

# Myth and Ms.: Entrapment and Liberation in Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*

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Most twentieth century female writers depict in their novels women learning about and, sometimes, struggling against a cultural entrapment peculiar to their sex. Virginia Woolf's Rachel Vinrace (*The Voyage Out*), for instance, discovers that her engagement to Terence Hewett results in an extraordinary loss of freedom. Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay (*To the Lighthouse*) find that they can be creative only when they bring people together for a party. Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers depict female children growing up in an alien American South. Though she struggles to liberate herself, Doris Lessing's Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook* is never totally free from the confines imposed on her by her sex.

Writing in French, Monique Wittig escapes in *Les Guérillères* what falsely might appear to be solely an English fictional tradition. Wittig's principal tool is myth. Using myth she transcends the twentieth century and envisions a utopia in which old myths have been adapted to achieve new ends. By this use of myth Wittig makes two important points about women in the twentieth century: they are trapped by myth, yet they can find a mythic means of escape from entrapment.

Two principal types of myth—classical and contemporary—are used by Wittig. By "classical" myths I mean legends from Greek and Roman antiquity, folktales, and Bible stories. By "contemporary" I refer to the kinds of myths described by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, those cultural—sometimes class-associated—myths by which humans define themselves. Freudian "theories" of masculine physiological superiority comprise the most important contemporary myth dealt with by Wittig.

Out of the materials of both classical and contemporary myths, Wittig constructs in *Les Guérillères* a new mythology similar to the one described by Joseph Campbell in *Myths To Live By*. According to him a new mythology is identical to ". . . the old, everlasting, perennial mythology, in its 'subjective sense,' poetically renewed in terms neither of a remembered past nor a projected future, but of now . . . to the waking of individuals in the knowledge of themselves . . ." This new mythology in *Les Guérillères* twice accomplishes the goal of awakened individuals that Campbell describes. In a fictional sense, the already-awakened—enlightened—individuals are the superwomen in the novel whose lives have been defined by the feminist myths of their culture. In a real sense, however, the waking individuals are the novel's readers, we who realize the necessity of creating our own mythologies.

Although the two major points made by Wittig in the novel concern twentieth-century females (i.e., they are trapped by myth and yet they possess a mythic means of escape), the tale is about a race of warrior-women and is set in some future century. These female warriors are patterned after the Amazons in Greek mythology, yet they are also descendents of twentieth-century females. They are fierce like the Amazons who are said to have cut off the right breasts of their children so that the breasts would not interfere

with their archery. Wittig's superwoman are an eclectic group. They live together in a single, unspecified, distant land. The forenames of the warriors are cataloged on twenty-nine pages of the text and are suggestive of the women's eastern and western heritage. The *guérillères* live primitively. Their joy consists of female communion. They swim together, tell stories, play primitive games, read, study about their origins, write about themselves, and prepare for war against the male enemy.

What little they know about our era, about female entrapment, they learn when various artifacts of an earlier society are dug up: "Daniela Nervi, while digging foundations, has unearthed a painting representing a young girl. She is all flat and white lying on one side. She has no clothes. Her breasts are barely visible on her torso. She half leans on one elbow. The other arm is crooked over her head, the hand holding a bunch of black grapes to her mouth."<sup>2</sup> A woman painted "flat" and "white," is coquettishly modest, an enigma to the female warriors who are as forthright in their sexuality as they are in warfare. Readers are swept up into an acceptance of the values of this fictional world and, like the *guérillères*, are amazed by the painting. A pattern is established which depends upon the juxtaposing of the *guérillères'* culture with our own. Observing the *guérillère* culture, the reader notices how, when myths differ and folktales change, behavior differs. Icarus does not fall into the sea. Snow-White is no longer passive. The *guérillères* aggress. Observing these changed myths and behaviors the reader realizes that she is trapped into certain behavior by a complex intermeshing of her own culture's myths. The question the reader asks: How can one get free?

In *Les Guérillères* Wittig provides an answer to this question. The answer suggested by Wittig's text is that the reader should do as Wittig has done in *Les Guérillères*: build her own mythology. But objections may be voiced: as Barthes and Campbell point out, myths have histories. Although this is true, myth is also a language used to describe anything which is true and possible. As the quotation from Campbell cited earlier states, myth is not solely "remembered past" nor "projected future." Myth is a reflection of the present and, as such, it provides for us what Shelley's Demorgorgon represented for Prometheus: possibility waiting to be defined.

The new mythology which Wittig creates for her readers and for her warrior-women in *Les Guérillères* possesses a classical base. Besides her use of the legend about the Amazon-women, she adapts for a female culture several other Greek and Roman male-centered myths, for example, the Prometheus myth. Dead for the *guérillères* is the legend in which a man dares steal fire from the gods. In its place are tales told by the *guérillères* "in which young women having stolen fire carry it in their vulvas" (p. 45). Other myths have been adapted. A story which resembles the Icarus-Daedalus legend is told to the women by Diane Ébèle. It is ". . . the fable of Koue Feï which is about a young girl who pursues the sun. . . . After a long chase Koue Feï jumps into the sun and instals herself within it" (p. 65). Koue Feï remains inside the sun. She controls its orbit and determines whether the weather will be good or bad. For once women are at the center of the universe. The implications of the myth are far different from the theme of the Icarus legend in which truth—control of the universe—is beyond the reach of humankind.

Other types of classical myths—folktales, and even Bible stories—are adapted for the *guérillère* culture. For example, the story of Sleeping Beauty is reinterpreted. In the *guérillères'* version of the fairy tale, the prince is gone who wakes Sleeping Beauty by kissing her. She has awakened herself. For the female warriors beauty breathes. Sleep, the pseudo-death, cannot be beautiful.

Even our fairy tales are told differently by the *guérillères*. The story about Rose-Red and Snow-White as it is traditionally told in the United States concerns two sisters who “. . . were the sweetest and best children in the world, always diligent and always cheerful . . . Rose-Red loved to run about the fields and meadows but Snow-White sat at home with her mother and helped her in the household or read aloud to her when there was no work to do.”<sup>3</sup> In our version of the story, Snow-White and Rose-Red are saved from death by a handsome prince trapped in bear's clothing. When the prince is freed from his disguise, he marries the quiet, gentle, hard-working, Snow-White. Rose-Red, the lively one, marries the brother of the handsome prince, presumably not her first choice.

Among Wittig's warrior-women the story has a different plot and ending: Rose-Red chases Snow-White with a stick, striking at her with it (p. 46). Angered at last, Snow-White takes up Rose-Red's stick, “She begins to run in all directions, she is seen striking out with all her might against the tree-trunks . . . she gives a great blow with the stick to Rose-Red” (p. 48). According to Wittig's narrator, “the women say that the little girls know this story by heart” (p. 46). Snow-White is a female Horatio Alger character. She has moved from passivity to action, from death to life.

Even the Biblical tale of creation receives a new interpretation. The Bible's negative explanation of Eve's tasting from the metaphoric tree of knowledge shaped woman's life for many centuries, the *guérillères* contend. According to them “He [God] [Adam] has closed your memory to what you are . . . He has made of you that which is not which does not speak which does not possess which does not write, he has made of you a vile and fallen creature, he has gagged abused [you] . . . He has invented your history” (pp. 110-111).

Besides these classical myths, however, there are contemporary myths which entrap. The point is, however, that they can also be reshaped to liberate women. One in particular is crucial to an understanding of *Les Guérillères*, the Freudian myth of male physiological and psychological supremacy. This “theory,” and its corollary, female inferiority, are equatable with prevailing cultural notions about female sexuality. In 1925, despite challenges, Freud persisted in claiming that women are merely men who lack a penis. According to him, women “refuse to accept the fact of being castrated and have the . . . hope of someday obtaining a penis in spite of everything . . . I cannot escape the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men . . . We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denials of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth.”<sup>4</sup> *Les Guérillères* contains an affirmative myth to replace Freud's “theory.” According to this myth a large group of women, the *guérillères*, refuse to repeat the litany that affirms male superiority: “The women say, I refuse to mumble after them the words lack of penis lack of money lack of insignia lack of name. I refuse to pronounce the names of possession and nonpossession” (p. 107). In their rebellion against

men, the *guérillères* refuse to be a slave to any possession, certainly not to a penis. But their refusal to yearn for a penis consists of more than empty slogans and brave, unsuccessful attempts to forget what they lack. They act. They build a new myth to replace the old.

Wittig's new sexual mythology corresponds to certain theories proposed by psychoanalyst Karen Horney who, beginning in the 1920's, wrote essays which contradicted Freud's theories about women. In her papers on feminine psychology, Horney places the blame on certain taboos for causing in women what she calls "primary penis envy." The taboos in question, in effect, forbid women to learn about their genitalia. Horney explains her theory in "On the Genesis of the Castration Complex in Women."<sup>5</sup> Men, she writes, can see their genitalia by merely looking down, are allowed to touch their genitalia while urinating, and feel power while passing an arching stream of urine. They can enjoy all these sensual pleasures without violating any social taboo. Forbidden this confidence-building and reassuring contact with their genitalia, females envy male assurance in such matters and feel an accompanying sense of dissatisfaction with themselves.

Wittig's society of *guérillères* encourages a comfortable, affirmative pride in female genitalia. Illustrated in the text is the natural manner in which the *guérillères* regard their bodies: "When it rains the women stay in the summer-house . . . . At last someone says . . . she cannot wait any longer, and squats down. Then some of them form a circle around her to watch the labia expell the urine" (p. 9). Both acts—the natural one of urination and the equally natural scopophilic act—illustrate the easy interest and pride the women take in themselves.

The women express in other ways their pride in their genitalia: "The women say that they expose their genitalia so that the sun may be reflected there as in a mirror. They say that they retain its brilliance" (p. 13). Their pride is not excessive or unrealistic. "They say that they take a proper pride in that which has for long been regarded as the emblem of fecundity and the reproductive force in nature" (p. 31). Such pride, Horney would claim, is a necessary attribute for women who hope to free themselves. Women must have knowledge of the "mons pubis the clitoris the labia minora the body and bulbs of the vagina" (p. 31). A knowledge of the body, this "naming of parts," causes the *guérillères* to be comfortable with themselves.

But besides her response to the Freudian myth, Wittig includes in *Les Guérillères* a simultaneously ancient and modern myth-drawing: the circle. Three circles adorn three separate, otherwise blank pages of the text. Besides these three circles, others are found metaphorically reproduced in almost all of the book's 172 passages. My explanation for Wittig's use of the circle diagrams and images resembles Georges Poulet's interpretation of the circle symbol in *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*.<sup>6</sup> Poulet traces the meaning of the symbol from the Renaissance into the early twentieth century and finds that the symbol no longer is representative only of God and of the infinite reaches of God's power. In the twentieth century, "It is man who, equally with God, discovers himself to be center and infinite sphere."<sup>7</sup> In *Les Guérillères*, the reader realizes that she is confronting an androgynous whole. Both male and female are at the center of an immense circle in Wittig's text, one with all center and no circumference. Before his androgynous circle becomes reality though, a revolution between males and females is fought, with women winning the liberation they had already earned and been enjoying.

The Jungian uroboric circles—the great female anima, figures prevalent in so many Latin American works and, for that matter, in most male-dominated literature—become in *Les Guérillères* a perverse little household pet called a “julep” which is led around on a leash. The “julep” “is an animal without head or tail that resembles a top. It spins on itself without uttering a sound. In houses it stands in the centre of the rooms, ceaselessly spinning on itself . . . They are invisible” (p. 57). Little girls play with juleps. They bear no resemblance to women or to any abstract female principle. Certainly in *Les Guérillères* circles are not symbols for the female vulva. “They [the *guérillères*] do not say that vulvas are to be compared to suns, planets, innumerable galaxies. They do not say that gyratory movements are like vulvas” (p. 61). The *guérillères* are free from our conventions.

They live in a free, primitive state. They play games with hoops and kites and questions. They do not fear death and, in fact, welcome death for the natural thing it is. Their bodies are built for lifting heavy objects. They revel in olfactory sensations. Their own scents are described as consisting of amomum, aniseed, betel, cinnamon, cubeb, mint, liquorice, musk, ginger, clove, nutmeg, pepper, saffron, sage, and vanilla. They are what Freud calls polymorphous perverse, that is, they lack erogenous zones as do infants in Freudian theory: “The women say that they perceive their bodies in their entirety. They say that they do not favour any of its parts on the grounds that it was formerly a forbidden object” (p. 57).

The *guérillères* keep records of their activities, a kind of instruction book-history text in which all the women are free to write. The women call this book a “feminary.” Wittig’s novel for our civilization is also a kind of “feminary.” It is an instruction book designed to explain how one achieves liberation. Wittig’s thesis is that feminine history can be changed by changing the myths about femininity. Her text, as “feminary,” contains some sample mythologies.

Freud’s famous axiom is that anatomy is destiny, but Wittig’s *guérillères* play a game in which they ask each other questions such as: “. . . whose destiny is written in their anatomy. . . . The answer to all the questions is the same. Then they begin to laugh ferociously slapping each other on the shoulders. Some of the women, lips parted, spit blood” (p. 86).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Campbell, “Envoy: No More Horizons,” *Myths to Live By* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 275.

<sup>2</sup>Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. by David LeVey (New York: Avon Books, 1973). Subsequent references to *Les Guérillères* will appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup>“Snow-White and Rose-Red,” *The Blue Fairy Book*, ed. Andrew Lang (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 176.

<sup>4</sup>Sigmund Freud, “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” (1925) in *Collected Papers*, Vol. V (London: The Hogarth Press, 1956), pp. 186-197.

<sup>5</sup>Karen Horney, “On the Genesis of the Castration Complex in Women,” *Feminine Psychology*, (New York: Norton, 1973).

<sup>6</sup>Georges Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1966).

<sup>7</sup>Poulet, p. xxvii.