience.

- 17 Showered with rebukes, Don Ramón seldom responds. When he does respond, he subverts his wife's quote to his own ends, as when they discuss their children's education:
 "You don't believe – out of the mouths of babes and sucklings," said Carlota bitterly.
 "Why Carlota, the babes and sucklings don't get much chance. Their mothers and their teachers turn them into little gramophones from the first." (PS 210)
 But Frieda says I am antediluvian in my positive attitude. I do think a woman must yield some sort of precedence to man, and he must take this precedence. [...] Consequently the women must follow as it were unquestioning. I can't help it, I believe this. Frieda doesn't. Hence our fight. (Boulton 163)
- 18 While Carlota's direct quote from Psalm VIII, 2, reflects her concern for the authenticity of her argument supported by the authority of the Bible, Don Ramón uses language against language in order to crush his wife's discourse, doing so for ideological purposes. He immediately merges the borrowing within his discourse, manipulating it to serve his own needs. Language is affected by the quarrel, just as it is subverted. In the same way, but to quite different ends, Cixous's quarrel with what she terms phallogocentrism – a combination of phallocentrism and logocentrism – is voiced through the reversal of the Greek myth: the Medusa "is not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (355).
- 19 Such a dynamic subversion of language can however result in granting the Lawrencean woman a voice, on condition that the text retains its reflexive features. The chapter in *Kangaroo* entitled "Harriett and Lovatt [*i.e.* Somers] at Sea in Marriage" (169-176) provides us with a passage endowed with such specular features.

Harriett and Somers at sea: towards a balance of the sexes

- 20 The chapter offers a striking instance of how verbal conflict is grounded in the reflexivity of language, thereby enabling the subversion of the partner's phrases so as to acquire a mirror effect. Indeed, taking their cue from their spouse's use of metaphors, along with borrowings from mythology and from the Bible, husband and wife in turn respond by way of minimal but strategic alterations of the prior utterance, playing with its phonological, syntactic and semantic features. Charles and Marjorie Goodwin, who have carried out conclusive socio-linguistic research into the operating structures of quarrels, call this process "format tying" (215-247). Bearing this in mind, I shall try to demonstrate how Lawrence's understanding of a balance of the sexes is conveyed through such a strategy, which sets language against language.
- 21 Throughout the chapter, an omniscient narrator stays with the sea metaphor, setting the "Pacific waters of lord and masterdom" against the "grey Atlantic of true friendship" that the ship *Harriett and Lovatt* is sailing on. The spouses, Harriett and Somers, are compared to "two fierce and opposing currents meet[ing] in the narrows of perfect love" (K 169). The very choice of the metaphor of the ship at sea is foregrounded in the following indication: "I have not made up my mind whether she was a ship, or a bark, or a schooner, technically speaking. Let us imagine her as any one of them" (K 171). The explicit listing of the options paves the way for a situation in which language will be set against language. Indeed the trope itself comes under criticism, when Harriett insists on calling the bark of their marriage a "houseboat."

- 22 The fact that the quarrel should be grounded in the reflexivity of language also has a bearing on the narrative voice. The chapter's *incipit* seemingly conveys Lawrence's self-parody, when it introduces Somers' ambivalent views as a husband. Thus the dominating male voice, which erases that of the female, mirrors the ideology at stake. The husband can tentatively be associated with Lawrence, who discussed his frequent rows with his wife Frieda in this letter to Katherine Mansfield, in 1918 for example:
- 23 But Frieda says I am antediluvian in my positive attitude. I do think a woman must yield some sort of precedence to man, and he must take this precedence. [...] Consequently the women must follow as it were unquestioning. I can't help it, I believe this. Frieda doesn't. Hence our fight. (Boulton 163)
- 24 In the novel, in order to sustain the husband's view, the narrator quotes authoritative verses from the first letter of Peter the Apostle (III, 1 and 6), in which his role is defined as that of "the lord and master who is honoured and obeyed" (K 169). The biblical quote conveys a phallogocentric view of marriage, one that a 19th century feminist revisionist and author of *The Woman's Bible*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, denounced when she commented on this verse, "Man is her head, her teacher, her guardian and her Saviour. [...] Unless she rebels outright, he will make her a slave, a subject, the mere reflection of another human will" (175). However Harriett's discourse resolutely challenges that of her husband, when she discredits the authority of this particular passage from Scripture, by way of her convocation of the term "slave": "In short, he was to be the lord and master, and she the humble slave" (K 174). She questions the validity of the Bible, even as she, linguistically, confers upon her husband the traditional, presumed role: "You lord and master!" (K 172). However later on in the passage, there is a shift to the third person: "Him, a lord and master! Why, he was not really lord of his own bread and butter; next year they might both be starving. And he was not even master of himself" (K 175). This indicates that the omniscient narrator is granting the wife a voice, and is doing so by way of parody. The taunt still confers upon the husband the role of provider for the household, while at the same time highlighting the male resistance to emancipation.
- 25 To similar effect, a range of mythological references, reinforced by hyperbole, syncretically highlights the established male readings of myths. Somers compares himself to Dionysos and also to Hermes, whom he couples with the superlative "Trismegistus," meaning the "thrice-greatest" (K 172).² Both gods are said to have been the lovers of Aphrodite, the goddess of love whose description in the novel is tainted with a phallogocentric bias: she is "Aphrodite, mistress of the seas, in her grand capacity of motherhood and attendant wifeness" (K 170). As the quarrel between Somers and Harriett gains momentum, the subversion disqualifies the husband from his pretensions. Harriett fully takes up the potentialities which are offered by the reflexivity of language. She desecrates each mythological symbol by the ploy of adding to their names a social and masculine honorific appendage, to comic effect: "Mr Dionysos, Mr Hermes, and Mr Thinks-himself-grand" (K 173). She pursues mischievously her enterprise of symbolic demotion: "This Hermes cum Dionysos wonder was comfortably changing his socks" (K 174). The quarrel turns into a struggle for the power over language, as Harriett resorts to "format tying," which consists in making minimal semantic shifts "so the prior move becomes an embedded subcomponent of the sentence used to answer it" (Goodwin and Goodwin 219).

- 26 The power-struggle is relentlessly fought, thanks to a profusion of other symbols of Greek and Egyptian origin, the cross and the phoenix, among others, carrying theosophical beliefs, which Helena Blavatsky had expanded on thoroughly in *The Secret Doctrine*. The phoenix rising from its ashes epitomizes the male character's quest for renewal. In a similar way, Harriet's reflexive use of language *consumes* the metaphor of the phoenix, in order to give rise to the textual meanings thus emancipated. She combines components of the symbol which her husband has just depicted in order to both stress and dismiss his male egocentric view, when she claims, "Of course, you lonely phoenix, you are the bird and the ashes and the flames all by yourself" (K 173). Thus challenging the established phallographic readings of the scene, I would suggest that the narrator turns from one spouse to the other in order to voice Harriett's position. However as I now show, in the process the narrator comes to be imbued with an androgynous quality encoded in the text.
- 27 Indeed, as the metalinguistic struggle gains momentum, Somers suggests a new name for the ship, claiming "I want to set fire to our bark *Harriett and Lovatt*, and out of the ashes construct the frigate *Hermes*, which name still contains the same reference, *her* and *me*, but which has a higher total significance" (K 173). Though the messenger god is traditionally said to be bisexual, there are no "contextualization cues" to herald the impending deconstruction of "Hermes" into "*her* and *me*" (Gumperz 131). The deconstruction of the god's name tentatively conveys an acknowledgement of duality and balance between the sexes, while the homophonic composition of the name further inscribes androgyny in the textual fabric. It should be noted that feminist readers of myths similarly lay the stress on Hermes' bisexuality. In *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Barbara Walker, for instance, emphasizes the god's "feminine wisdom [which credited him] with the invention of civilized arts" (395).³
- 28 Interestingly, most scholars derive the name Hermes from the Greek ἑρμα (*herma*), meaning *pile of stones*. These stones were piled up on the boundary of a parcel of land in order to assert legal rights of ownership. The boundary stones were also the site of diplomatic discussions with neighbours.⁴ Coupling stones and communication, the symbol acquires, within the matrimonial space that the spouses are fighting over, a dynamic function that prevents it from being petrified. Vacillations in agreement, redefinitions of respective roles and in the balance of power, these are evidence of the shifts in the spirited tug of war between "*her* and *me*," while the now androgynous narrator seems to stand on the boundary between the sexes. The emerging duality can then be said to harbour Lawrence's creed, one which Birkin articulates in *Women in Love*, whereby the male and female are together and apart, "two single equal stars in balanced conjunction" (142).

Conclusion

- 29 The deconstruction of language and of symbols dramatizes the quarrel that in turn becomes the archetypal scenario of all the couple's rows. Thus unlike Carlota, Harriett and her fictional sister Lottie have found a means to resist male discourse by subverting it. While they may not be articulating their views through an authentic female voice, as Cixous advocated with *écriture féminine*, they are not letting the Medusa of *doxa* petrify them either.

- 30 I have attempted here to show that the dramatization of quarrelling couples is endowed with a specular quality, which challenges the Victorian model of marriage by offering female characters a voice. Traditional forms of narrative are however also questioned, as language is set against language so as to subvert biblical and mythological allusions. If it is a somewhat frail female voice which emerges from the specular text, this only better mirrors the male resistance to the profound social changes of the time. But, despite or thanks to the author's ambivalence towards such emancipation, Lawrence's women "[are] beautiful and [they are] laughing."

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NOTES

1. However the comparison with Barthes stops there, for the latter opposes the monster to Perseus, who stands for the artist vanquishing the *doxa* (Barthes 122-123; Leeming 64).
2. Hermes Trismegitus is said to be the syncretic combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth, both of them gods of writing and magic. While the origin of the adjective "Thrice Greatest" varies according to traditions, it always involves three qualities or three functions. A later Egyptian figure, called Hermes Trismegistus, is the presumed author of esoteric treatises written in the third or second centuries BCE and known as the *Hermetic Corpus*. In *Kangaroo*, the name may further epitomize Somers' activity as a writer (see also K. 389).
3. Walker specifies that "Hermes was the original 'hermaphrodite,' united in one body with Aphrodite. Priests of Hermes wore artificial breasts and female garments when presiding over Aphrodite's Cyprian temple in the guise of the god Hermaphroditus" (395).
4. Gilbert Murray's *Five Stages of Greek Religion* strongly suggests that "This notion of Hermes as herald may have been helped by his use as boundary stone. [...] If you wish to parley with [your neighbour], you advance up to your boundary-stone" (53). Murray's work was first published in 1912, under the title *Four Stages of Greek Religion* and was later expanded.

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Keywords: female voice, quarrel scenes, power struggle, Bible, myths, deconstruction of language

Mots-clés: Female desire, Feminism, Gender relationships, Misogyny, Power struggle

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Shirley Bricout's field of research is D.H. Lawrence and the Bible. The translation into English of her first book was released under the title *Politics and the Bible in D. H. Lawrence's Leadership Novels* at the Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée. It is honored with a foreword by Keith Cushman. She was guest editor of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* for a special issue on D. H. Lawrence (2017). Shirley Bricout has contributed articles and book reviews to *Etudes lawrenciennes* (Paris Nanterre University), *Etudes britanniques contemporaines* (Montpellier III) and to *The Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies* (Nottingham, UK).