FORKED TONGUE

FORKED TONGUE: CONSTELLATIONS OF LANGUAGE IN SNAKE POEMS BY CANADIAN WOMEN POETS

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ABSTRACT

Concerned by the limitations of language, Canadian women poets, such as Jay Macpherson, P.K. Page, Margaret Atwood, Jan Conn, Lorna Crozier, and Betsy Warland, are reexamining the language and images associated with male mythologies in order to seek and redefine personal mythologies that are "not destructive," but rather "livable," reflections of self. The way these poets find alternate symbolic importance - "new patterns" - for the snake suggests that meaning is open and contextual. By reexamining a significant image used by the writers working in phallocentric language - such as the snake - these women writers separate the image from its phallic associations and enable themselves to write an empowering personal mythology. The emphasis on non-visual responses to experience is a way for women writers to de-phallusize the vision of their culture. Another way these poets alter the vision of their culture is by revising the dominant myths of the patriarchy. The image of the snake in these poems is that of a creator making and living its own language. The snake's tongue - be it black, red, forked, or flicking - is especially significant because of its link to language as a tool of expression, and also because it is a model for women poets seeking a new tongue, a new dialect, a language of the body, in which to communicate their experience. In the poetry of these Canadian women, the snake provides a language in which

these poets not only imagine lost matriarchies, but also find a community of mothers, they find themselves, and as the echoes and allusions indicate, they find each other.

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Unwriting Eden: Contemporary Canadian Women and the Snake Poem

In her essay, "Conversations with the Living and the Dead," multilingual Canadian poet Mary di Michele analyzes her relationship to the English language:

> My relationship to the language, English, in which I write, is doubly distanced. I am aware of the extent to which that written language is patriarchal. It is patriarchal to the extent that it has been appropriated and dominated by the male voice, but it is not patriarchal in its origins. So I use an etymological dictionary. It is an essential tool when I am writing to probe and study the history of the words I want to use (as they use me), to recover lost meanings, to enter time in the language as a field, as a journey and not just a destination. Women writers are rewriting the language by their growing presence in literature. (105)

For di Michele, as for many women poets, the issue of finding an appropriate language is a thorny one. English literary history is dominated by male writers who use phallocentric and logocentric language as they create and perpetuate mythologies for their subject, women.

Concluding an interview with Margaret Kaminski, Margaret Atwood comments on the significance of mythologies:

> I am very interested in mythologies of various kinds, because I think most people have unconscious mythologies. Again, I think there is a question of making them conscious, getting them out in the place where they can be viewed. And I don't believe that people should divest themselves of all their mythologies because I think, in a way, everybody needs one. It's just a question of getting one that is livable and not destructive to you. (Kaminski 32)

A personal mythology is necessary, Atwood believes, but it must be one that defines, not destroys, people. The quest

for a "livable" mythology is particularly significant for women poets because, for the most part, women have been the subject of and source of a male-oriented mythology which originates in the masculine poetic tradition.

Until recently, women have been the object for study by male writers, but women poets are now becoming writing subjects creating their own mythologies, thereby breaking down the stereotypes perpetuated by the male-oriented literary imagination. These women poets examine the language and images associated with male mythologies in order to seek and redefine personal mythologies that are "not destructive," but rather "livable" reflections of self.

The feminist study of Canadian women's poetry is a relatively recent area of discussion. There are a few anthologies, such as Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli's A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing (1986), in which editors collect feminist essays, some of which are concerned with the issue of language for women poets. But I have discovered that for a community of Canadian women poets, the snake image is a significant one for talking about language. As yet no published criticism documents the remarkably high incidence of snake poems in women's poetry - at least twenty-two poems, including a book-length snake poem, by eight poets.

In this study I examine Canadian women poets' rewriting of an image typically used as a symbol of male power. For

example, Jay Macpherson, Margaret Atwood, Jan Conn, and Lorna Crozier examine the snake image as it is used by male writers to perpetuate phallocentric language. Phallocentric language is a foreign language for contemporary women poets who find it impossible to define themselves using a language which was, and often still is, a tool with which they were and are imprisoned in destructive mythologies - the madonna, the whore, the angel in the house, the temptress, the muse. By reexamining a significant image used by writers working in phallocentric language - such as the snake - these women writers separate the image from its phallic associations of power and enable themselves to write an empowering personal mythology.

Canadian women poets have chosen specifically to unwrite the versions of the snake image which appear in the dominant mythologies of patriarchal society. They reexamine the depiction of the snake and of Eve in the biblical myth of Eden. As Kim Chernin notes in Re-inventing Eve, there is another way to read the biblical myth by seeing "Eve as rebel, the first woman to challenge the subjugation of women in the patriarchal garden" (xvi). This rebellious Eve is a model for women poets who challenge the patriarchal versions of the Eve myth in order to create a personal mythology which truly defines them. By reexamining the Biblical myth of sin and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, P.K. Page, Atwood, and Crozier retell the story from a non-patriarchal

viewpoint. They reevaluate the relationship between the snake and Eve to suggest another way of seeing the story - Eve becomes a model of rebellion and creativity who opts for what the snake offers: change, divine knowledge and self-recognition. These speakers are attracted to the snake not because of phallic desire, but because the snake image is a mirror that enables women to rediscover their selves and their creative power.

Once the snake is disassociated from its phallic significance and from patriarchal mythologies that make women culpable for all that is wrong in patriarchal society, Atwood, Crozier, and Betsy Warland use the image of the snake as a way of talking about writing. They dismantle logocentric language in order to discover their selves; they explore a new dialect through which they can express this self-realization. The speakers of these snake poems observe the snake's movements and note that the snake traces letters, thereby creating its own non-conventional language. Because of this bold act of self definition, the snake becomes an emblem of empowerment through which women can create a language that is not entrapping - a language of the body. By using a non-conventional language, these women poets gain authority and create a "tongue" with which to express their experience.

Atwood, Crozier, and Warland do not invent a completely new language, however. In fact, when interviewer Karla

Hammond mentions Miller and Swift's observations that there is a need for an unsexed tongue

> because many texts, like Charlotte's Web which by its `male orientation and use of subsuming masculine terms` no longer reflects reality," Atwood responds by saying, "Unfortunately, we're stuck with language and, by and large, it determines our categories." (112)

Atwood echoes Kristeva, who develops a theory of communication which suggests that language is a "heterogeneous signifying process located in and between speaking subjects... [It is] the study of specific linguistic strategies in specific situations" (Moi 154). Atwood also examines the use of language in specific situations when she observes:

> A word isn't separate from its context. That's why I say language is a solution, something in which you're immersed, rather than a dictionary. There are little constellations of language here and there, and the meaning of a word changes according to its context in its constellation. The word woman already has changed because of the different constellations that have been made around it. Language changes within our lifetime. As a writer you're part of that process - using an old language, but making new patterns with it. Your choices are numerous. (112)

The way these women poets find alternate symbolic importance -- "new patterns" -- for the snake suggests that meaning is open and contextual. The snake, as an image of the tongue, creating its own non-patriarchal language, becomes an emblem of the possibility of expression in a female-oriented language. Snake poems by Canadian women writers celebrate the freedom women poets have to express themselves in a language of the body; freed of patriarchal language, these

poets create a mythology of self that does not perpetuate the destructive stereotypes of women.

"The Primitive Tongue:"
Unwriting Phallocentric Language

> Literary women "lack that blood congested genital drive which energizes every great style" - Gass
>
> Yet while the snake retains its hold on the imagination as a phallic symbol, apparently not everyone is consciously aware of its significance: "If we teach sex education in the schools," said a Toronto clergyman recently, "we will stir up a nest of snakes." - Beryl Rowland

Canadian writer and critic, Janice Kulyk Keefer, in her essay, "Gender, Language, Genre," describes the distinctions within language which inhibit women writers:

> Literary as opposed to everyday language poses special problems. As a number of feminist critics have pointed out, among them Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, common speech has long been the particular domain of women, as the term "mother tongue" suggests. Literary language, on the other hand, derived from classical models and was the exclusive preserve of men, since with rare exceptions in most Western countries, women were denied any education in the classics. (166)

How, then, do women who feel compelled to write find a language in which to do so? For, as Keefer continues,

> ...[I]t is indisputable that contemporary women writers are still marked, and in some ways marred by the traumatic experiences of previous generations of "literary mothers." Moreover, what Aritha van Herk has termed the "erectocentric imagination" is still alive and well and living in the Academy and Publishing House as well as in the locker room. (167)

Two French feminist theorists concerned with the "feminist debate about the nature of women's oppression, the construction of sexual difference and the specificity of women's relations to language and writing" (Moi 96), Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, point out that the phallus has

long been the symbol of power in the male-oriented western culture. The phallus is, for that reason, an enormously powerful primary signifier in the patriarchal literary imagination. Concerned with the implications of this primary signifier for them, a community of Canadian women poets are reexamining the power of phallocentric language. They are interested in accomplishing what Moi describes as Cixous's goal:

> ...to proclaim woman as the source of life, power and energy and to hail the advent of a new, feminine language that ceaselessly subverts these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallocentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women. (105)

For these Canadian women poets, the task, as Keefer observes of

> writers who remain true to their vocation[,] is to achieve the kind of mastery which involves a specific use of power: not power over language, exploiting and manipulating words so as to trick them into saying what one wants to be true, or just expedient. But rather, the power to perceive, make new, alter or extend what we take to be reality. (168)

In an effort to expose phallocentric language and its limitations for women writers, Jay Macpherson, Margaret Atwood, Jan Conn, and Lorna Crozier use a powerful image for writers of the patriarchal tradition, the snake. By separating the snake image from its phallic associations, these women poets begin to find a way to create a personal mythology and an appropriate language through which they can discover the nature of women's expression.

One way that these poets explore the nature of women's

expression is by identifying the female speakers of their poems with the snake. Far from being an image of male power used by the patriarchy to perpetuate phallocentricity, the snake is an image of women. These women poets reevaluate the emphasis on rigidity, stiffness, and verticality seen in works by male poets such as Irving Layton and Joe Rosenblatt and they choose instead to focus on the fluidity and liquidity of the snake's motion which signify the female body. The women poets continue this new discourse by describing the snake not in terms of what it looks like, but in terms of how it feels to touch it and to be touched by it. They reevaluate the patriarchal emphasis on vision - the notion that seeing is believing - in order to valorize touch. Irigarayan theory illuminates the significance of seeing to Freudian theory. Toril Moi explains:

> ...Freud starts by posing the question "What is woman?" His use of light/darkness imagery, Irigaray argues, already reveals his subservience to the oldest of "phallocratic" philosophic traditions. The Freudian theory of sexual difference is based on the visibility of difference: it is the eye that decides what is clearly true and what isn't. Thus the basic fact of sexual difference for Freud is that the male has an obvious sex organ, the penis, and the female has not; when he looks at the woman, Freud apparently sees nothing. The female difference is perceived as an absence or negation of the male norm. (132)

Through his insistence on visibility and presence, Freud defines the phallocentric shaping of the western male imagination.

For contemporary Canadian male poets, such as Layton and Rosenblatt, the snake is clearly an image of phallic

power. Their male speakers define what they perceive as their imaginative superiority in terms of their sexual power. The association of the snake with the phallus empowers not only the snake but also empowers the male speakers who see the snake as an embodiment of their sexual selves.

The speaker of Layton's "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" sees the snake as a symbol of male power. The snake is a phallic power triumphant even in its victimization because of its injury. Describing the wound as something the snake must carry around like a "valise" or "satchel," the speaker notes the snake's movements as he

> watched the grass-snake crawl towards the hedge,
> Convulsing and dragging into the dark
> The satchel filled with curses for the earth,
> For the odours of warm sedge, and the sun,
> A blood-red organ in the dying sky. (73-77)

As he watches the ailing snake convulse and drag itself across the grass, the man witnesses the figurative death of the phallus. Whether it is the setting sun or the red satchel-bearing snake that the speaker is modifying with the description "blood-red organ," the speaker uses language charged with male sexuality to describe his world.

It becomes clear as the poem progresses that the speaker sees the world as a man's world and describes it in a male-oriented language using masculine images of sexuality. The man and the snake develop an association based on what they have in common: their sexual prowess. The

speaker uses phallocentric language to describe the bond of male sexuality between the man and the snake. He describes the last spasms of the dying snake in this male-oriented language:

> And then it stiffened to its final length.
> But though it opened its thin mouth to scream
> A last silent scream that shook the black sky,
> Adamant and fierce, the tall man did not curse.
> (81-84)

The speaker figuratively envisions the snake as a phallus emitting its last mighty ejaculation, one powerful enough to shake the sky before it dies. The tall man sympathizes with the snake and, the speaker notes, "[b]eside the rigid snake the man stretched out" (85). Associating the snake with his own sexual identity, the "tall man," a phallic image himself, mirrors the snake by lying beside it. He measures his life in terms of the phallus, using the snake as a sexual yardstick.

The speaker interprets the man's movements as an act of "fellowship in death" (86), but this is more than an act of "fellowship" with a snake; the snake enables the man to engage in a fellowship with the patriarchs. Layton's snake is associated with a patriarchal vision of human history. Ruskin, one of the fathers of the literary tradition, observes that "'The Penetrative Imagination' is a 'possession-taking faculty' and a 'piercing...mind's tongue' that seizes, cuts down, and gets at the root of experience in order to throw up what new shoots it will'" (Gilbert and

Gubar 5). Ruskin's consideration of the imaginative muse is described in a male-oriented language which describes the tongue/penis in terms of its violent capabilities. The speaker in Layton's poem describes the live snake as "earth's vivid tongue that flicked in praise of earth" (70). The man, identifying himself with the dead, phallic snake, sees "his mind tunnelled with flicking tongue / Backwards to caves, mounds, sunken ledges" (89-90). Like a snake moving through the hollow, female, womb-like spaces of caves, mounds, and ledges, the man allows his imagination with its flicking snake's tongue, to slither through the memory of humanity. Of course, his perception of the history of humanity has a patriarchal slant, established and perpetuated by the "fathers" named throughout the poem: Donatello, Plato, Moses, and Joshua. "A Tall Man Executes a Jig," peppered with male-oriented language and the phallic image of the snake, is evidence that Layton is a writer of the "Penetrative Imagination." In Layton's poem, this patriarchal memory of humanity is couched in terms that suggest the phallocentric view of sex as a game of hunt and conquer. Memory, in this poem, is represented by a phallic snake slithering through the female spaces of "caves, mounds, and sunken ledges" (91).

At the poem's conclusion, the old man clearly perceives the phallic snake as a male god figure. In the final stanza, the speaker describes the snake as it "crept upon the sky, /

Huge, his mailed coat glittering with stars that made / The night bright" (94-96, emphasis mine). This specifically male snake is, in this moment of transcendence, a god-figure. It is a male god-like figure that, with its halo-like form "coiled above his head" (98), is able to "transform" the old male speaker by reaffirming his belief in his own male, phallic power. The dying snake, with all the rigidity and ejaculatory power of the phallus, remains turgid in its death. When it is resurrected, it "crept upon the sky" (95), ascending to the position of a god. The snake enacts the speaker's own phallocentric view of the world: the phallus rules - it is god.

In "There are Snakes Beyond Our Myth," published fifteen years after Layton's poem, Joe Rosenblatt's speaker also describes a male-affirming power through the phallic image of the snake. The pronoun "our" in the opening line, "there are snakes beyond our myth" (1), does not refer to all of humanity but only to a portion of it. Part of humanity is pursued by snakes "who follow us thru the vapour / into the narrow bedrooms of the skin" (2-3). Men are pursued by snakes as they perform their sex acts, "trembling under those cool sheets" (4). As the snake follows the speaker "into the narrow bedrooms of the skin" (3), it is no longer a creature "beyond our myth"; it is a phallic image - men and snakes are allies. The speaker's phallic association with the snake, and the casting of the woman as the hunted

victim of the conquest are suggested by his use of the architectural metaphor of "bedroom of the skin." In Rosenblatt's poem, men are figured as penises, which are represented by snakes; women, the bedrooms of skin, are merely containers, a space to occupy and fill.

The stanza break and the opening line of the second stanza, "& there are snakes who carry a luxurious poison" (6), seemingly offer a contrast to the "snakes beyond our myth" of the opening section. The second stanza, however, is really a continuation of the first five lines, in which Rosenblatt's speaker brings his hunt-and-conquer theme to completion. The men of the first stanza no longer merely collude with the snakes following them; they <u>are</u> these snakes which carry the "luxurious poison." The phallus, a metonymy for "men," is represented as a snake. But Rosenblatt's snakes, like Layton's, traverse female spaces. Rosenblatt uses geographic terms to describe the female anatomy and to emphasize the conquest theme. The snakes make a territorial gain, "slithering over a hill to a trough" (7). Like Layton's snake, too, Rosenblatt's snakes have their ejaculatory moment when they "empty a milky poison / from their hot mouths" (8-9). The speaker's use of the word "poison" to describe the ejaculate suggests that men are a dangerous predator of helpless women. Besides the milky poison which issues from their hot mouths, the snakes also emit language, "whispering: beguiled... beguiled... " (10).

While Layton's snake transforms the old man by wreathing him in its phallic power, Rosenblatt's snakes rejoice at their conquest over women and language, even if that victory is gained through deceit. The hunt is over when the snake has marked its territory - the phallus scores again. The lack of closure marked by the three-dot ellipses suggests that the beguiling and these conquests will continue ad infinitum. They cannot, however, continue forever. Women writers are compelled to respond to the male-biased language in which it is impossible for them to define themselves and to mythologies which relegate them to a passive role as objects to be conquered and beguiled. Canadian women poets are reexamining the images patriarchal poets use to create those unlivable mythologies and are recasting them.

In the phallocentric language of the patriarchal imagination, the connection between the signified "phallus" and the signifier "snake" seems to be an easy one to make. Meaning, however, is not a closed system and Canadian women poets such as Jay Macpherson, Margaret Atwood, Jan Conn, and Lorna Crozier provide alternative ways to read the signifier "snake." They reexamine the image of the snake and deemphasize the poetic tradition that writes of conquests over women. These women poets not only remove the phallic aspect of the snake but, in some poems, they identify the snake with the feminine world and with themselves. In order to speak the female language of the body, the women poets

strip the snake image of its masculinist associations.

In Jay Macpherson's second "Eurynome," the speaker subverts the implied phallic image of the snake. "Come all old maids that are squeamish / And afraid to make mistakes," the speaker directs, "Don't clutter your lives up with boyfriends: / The nicest girls marry snakes" (1-4). There is something tidy about marrying the snake; it does not "clutter" up one's life. The snake will try to be attentive "[i]f you don't mind slime on your pillow / And caresses as gliding as ice / --Cold skin, warm heart, remember" (5-7). In addition to being clean and attentive, the snake is useful since, as the speaker points out, "they keep down the mice--" (8). In her slightly flippant tone, the speaker concludes her argument for the snake: "If you're really serious-minded, / It's the best advice you can take: / No rumpling, no sweating, no nonsense, / Oh who would not sleep with a snake? " (9-12) A relationship with a snake is uncomplicated, the speaker argues. A phallocentric reading of the poem suggests that the snake is a phallic substitute for the penis, but the speaker defends the snake by emphasizing attributes other than its sexual prowess. Macpherson's early snake poem subverts the phallic image of the snake by focussing on non-physical aspects of the snake. She denies a masculinist response to this snake image.

Atwood, too, refutes masculinist interpretations of the snake image. For example, the speaker of "Snake Woman" turns

the tables on Rosenblatt when she describes a man's response to a snake in the bedroom. She confesses that she has always been fascinated by snakes and she describes how she would catch snakes and bring them into the dining room. She quotes the violent reaction of the fearful man: "Put that thing in my bed and I'll kill you" (19). Atwood lets us hear the fear in the man's response to the snake in the bedroom that we never hear from any of the women in the bedrooms of skin in the Rosenblatt poem. Atwood's poem echoes the sentiments of Macpherson's "Eurynome II" when the speaker concludes in an ironic tone, "Now I'd consider the snake" (21). Her speaker is not interested in a man who projects his phallic self onto a snake. She is not interested in the phallic projection, that image of the hunter and the father; she would consider the real thing, the snake, on her own terms.

"Bad Mouth" opens with the speaker unwriting the hunt-and-conquer theme evident in patriarchal writing, such as the Rosenblatt poem. In the first stanza, the speaker points out the difference between the snake as hunter and Rosenblatt's poetic hunter:

> There are no leaf-eating snakes.
> All are fanged and gorge on blood.
> Each one is a hunter's hunter,
> nothing more than an endless gullet
> pulling itself on over the still-alive prey
> like a sock gone ravenous, like an evil glove,
> like sheer greed, lithe and devious. (1-7)

Unlike the hunter, who hunts game mostly for sport, and the poetic hunter, who courts women for sexual sport, the non-

phallic carnivorous snake hunts in order to survive. It is dangerous, "greedy," and "devious" - like the phallic snakes we have read about - but this snake is this way because it must be in order to exist. The speaker uses language such as "fanged," "gorge," "evil," "poisoning," "venomous," "syringes," and "radar" to suggest the dangerous aspects of this true hunter. Lacking any human associations, this hunter is the "hunter's hunter" - it is a model for the human hunters who learn to be devious, to be greedy, and to use radar and any other tools they need to catch their female prey.

Perhaps the innocent snakes have taught the poetic hunter another lesson. At the end of the poem, Atwood's speaker describes the seemingly asexual mating activity of snakes. "Even their mating is barely sexual," she notes. It is "a romance between two lengths / a cyanide-coloured string. / Despite their live births and squirming nests / it's hard to believe in snakes loving" (36-40). By describing the mating rites of the snake in terms of colour, the blue-green colour of cyanide, and as inanimate objects, lengths of string, the speaker completely removes the image of the snake from any sexual, or even human, associations. As a poem such as Rosenblatt's indicates, a poem in which the hunt theme cloaks the need for sexual dominance, many poetic hunters have learned from the snake that sexual activity need not have anything to do with such human

aspects as love and caring.

Atwood's speaker completely dismisses the phallic associations of the snake in the witty opening of "Eating Snake." She begins by confessing, "I too have taken the god into my mouth, / chewed it up and tried not to choke on the bones" (1-2). Aware of the phallocentrism that pervades some readers' textual interpretations, she elaborates: "Rattlesnake it was, panfried / and good too though a little oily" (3-4). For those masculinist readers who insist on a phallocentric reading, she instructs them to "(Forget the phallic symbolism: / two differences: / snake tastes like chicken, / and who ever credited the prick with wisdom?)" (5-8). This poem challenges and corrects the phallic associations of the snake and the speaker emphasizes, by using parentheses, that a phallic, or Freudian, interpretation must be bracketed, forgotten, or unlearned.

In "Quattrocento," Atwood's speaker describes a fifteenth-century painting of the snake in the Biblical garden of Eden. In her descriptions of the Michelangelesque representation, the speaker notes that the artist identifies the snake with women; the snake is "vertical and with a head / that's face-coloured and haired like a woman's" (8-9). The artist's association of the snake with women does not suggest a non-phallocentric interpretation of the snake; rather it aligns the sinner, Eve, with the evil force, the snake. The artist's emphasis on verticality confirms that

this is indeed a phallic image of the snake - and of women.

In "Lies About Snakes," the speaker implicitly demands that we reexamine the patriarchal meaning of the signified snake. Adopting the tone of an educator, the speaker declares, "I present the glass snake / which is supposed to break when stepped on / but doesn't. One more lie about snakes" (1-3). The glass snake, however, is not even a species of snake; it is a lizard. The lesson in "Lies About Snakes" is that meaning is never a closed system ruled by the patriarchs. In women's eyes, the patriarchal ideology is a lie; hence, like the speaker of Atwood's poem who compellingly reveals these lies about snakes, these poets need to untell patriarchy's lies - they need to tell women's "truths."

The speaker goes on to describe the motion of this snake which is not a snake as it "undulates over the sand, / a movement of hips in a tight skirt" (6-7). The snake's movements are described without the phallic thrusts and territorial gains of Layton and Rosenblatt. Instead, there is a feminine quality in this snake's motions - a wave-like fluidity. There is a sensuality, and perhaps a sexuality, in this snake's movements that exists without any phallic associations.

As an alternative to removing all human context from the snake, as she does in "Bad Mouth," Atwood's speaker provides both male and female images for the snake in

"Metempsychosis." In this poem, the snake is "[s]omebody's grandmother" (1), "a dancer" (5), "your blunt striped uncle" (7), or "your lost child" (21). The souls of humans, both male and female, inhabit these snakes, yet these snakes are not described in terms of sexual imagery. The movement of these snakes is not rigid but fluid; one "glides through the bracken, / In widow's black and graceful / and sharp as ever" (1-3) while another is "a green streamer waved by its own breeze" (5-6). These snakes move in a graceful, gentle motion that suggests nothing phallic. A distinctly male snake, at least in his former life, "your blunt striped uncle [has] come back / to bask under the wicker chairs / on the porch and watch over you" (7-9). This snake, in spite of its male gender, acts in a female way; it is comforting, protective, and that most motherly of characteristics, nurturant.

Throughout her snake poems, Atwood deemphasizes and, at times, boldly prohibits a phallic interpretation of the snake. Instead, it is simply a snake, or not even a snake, or sometimes a snake with very human, often feminine, characteristics. The snake poems by Jan Conn and Lorna Crozier were published later than Atwood's snake poems and Atwood's influence on these poets is evident in their choice of language and themes. These poets are also interested in separating the snake from its phallic associations in order to express themselves in a non-phallocentric language.

In his review of Rosemary Sullivan's anthology Poetry by Canadian Women, Joe Rosenblatt barely hides his surprise at discovering Conn's non-patriarchal, non-phallocentric use of the snake image in her poem, "All Women Dream of Snakes":

> Being an animal lover generally (baboons, frogs, cats, snakes, and abused and much maligned toads...) I am partial to Jan Conn's society and landscape. "All Women Dream of Snakes" struck my undulous curiosity. Here was a potentially controversial poem. Dare she mention snakes (an obvious penis symbol) and "Freud in the background" and survive in a feminist atmosphere? (Rosenblatt, Books 36)

Rosenblatt's "undulous curiosity" rises and falls like the phallic expression of self in his poem. His firm grounding in phallocentric language shapes his reading. Rosenblatt's use of the parentheses implies his assumption that all people see snakes as he and other patriarchal writers do, as a phallic symbol. In "All Women Dream of Snakes," however, Conn elaborates on the images from Atwood's poems in order to unwrite the phallic imagery patriarchal writers have attached to the snake.

The poem provides an example of how a male uses a frog as a sexual exhibit. The speaker recalls how

> [l]ate one night coming home on the streetcar,
> a boy with a white styrofoam box
> told two girls beside him
> there was a frog inside,
> hoping for admiration, later,
> conversation. (30-35)

The boy, a product of phallocentric thinking, uses the amphibian as a sexual tool to impress and flirt with the girls. The frog becomes, for the boy, an image that empowers

him sexually. For the speaker, on the other hand, the frog's appeal is not as a tool to boost her sexual appeal. "With frogs I'm more sympathetic," (22) she claims. While the speaker's relationship with things "green and slimy" (44) is different from that of the boy's, a representative of the dominant patriarchal ideology, her relationship with the snake is especially significant.

Conn's "All Women Dream of Snakes" opens, like Atwood's "Eating Snake," with an allusion to Freud. The speaker declares, "All women dream of snakes, / I've been told, Freud in the background -- / his reductionist view of sexuality" (1-3). By referring to Freud's interpretation as "reductionist," the speaker, like Atwood, makes it clear that patriarchal views of snake images and of women must be unlearned. Conn's speaker's blunt statement, "Personally, I prefer snakes to men" (4), is a much stronger assertion than the ironic comment, "Now I'd consider the snake" (21) in Atwood's "Snake Woman." Conn's speaker specifically opts for the snake over men and the view of the fathers which they perpetuate.

One reason the snake appeals to Conn's speaker is "the texture of their skin / (belts, purses, shoes)" (6-7). This speaker does not rely on her sight alone to experience the snake. She knows what it feels like to touch it. To see the snake as a phallic symbol is to value vision over the other senses, since the penis is a more readily visualizable

sexual organ. The phallocentric interpretation of the snake ignores other senses such as the sense of touch. For this speaker the sense of touch is as important as vision for validating her experience.

The speaker prefers the snake not only because of its appeal to her senses, but also because of the way it moves. Like the speaker of Atwood's poems, who notes the fluidity of the snake's motion as "a movement of hips in a tight skirt" ("Lies About Snakes" 7), Conn's speaker comments on this snake's movement. The snake has "the lack of legs / so every movement is a sort of dance -- / grace they slide in and out of / like a hand in a glove" (8-11). The description is sexually suggestive, yet the activity is not described in terms of rigidity, erectness, ejaculations, and conquests. There is female grace in this snake's dance.

"Everyone has a primitive brain" (38), the speaker concludes and it was

> Only yesterday the baby brontosaurus
> curled at the base of my skull
> went out for a walk,
> dragging me along into the swamp.
>
> I had to wait around while it ate
> everything green and slimy in sight.
> Feed me, it said. Feed me. (39-45)

The speaker's brain, perhaps more primitive than the reptile with which she opens the poem, feeds on things "slimy and green." For her, snakes and amphibians are not the same slimy and green creatures that many women, trapped by stereotyped mythologies, are conditioned to fear

(inexplicably) as young girls. Rather, her brain feeds on the myths of these creatures and ruminates on them.

Crozier, too, is interested in re-viewing patriarchal perceptions of the snake. In "Sleeping With Snakes" (see Appendix), the speaker uses deflation to undermine the phallic interpretation of the snake. She begins by describing the snake as "[t]hick as her arms, / all skin and muscle / and hidden bone" (1-3). After suggesting a resemblance between the snake and the phallus, she deflates that interpretation by associating the snake with other animals. The snakes "nuzzle her / like a horse's mouth / feeding from her palm / or bunt her / with their flat, blunt heads / like cats" (4-9). The speaker continues to unwrite the phallic association of the snake with further descriptions of the snakes which "lie still / as the green / on the underside of ice" (10-12) until spring when "they'll begin / to stir like water / close to the boiling point" (15-17). Like the speakers of Atwood's and Conn's poems, this speaker describes the snakes in terms of their fluidity, but this fluidity is fervent and exuberant. The woman in the poem satisfies herself with these snakes, as the speaker observes: "Strange / how she can warm herself / at such cold fires" (25-27). The snakes clearly appeal to her, perhaps sexually, but not as a phallic image. Instead, the snake becomes an image of the woman. The female body awakens from a dormant state and comes alive to celebrate

her own sexuality.

At the opening of "Mother Tongue," Crozier provides another reason for Macpherson, Atwood, Conn, and herself to consider the snake over the man. The snake's tongue, Crozier suggests, is "the first seducer" (2) which

> entered
> every orifice
> long before Adam,
> touching every part of her
> inside and out,
> tasting everything. (12-17)

This snake, which satisfies Eve - who was "living as she did with a man / who wouldn't touch her," (6-7) - with oral gratification, is not a phallic image. Its activity is described in sexual terms, but its form is not penile; rather, "its whole body [is] a primitive tongue" (25).

The use of the word "primitive" by both Conn and Crozier suggests not a slightly-evolved being, but the first, the original, being - a being closely associated with nature. By using the word "primitive," the poets defy the patriarchal binary opposition of culture/primitiveness. Hélène Cixous lists such oppositions in which the characteristics considered feminine are given less value:

> Activity/Passivity
> Sun/Moon
> Culture/Nature
> Day/Night
> Father/Mother
> Head/Emotions
> Intelligible/Sensitive
> Logos/Pathos
> (Moi 104)

The feminine side of the opposition is considered to be

powerless and negative, particularly when more than one so-called positive attribute can be paired with the negative, feminine one:

> Nature/History
> Nature/Art
> Nature/Mind
> Passion/Action
> (Moi 104)

The snake, an important image for these writers, is defined as primitive and it is linked to nature. But rather than perpetuating the culture/nature opposition, Conn and Crozier redefine nature. The women speakers of these poems link themselves to the natural or primitive snake. In spite of the patriarchal binary oppositions which render nature as valueless, the link of women and snakes to nature is positive. As Alicia Ostriker notes in her study of American women poets, Stealing the Language, "The femaleness of nature has manifested itself in a creature that responds and is responded to .... [W]e have recognized, in nature, ourselves" (118). The snake, once it is stripped of its phallic symbolism, becomes an emblem through which women can recognize themselves and communicate that recognition in a non-phallocentric language.

The female speaker in Crozier's "Fear of Snakes" unmistakably recognizes herself in the snake. The title of the poem indicates that this is a poem about the speaker's own fear of snakes but the poem is also about the fear the snake experiences. The speaker associates herself with the

snake when she says, "I remember / when my fear of snakes left for good, / it fell behind me like an old skin" (4-6). As the snake sheds its skin, so the speaker sheds her fear.

What causes her to shed her skin-like fear is not the cyclical patterns of the seasons but a deeper association with the snake. She remembers a neighbourhood boy, Larry Moen, carrying a snake "like a green torch" (8). Like Layton's speaker who sees the snake as a green flame and is empowered by its phallic presence, Larry Moen becomes powerful when he carries the snake because with it he can frighten and victimize little girls. "Drop it down her back" (9), Larry's friends urge him and the speaker recalls her fear of "its sliding in the runnel of [her] spine" (10). Crozier uses parentheses in this poem to expand on the character of Larry Moen and to describe further the tyrannical nature of patriarchy:

> (Larry,
> the one who touched the inside of my legs on the swing,
> an older boy we knew we shouldn't get close to
> with our little dresses, our soft skin) (10-13).

It is Larry, with his prepubescent sexuality, who is threatening to the speaker; it is the threat of Larry's phallus, not that of the physical snake, which is dangerous to the young girl. Larry, wielder of power, victimizes those who are "other," those who are powerless. The intervention of the speaker's brother, a male who has a connection to the young female, is what prevents further victimization of the young girl and Larry finds another object, the snake, to

victimize: "... my brother / saying Let her go, and I crouched behind the caraganas, / watching Larry nail the snake to a telephone pole" (13-15). When the snake becomes a victim - "twisted on twin points of light, unable to crawl / out of its pain, its mouth opening, the red / tongue tasting its own terror" (16-18) - the speaker is able to associate herself with the snake, instead of perceiving it as an implement of victimization. Her feelings toward the snake are different from a Laytonesque speaker's tendency to see the snake as a mirror for his own sexuality. Crozier's speaker declares, "I loved it then, that snake" because in that snake she sees aspects of herself - another victim of the patriarchal system which allows those in power to oppress any "other" which the dominant power perceives as weak.

By rewriting the snake as a non-phallic image, these women poets discover non-patriarchal ways to describe society. These poets challenge the idea that phallocentric language provides universal truths for all of humanity. More important, these poets find non-patriarchal ways of describing women's experience. Women poets have learned that seeing is not the only way of knowing something is there. The use of other senses, particularly touch, can verify the presences and absences around them. Women are rediscovering that they must trust the response of their bodies. And, as Irigaray explains, there is much about their bodies to which

women respond:

> A woman "touches herself" constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two - but not divisible into ones - who stimulate each other. (Moi 143)

The female-associated snake which knows the woman's body better than a man does suggests the woman's own familiarity with her body. The speakers in these poems declare their preference of the snake over men (the phallic entity) because the snakes are images of women themselves. The snake is not a phallic image that penetrates women's bodies but is an emblem of women's engagement with their own bodies. In fact, in "My New Old Man, He's So Good," Crozier's speaker identifies herself sexually with the snake as she describes her actions with her lover:

> or best when still
> I move over him
> my slippery skin, snake
> swallows mouse, he dies
> inside me often, I breathe
> him into life, lick him
> from darkness, his and mine
> or just the night (6-13)

The association of the snake and woman is an empowering one for women, not only for the speakers in Crozier's poems, but for the speakers of many Canadian women's snake poems. The response of the flesh to nature becomes a way for women poets to express their own feminine libido. And the association of women and the snake - the de-phallus-izing of the snake - enables these women poets to create their own feminine discourse with which they can mold their own

mythologies.

Women still, however, are not completely free of the phallocentric, patriarchal shackles of language. For centuries the dominant ideology has defined women as "other" and placed them on the negative, powerless side of binary oppositions. The mythologies created by the male poetic tradition continue to keep women in that position of subjugation. The story of Eve's fall is an excuse to subordinate women and women continue to be maligned because they must live out the blame placed on Eve by male-oriented society. As I shall explain in chapter two, Canadian women poets examine the patriarchal mythologies of the Eden story through their snake poems. By finding new contexts, new "constellations" of language, as Atwood puts it, for the patriarchal image of the snake, women poets are revising the dominant mythology which insists on making women culpable for the faults of the world.

Revising the Revisions?: Revisionist Mythmaking in Canadian Women's Snake Poems

> Do you know that each of you is an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must necessarily live too. You are the gate of Hell, you are the temptress of the forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law. - Tertullian
>
> A woman must be a learner, listening quietly and with due submission. I do not permit a woman to be a teacher, nor must woman domineer over man; she should be quiet. For Adam was created first, and Eve afterwards; and it was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who, yielding to deception, fell into sin. -I Timothy 2:11-14

Because Eve's story has been every woman's story since the evolution of the patriarchal myths, it is vitally important that this story undergo the process of revisionist mythmaking. As Ostriker explains, through this process revisionist poems

> treat existing texts as fenceposts surrounding the terrain of mythic truth but by no means identical to it. In other words, they are enactments of feminist antiauthoritarianism opposed to the patriarchal praxis of reifying texts. As Adrienne Rich declares in her definition of women's "writing as re-vision," "Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival." (235)

Revising patriarchal myths allows women poets to draw attention to subverted meanings or to recast the myth by making the objects of the patriarchal myths the subjects of these revisionist myths. But it is also a dangerous act; it means drawing further attention to those myths.

Feminists debate the usefulness of revisionism as a way of responding to the mythologies perpetuated by the male literary imagination. In Feminism and Poetry, for example, Jan Montefiore argues that revisionism is counterproductive to the feminist cause:

> Alicia Ostriker sees such "revisionary mythmaking" as a project to raid "the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meanings of 'male' and 'female' have been preserved." But just because this material is both traditional and powerful, it is resistant to recasting. Political interpretations can deflect but not alter its meanings, which either return to haunt the poem that overtly discards them, or vanish into witty analysis. Strategies of storytelling are not, finally, effective in overcoming the paradoxes of exclusion. There is truth as well as optimism in the claim that women need to make their own tradition. (56)

According to Montefiore, revising existing myths only empowers them; revising myths draws attention to the offensive politics embedded within those myths without altering those politics.

But for the French theorist, Hélène Cixous, the realm of biblical and classical myth is extremely rich soil in which to cultivate new mythologies. As Toril Moi explains:

> Cixous's predilection for the Old Testament is obvious, but her taste for classical antiquity is no less marked. Her capacity for identification seems endless: Medusa, Electra, Antigone, Dido, Cleopatra - in her imagination she has been them all. In fact, she declares that "I am myself the earth, everything that happens on it, all the lives that live me there in my different forms" (VE, 52-53): This constant return to biblical and mythological imagery signals her investment in the world of myth: a world that, like the distant country of fairy tales[,] is perceived as pervasively meaningful, as closure and unity. The mythical or religious discourse presents a universe where all difference, struggle and discord can in the

end be satisfactorily resolved. (116)

Revisionist mythmaking cannot be discarded as nonproductive or accused of actually abetting patriarchal vision by spotlighting it. As Cixous has discovered, revising patriarchal myths is a way of creating texts in which women are fairly represented.

To begin with, Cixous, herself, questions the validity of patriarchally-created mythologies:

> What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?
> If it were to come out in a new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to <u>found</u> (fund) phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?
> Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies; another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of society. (Ostriker 210)

Cixous is not the only woman who has doubts about the patriarchal world vision. Women poets are creating new mythologies by recasting existing patriarchal mythologies. "Most of these poems," Ostriker points out,

> involve reevaluations of social, political and philosophical values, particularly those most enshrined in occidental literature, such as the glorification of conquest and the faith that the cosmos is - must be - hierarchically ordered with earth and body on the bottom and mind and spirit on the top. (235)

Women have inherited a myth that excuses patriarchy's demeaning treatment of them. These issues are important to Canadian women poets who are interested in dismantling the hierarchical vision of the patriarchal imagination.

It is important for women poets to address the issue of mythology because the patriarchal versions are not the only mythologies for women to try to fit into. As Elaine Pagels explains, the Gnostic Gospels coexisted with the myths that appear in the Bible until the time of Constantine when religion became an institution. The Gnostic Gospels tell many of the same stories as the patriarchal scriptures but from a different point of view. For example, in some of the Gnostic Tales, a female spiritual principle enters the snake in the Edenic garden. Merlin Stone argues in <u>When God Was a Woman</u> that the biblical version of the Edenic myth is really a patriarchal revision of a number of existing myths, designed to discourage goddess worship - designed, in other words, to legitimize patriarchal society. The snake is an important symbol because of its historical significance, as Stone explains:

> It seems that in some lands all existence begins with a serpent. Despite the insistent, perhaps hopeful assumption that the serpent must have been regarded as a phallic symbol, it appears to have been primarily revered as a female in the Near and Far East and generally linked to wisdom and prophetic counsel rather than fertility and growth as is so often suggested. (199)

In their snake poems, P.K. Page, Margaret Atwood, Lorna Crozier, and Jay Macpherson often link the snake to a figure of wisdom or even to a god/goddess figure who exercises his/her power through knowledge and creativity. Through their use of the snake image, these poets reexamine some of the patriarchally-created scripts in the Bible, classical

myth, and the fairy tale.

Page, Atwood, and Crozier reconsider the version of the Edenic myth told by the patriarchal fathers. As Gilbert and Gubar observe,

> [T]he story that Milton, "the first of the masculinists," most notably tells to women is of course the story of woman's secondness, her otherness, and how that otherness leads inexorably to her demonic anger, her sin, her fall, and her exclusion from that garden of the gods which is also, for her, the garden of poetry. (191)

These Canadian women poets revise the biblical myth of Eden by reevaluating Eve's actions, the snake's role, and the relationship between the snake and Eve. By rewriting the patriarchal version of the Edenic myth, these women poets create for themselves an inspiring women's mythology.

In Page's early revisionist poem, "The Apple," Eve deflects the blame for the sin from herself. "Look, look," she points out, in the spring "he took me straight / to the snake's eye / to the striped flower / shielding its peppery root" (1-4). Adam leads Eve through the orchard to the infamous tree, the fruit of which they are not to eat. The snake is represented only by its eye, but it is the snake's presence which indicates to those schooled in the patriarchal version of the myth that this is the forbidden tree. The apple blossom and the snake's presence are linked as biblical images signifying knowledge. In accordance to the Father's decree, "You may eat from every tree in the garden, but not from the tree of knowledge of good and evil,

for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die," (Genesis 2:16-17), Eve declares, "I shall never go back" (5).

But again, Eve is led back to the tree; this time, though, it is not a walk straight to the tree: "At harvest, he led me round and about" (6). Adam leads Eve on a serpentine trail that takes them back to the tree to which she swore she would never return. In the biblical version Eve, convinced by the snake, "saw that the fruit of the tree was good to eat, and that it was pleasing to the eye and tempting to contemplate, [and] she took some and ate it. She also gave her husband some and he ate it" (Genesis 3:6). In Page's revision, Eve never names who actually picked the "[o]ne apple only hung like a heart in air" (10), but she does explain how they ate that one apple. "Together, bite by bite / we ate," Eve recalls, "mouths opposite. / Bit clean through core and all to meet: / through sweet juice met" (11-15). It is not that Eve eats the fruit and then gulls defenseless, naîve Adam into eating as well. Page revises the myth so that Adam and Eve are equally responsible because they ate the apple together, meeting at the middle. This eating together of the "heart," created by the Father, is an act of communion. After this sacrament, Eve repeats, "I shall never go back" (16). Having eaten the forbidden fruit, Eve is expelled from the garden, according to the patriarchal myth; she can never go back, she can never

return to that state of innocence in the garden. Eve leaves silently in the patriarchal version, but when Page's Eve is cast out, she claims her voice and defiantly announces her exile.

In the patriarchal myth, the Father condemns her as he casts her out of the garden: "I will increase your labour and your groaning, and in labour you shall bear children" (Genesis 3:16). In Re-inventing Eve Kim Chernin suggests an alternate reading of the Father's act:

> By expelling Eve, the arrogant male Authority (read either text) restores to Eve her original power as creator of life, thereby reestablishing her hidden identity with the Great Mother. Read like this, the expulsion allows Eve's return to her true nature; the Fall brings about her rise to creative power. (172)

According to Chernin, the Father's attempt to discipline Eve fails because this so-called punishment actually permits Eve to identify herself with the Goddess and thereby explore her own creative capabilities. In Page's version, for example, Eve is redeemed through the labour of childbirth:

> But someone let an angel down
> on a thin string.
> It was a rangey paper thing
> with one wing torn,
> born of a child. (17-21)

This is no gloriously perfect Messiah who saves Adam and Eve. Instead, the existence of this tattered paper angel born of her own creative power allows her to end her story: "Now, now, we come and go, we come and go, / feverish where that harvest grew" (22-23). The repetition of the closing lines suggests a great deal of activity; this repetition of

activity which she describes as "feverish" is indicative of the sexual energy which infuses her. The curse of God in the patriarchal version becomes a release for Eve's creative power in Page's revision.

In "Quattrocento," Atwood also revises the patriarchal version of the biblical myth, but unlike Page who focuses her revision on Eve's point of view, Atwood concentrates on the role of the snake. The poem opens with the speaker explaining how patriarchal myths are perpetuated: "The snake enters your dreams through paintings" (1). Male artists may perpetuate mythologies which the patriarchy uses to maintain its position of perceived superiority and to disempower the "other."

The speaker's description of the unnamed painting in "Quattrocento" suggests that the depiction of the Genesis tale is of the kind Michelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel. The painting, the speaker tells us, is "of a formal garden / in which there are always three" (2-3). The recurrence of three figures (a significant number in Christian mythology) and the meticulous order pervading this garden suggest that this is the patriarchal vision of Paradise. But as she describes the painting the speaker reveals her displeasure with this representation of Paradise:

> Everyone looks unhappy,
> even the few zoo animals, stippled with sun,
> even the angel who's like a slab
> of flaming laundry, hovering

up there with his sword of fire,
unable as yet to strike.

There's no love here,
Maybe it's the boredom. (10-17)

Paradise is boring, the speaker suspects. The fact that in the Biblical story nothing happens to Eve between her creation and the episode leading to her expulsion from the garden, is indicative of no action in Paradise, and hence, no narrative - or at least none the patriarchy considers worth telling. For Eve, Paradise is a place of stasis. The opportunity to know evil as well as good, and the opportunity to experience death as well as life, is the possibility of recognizing difference and alleviating boredom. But in this depiction of the patriarchal myth, Paradise is a world of inaction where the weather is always ideal and where the somewhat domestic male angel in his "flaming laundry" is impotent; there is no one to strike with his phallic sword. In this garden of inaction, the angel can only hover; he cannot act. The speaker satirizes the patriarchal valorizing of power, order, and "the man of action" through this immobilized Paradise.

There is, however, more than one truth; there are a number of myths and the patriarchal version is clearly unsatisfactory. The speaker notices "that's no apple but a heart / torn out of someone / in this myth gone suddenly Aztec" (18-20). Alluding to Page's "One apple only hung like a heart in air," Atwood's speaker finds other myths - Page's

revisionist poem and Aztec myths - from which to create her own story. Clearly the patriarchal story of Genesis is not the only creation myth, and Atwood's speaker draws on other versions, such as the Aztec myths, in order to create her own revision.

In reevaluating the other versions, the speaker examines the significance of the snake as she creates her own myth. What the snake offers, the speaker observes, "is the possibility of death / ... / death upon death squeezed together, / a blood snowball" (20-24). The Pageian apple-turned-heart becomes in this myth a "blood snowball." The snake offers the possibility of death, but it also offers physical reality, an alternative to boredom:

> To devour is to fall out
> of the still unending noon
> to a hard ground with a straight horizon
>
> and you are no longer the
> idea of a body but a body,
> you slide down into your body as into hot mud. (25-30)

This is a fall from the ideal to the concrete, and it entails learning about darkness. To be the Platonic ideal is less exciting than being a "copy" because being perfect implies stasis while being a copy allows the opportunity of action, even if that action means there is the possibility of error.

The fall also means experiencing disease, history, and space. But it is the presence of darkness, the absence of light, that makes the fall valuable. The speaker, addressing

the reader, teaches us that we carry the darkness inside us, like that tasted apple-heart-snowball, and "it's the death you carry in you / red and captured, that makes the world / shine for you / as it never did before" (38-41). We learn to appreciate the light when it is taken from us. This does not mean we want the light back forever; do we really want to return to "unending noon"?

In the brilliant garden absent of love, how could Eve not choose to eat the fruit when "[l]love is choosing, the snake said" (43). Eve chose - that is, she loved - and she learned. The speaker concludes her myth, like Page, with the language of communion. The snake says, "The kingdom of god is within you / because you ate it" (44-45). Eve eats the apple-heart-snowball - the kingdom of god - and now knows the darkness as well as the light. This revisionist myth ends before the expulsion scene of the patriarchal version. In this static Eden, which is no Paradise for her, Eve chooses - she opts for action.

The speakers of other Atwood snake poems suggest that the snake is not a devilish figure offering dark, forbidden knowledge. In "Eating Snake," "Psalm to Snake," and "After Heraclitus," for example, she likens the snake to a deity. In Re-inventing Eve, Kim Chernin summarizes a Gnostic tale in which the snake is perceived differently from the way patriarchy has cast it. The snake "who comes to counsel disobedience is an enlightenment figure, an Instructor. It

is not the snake in the grass, the vile serpent, the fallen Lucifer. This snake is a wisdom teacher, the form in which the female spiritual principle now presents herself" (170). For Atwood's speaker, the snake is a god figure and it becomes an image of herself.

Atwood's speaker completely dismisses the phallic associations of the snake in the witty opening of "Eating Snake" in order to examine religious rituals. She instructs her phallocentric detractors to "(Forget the phallic symbolism: / two differences: / snake tastes like chicken, / and who ever credited the prick with wisdom?)" (5-8). Having discouraged the phallocentric reading of her poem, the speaker can now proceed with what this poem is really about: eating snake.

The speaker begins by confessing, "I too have taken the god into my mouth, / chewed it up and tried not to choke on the bones" (1-2). "All peoples are driven / to the point of eating their gods / after a time" (9-11), she then observes. The religious ritual of symbolically eating the body and drinking the blood of one's god is a cross-cultural occurrence, according to the speaker. The reason people partake in this ritualistic eating is

> ... the old greed
> for a plateful of outer space, that craving for darkness,
> the lust to feel what it does to you
> when your teeth meet in divinity, in the flesh,
> when you swallow it down
> and you can see with its own cold eyes
> look out through murder. (11-17)

This speaker gains knowledge and understanding as she swallows her portion of the god. By consuming the divine flesh, she becomes, to some extent, divine herself. Recall the snake's words in "Quattrocento": "The kingdom of god is within you / because you ate it" (44-45). This metonymic transfer explains why people participate in this ritual.

Yet after her speculation on the significance of this cross-cultural act, the speaker dismisses her own participation. "This is a lot of fuss to make about mere lunch: / metaphysics with onions" (18-19), she observes: "It was only a snake after all" (24). While the snake has significance as a deity for the speaker, she is very careful to downplay her eating of it. For her, this act is not a sacrament. The snake is not to become a new Logos in the patriarchal vision of religion. It is her god and she honours it in her own way.

The speaker honours her deity by creating a song for it in "Psalm to Snake." Praising her god/goddess, the speaker lists the marvelous paradoxes of the snake:

> a shift among dry leaves
> when there is no wind,
> a thin line moving through
>
> that which is not
> time, creating time,
> a voice from the dead, oblique
>
> and silent. (3-9)

This is a deity which is there even when it is not there, that speaks even when it is silent. The speaker's use of

paradoxes to describe the snake is also evident in a Gnostic poem called the Thunder, Perfect Mind in which the speaker is a feminine power describing her own paradoxical nature:

> I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore, and the holy one. I am <the mother> and the daughter....I am she whose wedding is great and I have not taken a husband....I am knowledge, and ignorance....I am shameless; I am ashamed. I am strength, and I am fear....I am foolish, and I am wise....I am godless, and I am one whose God is great. (Pagels, Gnostic Tales 66)

In order to describe the nature of the god/goddess figure, both speakers find conventional language imprecise; they resort to paradoxes in order to communicate the elusive quality of the figure. Women are not "Woman". They cannot be categorized into simple constructs, in spite of patriarchy's efforts to do just that. Confined to patriarchal language, these speakers try to define their existence and find the only way to do so is to say, "I am neither this nor that; I am both this and that" because patriarchal definitions oversimplify.

The speaker in "Psalm to Snake" continues to sing of the snake's god/goddess-like power. It is a "[p]rophet under a stone. / I know you're there / even when I can't see you" (11-13). In her experience of the world, this speaker has learned to rely on more than just her vision. When she does rely on vision, she can see not only what is present, but also what is absent:

> I see the trail you make
> in the blank sand, in the morning

I see the point
of intersection, the whiplash
across the eye. (14-18)

This speaker's ability to perceive absence challenges patriarchal vision which focuses on the perception of that which is present, as I observed in my discussion of phallocentricity. Her god may be subordinated to the hierarchical vision of patriarchy which values only the Father, but she still sees the traces of her deity and writes this sacred song to it.

"After Heraclitus" begins with the speaker's recollection of an instructor who quoted one of the patriarchs whose primary concern was presences and absences:

The snake is one name of God,
my teacher said:
All nature is a fire
we burn in and are
renewed, one skin
shed and then another. (1-6)

For Heraclitus, things exist and then they are gone; nothing lasts - there is no permanence in the universe. The implication of this philosophy is that things must be visible to exist. For God to exist, he must be visible; the snake is one name of God.

But for the speaker, the snake as god/goddess has power. She explains: "This is the voice / you could pray to for the answers / to your sickness" (14-16). "You do not pray," (19) she observes of the patriarchal "you," "but go for the shovel, / old blood on the blade" (19-20). Heraclitus may be right, to the extent that patriarchy fails

to recognize the deity around it, and kills it - it exists and it passes away. There is no permanence. Yet, like the snake in "Quattrocento," this snake knows the secrets of knowledge; it understands darkness. The speaker explains these powers to the patriarchal "you":

> But pick it up and you would hold
> the darkness that you fear
> turned flesh and embers,
> cool power coiling into your wrists
> and it would be in your hands
> where it always has been. (21-26)

Still, the listener is skeptical and unwilling to yield the power he perceives he has, not only in his hands, but also in the phallus. He refuses to acknowledge that the power has always been in his hands, yet it is with his hands that he can kill this god/goddess that is flesh and embers combining to form cool power. The speaker's only recourse is to point out its flaws to the patriarchy.

In Atwood's poems, the snake is a powerful, knowledgeable figure much maligned by the patriarchal version of the Edenic myth. Through a series of poems, she revises a mythology for the snake, an emblem of woman herself. The patriarchal version has conflated the sin and the sinner; Eve listened to the snake so they are both condemned. Atwood restores both in her snake poems.

In "Mother Tongue," Lorna Crozier reevaluates the patriarchal myth of Eden by examining the relationship between Eve and the snake: "It was the snake she wanted / not the apple / though she bit into its hard flesh, /

finding the star at the centre" (8-11). Eve's curiosity about the snake is partially a sexual desire because its tongue "flicked across the woman's skin / and she'd have done anything, / living as she did with a man / who wouldn't touch her" (4-7). As I explain in chapter one, senses other than vision, particularly touch, are important to women poets. The snake, unlike the man, intuits Eve's need and responds.

It is not merely sexual attention that Eve needs from the snake, however. As Kim Chernin points out in her psychological revision of the Eve story, Re-inventing Eve,

> Eve, our rebel, has been forbidden two things in the Garden of Eden. One of them is knowledge. The other is food. She knows the risk involved but goes ahead anyway and consumes knowledge. Therefore, we ask: what kind of knowledge is this, associated with food, for which this first woman was compulsively hungering? Could it be knowledge of her capacity to become something far different than the Father God, creating her in his image, intended her to be? (xvii)

Like Atwood's speaker, who consumes knowledge - the kingdom of god - in the form of the snake, Crozier's speaker recasts Eve: her act of defiance against the patriarchy is an act of self discovery. In Crozier's revisionist poem, the snake has touched "every part of her [Eve] / inside and out, / tasting everything" (15-17). This snake's knowledge of Eve is one that engages the senses - the snake touches her, it tastes her. The speaker suggests that the snake's knowledge is regarded as a threat by the patriarchy and

> [t]hat's why we've been taught
> to fear them.

> It isn't the snake itself,
> its sudden green or orange flame,
> but what it knows. (18-22)

The snake knows Eve, and can impart to her its knowledge of her. Through the snake image, then, women become familiar with their own bodies and with their selves. In Atwood's "Lesson on Snakes," we hear echoes of "The Apple," in which Page's speaker notes the similarity between the snake's eye and the striped flower. Atwood's speaker also likens the snake to a flower:

> ... this one
> opens it[s] mouth as wide as it can
> showing fangs and a throat
> like the view down a pink lily,
> double tongue curved out like stamens.
>
> The lilies do it to keep
> from being eaten, this dance of snakes
>
> and the snakes do it to keep from being
> eaten also. (1-9)

As Alicia Ostriker observes in Stealing the Language, "The identification of woman with flower is at least as old as the Roman de la Rose" (108). The flower, which Atwood's speaker associates with the snake, represents the female body. As women become more adventurous and more assertive in the exploration of their bodies, and of their selves, how could the fathers not view this knowledge as a threat to their position of power? If women knew their selves, they would no longer allow themselves to be subjugated as the patriarchal myths prescribe.

It is not only the Edenic myth which Canadian women

poets rewrite through their snake poems. While the Bible is probably the most powerful tool patriarchy has to subjugate women by perpetuating oppressive mythologies, there are other non-religious mythologies which the patriarchy also deems universal texts. Classical myths and fairy tales also need to be revised by these women poets because these texts, too, have been accomplices in patriarchy's creation of destructive mythologies for women.

In Jay Macpherson's first "Eurynome" poem, it is clear that women are the victims of patriarchal revisionary mythmaking. The goddess, stripped of her creative power, is relegated to the role of mere childbearer for the god's will:

> In the snake's embrace mortal she lies,
> Dies, but lives to renew her torment,
> Under her, rock, night on her eyes.
> In the wall around her was set by One
> Upright, staring, to watch for morning
> With bread and candle, her little son. (1-6)

No longer is this snake the "great serpent Ophion" (Graves 27) which Eurynome created from the north wind, Boreas, and which she wills to impregnate her. No longer does Eurynome lay the Universal Egg which, when it hatches, spills out the sky, water, earth and all their inhabitants. Instead, this is a woman bereft of power, forced to submit herself to the progenitive wills of the Father, the "One," in order to perpetuate the patrilineal line - she bears him "a little son" (6). As Russell Brown and Donna Bennett observe, "Macpherson here shows how matriarchal myths are altered by

subsequent patriarchal cultures, with the universal progenitrix displaced by a male creator and becoming simply the bearer of his progeny" (290). The patriarchal culture, by revising classical myths, creates a destructive mythology which women are now exposing.

In her more playful poem, the second "Eurynome," Macpherson's speaker invokes the classical creative goddess and her power by advising women to reclaim their right to choice. Recognizing that there are women afraid to submit themselves to the "mistake" of patriarchal vision, she declares: "Come all old maids that are squeamish / And afraid to make mistakes, / Don't clutter your lives up with boyfriends: / The nicest girls marry snakes" (1-4). By invoking the mythical goddess, Eurynome, though her title, the speaker suggests that like that first female creative goddess who chose her mate and thus her mode of creativity, contemporary women who are hesitant to participate in patriarchy's oppressive role for them can make their own choices, including decisions about their sexual partners. Macpherson's first "Eurynome" poem seriously points to the dangers of allowing the patriarchal revisions of female mythologies to predominate. In her second "Eurynome," she revises the patriarchal revision, thereby recovering women's mythology. By associating old maids with their female creator-ancestress, she empowers women and shows them how to break free of the shackles of patriarchal mythologies.

Instead of revising a patriarchal myth in order to empower women, in "The White Snake" Atwood's speaker revises a fairy tale in order to warn the patriarchy of the dangers of mythmaking. The modern source for "The White Snake" is one of the stories collected by the Grimm brothers. In the story, a wise king maintains his wisdom by eating a secret dish at the end of his dinner. His curious servant sneaks some leftovers to his room one evening and discovers that this secret dish is a white snake. The servant, too, eats of the snake, and immediately hears the language of animals. Because of this ability, the servant learns that the Queen's ring, which he has been accused of stealing, has been swallowed by a duck. He is rewarded with a horse and money and sets out as a traveler who, during his sojourns, saves some animals which promise, in return, to remember him. He falls in love with a Princess, but must first prove his worth to her by completing a task that is almost impossible. When he accomplishes the first feat, through the help of his animal friends, the fickle princess sets him off on other tasks. In a strange twist on the Edenic story, the last request of the Princess is that he bring her the apple from the Tree of Life. The servant is again helped by the animals he befriended and the story concludes:

> The youth, full of joy, set out homewards, and took the Golden Apple to the King's beautiful daughter, who had now no more excuses left to make. They cut the Apple of Life in two and ate it together; and then her heart became full of love for him, and they lived in undisturbed happiness to a great age. (76)

The fairy tale has been revised by more than one contemporary female poet. Anne Sexton, in Transformations, revises the story in a somewhat idealistic -- man-from-the-wrong-class-gets-the Princess -- yet ironic telling. The marriage of the traveler and the Princess is described as "a kind of coffin, / a kind of blue funk" (117-118). Marriage may not be all that it is made out to be in fairy tales if the confines of the coffin are proof - yet these two appear to be happy. Atwood's revision of the tale, stripped of the wise king, the finicky princess, and the happily-ever-after-ending is a warning against patriarchal vision.

The poem opens with a description of the rarity of the white snake:

> The white snake is to be found, says legend,
> at the dark of the moon,
> by the forks of road, under three-leaved trees,
> at the bottoms of unsounded lakes.
>
> It looks like water
> freezing. It has no eyes.
> It lays quartz eggs and foretells the future. (1-7)

Atwood's speaker describes a mythic snake which can only be found through a quest. "If you can find it and eat it," she explains, "then you will understand / the languages of the animals" (8-10). When a man finds the prophetic snake and eats the "sacred body of living snow" (13), he is not flooded with glorious sounds and knowledge which will empower him. Instead, the speaker says, the "sound poured over him / like a wall breaking, like a disaster" (15-16). In spite of his new-found knowledge, the man is rendered

blind and mute.

"Beware of the white snake," the poem concludes, "Choose ignorance" (25-26). Yet the speaker does not leave the revision there. She parenthetically remarks that "([t]here are no white snakes in nature)" (27). If this is the case, why tell the story? This snake poem is perhaps less about the snake and more about the man. The poem speaks to men's presumptuous belief that they have the right to all knowledge of all kinds. Yet men's consuming quest for knowledge from the snake is centuries old, as Merlin Stone explains in When God Was a Woman:

> In the writings of Philostratus, he claimed that it was quite common for Arabians to understand divine revelations, especially the sounds of birds, explaining that they had acquired this ability by feeding themselves the heart or liver of serpents. (212)

By negating the existence of the white snake, Atwood's speaker suggests that the issue is not whether or not snakes have divine knowledge or prophetic abilities. What she feels compelled to comment on is the view of the patriarchy that it has a divine right to that knowledge.

Page, Atwood, Crozier, and Macpherson are all engaged in revisionist mythmaking in these snake poems. What becomes clear is that this process of revisionist mythmaking is actually an act of reconstitution or recovery. It is the male literary tradition which is guilty of revisionism, as the Biblical scriptures, classical myths, and fairy tales reveal. These women poets return the snake image to an

earlier symbolic meaning found in the Gnostic Gospels, and classical and pre-Biblical myths.

The patriarchal version of the Edenic fall has had enormous impact on the male imagination, and hence, on the mythology of women. These women poets object to the patriarchal version, as Crozier remarks in an interview with Doris Hillis: "Perhaps one of the reasons the Edenic myth doesn't work out here [in western Canada] is because our gardening season is a very short one" (Hillis 112). Underlying Crozier's practical observation that the Edenic myth is inappropriate because of geography is the implication that the patriarchal myth is inappropriate as a universal truth for all of humanity.

In her own revisionist myth, Chernin observes that "[b]orn in a patriarchal garden, Eve still knows enough to pay attention to dreams and listen to animals when they come by to chat. We have forgotten that dreams bring guidance, snakes wisdom" (xxi). Just as Eve listens to and, in fact, identifies herself with the snake, so these Canadian women poets also find knowledge in the snake. For them, the snake is an emblem of their ability to create their own myths by revising dominant mythologies. As we shall see in the next chapter, the snake also becomes an emblem of female language. The snake, an agent of non-conventional language, becomes a model for these poets who write in a non-logocentric, female language of the body.

"Speaking the Flesh": Canadian Women Poets Create Non-Logocentric Language

> I used to write diaries when I was young but if I put anything down that was under the skin I was in terror that someone would read it and ridicule me, so I always burnt them before long... I wonder why we are always ashamed of our best parts and try to hide them. - Emily Carr
>
> All we can do is write our way home. - Betsy Warland

Throughout this thesis I have been examining women's efforts to claim their own mythology by revising patriarchal myths which are destructive and which do not truly reflect women's experience. These poets are also concerned with language and with removing it from its male-oriented, phallocentric connotations so that it can be used to record women's experience. The fact that language is male-oriented does not escape Betsy Warland who in her poem-essay "the breasts refuse" observes:

> Webster's Condensed Dictionary of the English Language
> Twentieth Century Edition (1906)
> establishing the correct
> spelling, pronunciation, and definition of words
> based on
> The Unabridged Dictionary of Noah Webster
>
> same black bumpy-leather cover
> as the Bible
> pages edged with red
> not of her curse
> but of his victory. (I.21-31)

It is not surprising that the Bible and dictionary resemble each other; both are patriarchal tools used for ascribing and defining universal truths or meanings. Indeed, language

is not only phallocentric, it is logocentric; that is, as Toril Moi explains the Derridian term, "the mainstream of Western thinking [is] logocentric, due to its consistent privileging of the Logos, the Word as a metaphysical presence" (179).

The danger of logocentric thinking is evidenced in Erich Neumann's Jungian study, The Origins and History of Consciousness, in which Neumann makes assumptions about the western culture:

> Although from antiquity right down to recent times we see a new and differently patterned canon of culture continually superceding the previous one, the West has nevertheless succeeded in achieving an historical and cultural continuity in which each canon gradually came to be integrated. The structure of modern consciousness rests on this integration, and at each period of its development the ego has to absorb essential portions of the cultural past transmitted to it by the canon of values embodied in its own culture and system of education. (xviii)

Neumann, blind to his own patriarchal biases, fails to acknowledge that values within western culture vary according to gender, class, race, and religion. The "canon of values" he documents are patriarchally defined, and hence he finds their counterpart in patriarchal versions of mythology.

The first myth Neumann describes is that of the Uroboros, the snake with its tail in its mouth:

> As the Heavenly Serpent, the uroboros was known in ancient Babylon; in later times, in the same area, it was often depicted by the Mandaeans; its origin is ascribed by Macrobius to the Phoenicians. It is the archetype of the ἓν τὸ πᾶν, the All One, appearing as Leviathan and as Aion, as Oceanus and also as the

Primal Being that says: "I am Alpha and Omega." (10)

In his logocentric description of the snake, Neumann defines it as an image of the round, as a symbol of eternity. As Beryl Rowland explains in Animals With Human Faces, the image of the snake as round continued to be common in patriarchal culture: "There are numerous examples of the serpent appearing alone as the symbol of prudence, and probably for this reason it was adopted as a device by many early printers. Sometimes the serpent of prudence is in the form of a circle" (147). The significance of the round snake and its association with printing, language, the word, cannot be underestimated. Neumann links the round snake and the word to the original (patriarchal) creation:

> Understandably enough, the creative principle that brings the world into being is derived from the creative nature of man himself. Just as a man - our figures of speech say the same thing today - brings forth his creations from his own depths and "expresses" himself, so do the gods. In like manner Vishnu the Boar scoops the earth out of the sea and the god ponders the world in his heart and expresses it in the creative word. The word, speech, is a higher product, the utterance of one sunk in himself, in his own depths. (21)

Neumann explains the evolution of patriarchy's valorization of the word. Because of the creative capabilities he possesses through language, man is able to emulate his god's creativity by writing. Logocentric language exists because the patriarchy believed that this creative manipulation of language belonged to the realm of men.

In the introduction of her religious/ philosophical/

archeological study of myths, When God Was a Woman, Merlin Stone points out the patriarchal biases of logocentric language:

> Paying close attention to semantics, subtle linguistic undertones and shades of meaning, I noticed that the word "cult," which has the implicit connotations of something less fine or civilized than "religion," was nearly always applied to the worship of the female deities, not by ministers of the Church but by presumably objective archaeologists and historians. The rituals associated with the Judeo-Christian Yahweh (Jehovah) were always respectfully described by these same scholars as "religion." (xx)

In spite of, or rather, because of this patriarchal culture which privileges certain kinds of religion, and a specific canon of values, it is important for women writers to put the words back in women's mouths and hands.

I say "back" in women's mouths because, as Stone discovered, language may not be the invention of men, despite patriarchal claims to the contrary. Stone documents a number of so-called pagan goddesses with whom language is associated:

> In India the Goddess Sarasvati was honored as the inventor of the original alphabet, while in Celtic Ireland the Goddess Brigit was esteemed as the patron deity of language. Texts revealed that it was the Goddess Nidaba in Sumer who was paid honor as the one who initially invented clay tablets and the art of writing. She appeared in that position earlier than any of the male deities who later replaced Her. The official scribe of the Sumerian heaven was a woman. But most significant was the archeological evidence of the earliest examples of written language so far discovered; these were also located in Sumer, at the temple of the Queen of Heaven in Erech, written there over five thousand years ago. Though writing is most often said to have been invented by man, however that may be defined, the combination of the above factors presents a most convincing argument that it may have

> actually been woman who pressed those first meaningful marks into wet clay. (3)

Although the patriarchy has appropriated language, women poets are seizing it back. Margaret Atwood, in her essay "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All," explains the difficulty of being a woman in a patriarchal world which operates in logocentric language: "We spent a lot of time wondering if we were 'normal.' Some of us decided we weren't. Ready-to-wear did not quite fit us. Neither did language" (16). By reclaiming language, women poets no longer find themselves trying to make male-oriented language fit; instead, they are rediscovering a language suited to them - a language of the body.

Some writers have already experienced a patriarchal backlash against writing in this sexually-infused language. Lorna Crozier, one poet who has suffered this backlash, explains the nature of the patriarchal gripe against her poetry:

> It isn't a girl masturbating, or carrots "fucking the earth," or a tongue finding peas clitoral "as it slides up the pod," that makes some people go berserk. It is women writers saying - hey here's another way of looking at things you thought were wrapped up, tied with string, stored in the basement. We're going to open the packages and surprise you. We're going to tell you some secrets and expose some lies. We're going to peel some vegetables and show you what's underneath the skin. (92)

As Crozier observes, the patriarchy is threatened by this new language of the female flesh. In their snake poems, Margaret Atwood, Betsy Warland, and Lorna Crozier uncoil the

snake from its patriarchal, logocentric associations in order to find a way of expressing women's experience through a language of the body. The snake's tongue - described in various poems as black, red, or forked - is significant to these poets because the tongue is an implement of language and expression, and also because these poets find themselves speaking in tongues - they create a non-logocentric, female language of the body which is unfamiliar to the patriarchy.

In many of Atwood's snake poems, the snake is associated with language; Atwood's snakes handle language to varying degrees. For example, in "Bad Mouth," the snake does not communicate. The speaker notes: "Between us there is no fellow feeling, / as witness: a snake cannot scream" (26-27). This snake is completely incapable of oral communication. "Alone among the animals / the snake does not sing" (41-42), the speaker observes. This is a snake which cannot scream, nor can it sing; yet, as the last two lines suggest, perhaps there is an explanation: "The reason for them is the same / as the reason for stars, and not human" (43-44). The gap between snakes and humans may not be the snake's failure to communicate, but the result of human's inability to comprehend things not human. Humans are guilty of valorizing human thought; that is, the patriarchy privileges the Western Logos, and thus fails to comprehend things that are "other."

While there is a mysterious communion between the snake

and the human in "Bad Mouth," there is no expression they can share. Although the snake in "Lesson on Snakes" does not speak, there is communication between it and humans. The speaker observes that

> [s]ince they cannot talk:
> the snake is a mute
> except for the sound like steam
> escaping from a radiator
> it makes when cornered:
> something punctured and leaking. (9-14)

Although the snake does not communicate in verbal language, the human speaker is, nonetheless, able to register not only the sound the snake makes when it is threatened, but also the meaning of that sound.

In the mythical poem, "The White Snake," the snake possesses powers that have to do with language. "If you can find it and eat it," the speaker explains, "then you will understand / the languages of the animals" (8-10). The human yearns to learn a different kind of knowledge, a different kind of language. But when he finds the snake and eats it,

> [h]uman speech left him.
> For the rest of his life, emptied and mute
> he could do nothing but listen
> to the words, words around him everywhere like rain
> falling.
> (21-24)

Not only does the man lose his ability to use conventional language, but he is unable to express himself in this new language. Just as women are victimized by the deluge of patriarchal language, he is flooded by language which does not fit him.

The speakers of Atwood's snake poems make it clear: there are different kinds of language and trying to make conventional, patriarchal language fit women is senseless. In "Eating Snake," the speaker is highly critical of the assumption that logocentrism is grounded in Truth. The speaker describes the snake she was served for lunch:

> The snake was not served with its tail in its mouth
> as would have been appropriate.
> Instead the cook nailed the skin to the wall,
> complete with rattles, and the head was mounted.
> It was only a snake after all. (20-24)

The speaker deflects the significance of her lunch, or as she calls it, "metaphysics with onions" (19), in order to deflate the importance of logocentric Truths. She responds specifically to the patriarchal thinking we see in the writings of such fathers as Neumann, particularly when she parenthetically concludes: "(Nevertheless, the authorities agreed: / God is round)" (25-26). Opposing the closed fixity of logocentrism, the speaker notes that this snake is not like Neumann's Uroboros which symbolizes the eternal privileging of patriarchal power. While this snake is a "god" (1), it is not the god of the Logos; it is not the never ending Alpha and Omega. This god does not impose fixity.

The snake in "Psalm to Snake" is not merely an image the speaker uses in order to talk about and criticize logocentrism; it <u>is</u> language. The speaker begins her invocation to the snake by saying: "O snake, you are an

argument / for poetry" (1-2). Certainly, her veneration of the snake, her need for its presence, is sufficient reason or occasion for a poem. But the snake itself is an argument, or "discourse meant to persuade" (Webster's). The snake is discourse, it is expression, it is language. More than that, it is a means of communicating meaning - it is a word. The speaker concludes her psalm by praising the snake: "O long word, cold-blooded and perfect" (19). This god whom the speaker praises does not deem itself Logos; rather, she bestows upon it the title of a "long word." The speaker uses no punctuation at the end of her psalm. Perhaps her psalm is not complete and this open text suggests a lack of fixity. This long word/snake is not closed - it is not easily defined. Meaning is an open system.

In the surrealistic "The Blue Snake," the snake is actually able to communicate in verbal language. The poem opens with a comparison of the body to architecture: "The snake winds through your head / into the temple which stands on a hill / and is not much visited now" (1-3). In chapter one I noted the denigrating use of the architectural metaphor by male poets, particularly by Rosenblatt. In "The Blue Snake," however, the metaphor denigrates no one. Unlike Layton's snake which, at the end of "A Tall Man Executes a Jig," coils around and wreathes the man's head, forming a closed circle, this blue "snake winds through your head" and, the speaker puns, "into the temple."

The blue snake possesses knowledge which it can communicate, as the speaker explains: "What does it know / that it needs to tell you? / What do you need to be told?" (10-12). This snake is capable of articulation, and as the speaker observes:

> You are surprised to hear it speak.
> It has the voice of a flute
> when you first blow into it,
> long and breathless; it has an old voice,
> like the blue stars, like the unborn,
> the voice of things beginning and ceasing. (13-18)

Its "old voice...like the unborn, / the voice of things beginning and ceasing" may suggest that the snake is associated with Logos, but the non-circular movements of the snake which "winds through your head," (1) "swims towards you," (5) and reveals its "many pairs of delicate ribs / unrolling like a feather" (25-26) remove the blue snake from logocentric associations.

In spite of the snake's ability to communicate in verbal language, it is through non-conventional language that the snake guides the "you" figure to whom the speaker addresses the poem. The speaker describes the events following "you's" rejection of the snake:

> Behind you the snakes [sic] dissolves
> and flows into the rock.
>
> On the plain below you is a river
> you know you must follow home. (30-33)

This snake which swims "dry in the dry air" (6) and "dissolves / and flows into the rock" (30-31) becomes, instead of a distant, fixed I Am, the guide this "you"

needs; it is the river "you" follows home. Like the snake-flower of chapter one which is an emblem of women's self recognition, this snake guides "you" to a place where "you" is comfortable: home.

In "After Heraclitus," the speaker again describes a snake which embodies language. She observes:

> To talk with the body
> is what the snake does, letter
> after letter formed on the grass,
> itself a tongue, looping its earthy hieroglyphs.
> (7-10)

This snake creates its own non-conventional language as it loops and talks with its body. "Itself a tongue" (10), the snake becomes language. This snake then names itself in this self-created language: "This is the nameless one / giving itself a name, / one among man / / and your own name as well" (27-30). This snake which creates its own language attains power. As Toril Moi, quoting Kramarae, observes: "Feminists have consistently argued that 'those who have the power to name the world are in a position to influence reality'" (158). The snake is empowered by this act of self-naming. By naming what it is, it also names what it is not; hence, by acknowledging difference, it names "you."

Just as logocentric language does not fit Atwood, so spoken language often does not fit the snake; yet something about language can be learned from the snake. The snake adopts non-conventional language; it becomes a tongue, a language and it names itself. The snake, therefore, becomes

a model for women poets seeking a way to express women's experience in a non-logocentric language. In the poetry of Warland and Crozier, too, the association of the snake with language is a significant image of empowerment.

Betsy Warland's book-length snake poem, serpent (w)rite, may be influenced by modernist poets such as Marianne Moore, whose poetry is inundated with quotations. But Warland's poetry might better be described as Toril Moi defines the work of the French feminist critics who "have preferred to work on problems of textual, linguistic, semiotic or psychoanalytic theory, or to produce texts where poetry and theory intermingle in a challenge to established demarcations of genre" (97). Heavily peppered with quotations, Warland's text is both poetry and theory.

Like Atwood, Warland negates the circular symbolism of the snake image when the speaker notes:

> WHERE ARE WE?
> surrounded
> waves rising
> "Old cartographers used to put a snake biting its tail
> Hall
> in the corner of the map to mark the place where the unknown began, where the sea stretched into an unbroken horizon." (4.17-23)

The very structure of Warland's poem defies the patriarchal significance of the snake as round, as eternity. The poem is divided into eight sections or "turns" - Turn one, Turn two, Turn three.... This snake poem winds through its material; it does not coil itself around it.

As the work of cartographers suggests, the patriarchy

has always been concerned with naming. Warland's speaker points to the precedent for this activity: "Adam's words name / Eve's words repeat / (lip service) / she took the words right out of His mouth" (1.287-290). Adam's naming was a tool of power in the garden and he maintained that power after his expulsion. Even in the Gnostic gospels, in which Eve is significantly more empowered than she is in the Biblical scriptures, Adam still maintains power through naming. Elaine Pagels explains the nature of their relationship:

> According to the gnostic text called Reality of the Rulers, when Adam first recognized Eve, he saw in her not a mere marital partner but a spiritual power: And when he saw her, he said, "It is you who have given me life: you shall be called Mother of the Living [Eve]; for it is she who is my Mother. It is she who is the Physician, and the Woman, and She Who Has Given Birth." (66)

While Eve may hold some spiritual power in the garden, Adam ultimately holds the power because he is the one who names Eve, and in doing so, he names and empowers himself. As Warland's speaker observes, it is through the patriarchal activity of naming that we acquire language:

> this is how we acquired language
> religion or myth is our narrative
> our incessant story line
> script, to cut, separate, Scripture, manuscript, riddle, discriminate, secrete, crisis. (291-295)

Clearly, Warland's speaker suggests, it is imperative for women to break free of patriarchal naming.

Like Atwood, Warland finds a new language in which to free herself of the shackles of patriarchal scripting.

Alluding to the patriarchal version of the Edenic myth, Warland's speaker finds her model for a new language:

> signals on tree fiber
> this is my body (teks, text) tissue
> sniff out your lost needs
> the word made flesh
> lost flesh makes words
> the serpent, serp-, crawls
> cursed to the dust
> "upon your belly you shall go Genesis
> and dust you shall eat"
> crawls in the dust
> from which we were made
> gerebh-, grammar, paragraph crawl
> serpent language (1.105-117)

In the serpent's crawl, the speaker finds serpent language - a language of the body - and a model language for herself.

The snake's language is not only a model text for the speaker's language; it is a model for how we receive texts as readers. The speaker observes:

> this is how we read
>
> I/s movement
> serpent movement. (5.15-18)

In our quest for language, we become snake-like both in the way we receive the text, and in the way we create the text. As we become snake-like, we become the text. We are

> figures of speech we leave our marks
> hunt our absentminded selves
> sniff the scentences of
> one an Others' wordprints
> tongues our auxiliary organ of smell
> flick at each word. (8.147-156)

How, though, do women writers get to this point? Can women writers simply assume the posture of an author and

create a new language in a world clouded by patriarchal vision? As Gilbert and Gubar point out, the realm of literary creation has long belonged to men:

> Though many of these writers use the metaphor of literary paternity in different ways and for different purposes, all seem overwhelmingly to agree that a literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, made flesh. In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. (6)

In a logocentric culture, the word is made flesh, but only by the literary fathers. The Fathers maintain the power to name, to script, because creative capabilities originate in the pen-penis. Gilbert and Gubar point out the frustration of this patriarchal view for women: "Where does such an implicitly or explicitly patriarchal theory of literature leave literary women? If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?" (7).

Warland's speaker, too, ponders this question of generating texts and finds a way to give the words back to women:

> He [Adam] writes with <u>penis, pes-, pencil</u>
> Eve (w)rites with <u>nipples, nadja-, nib</u>
> She (w)rites two
> not opposite but different
> speaks both sides of Her brain
>
> A-dam speaks left - feels left
>
> Eve
> the second hand the "second sex"
> ambidextrous. (8.110-118)

Warland's speaker places the authority of language with

women by giving them the tools, the nibs, the metaphorical organs needed to write. Eve's (w)riting is riting; it is a ceremonial act, a celebration. By acknowledging Eve's use of both sides of her brain, the speaker validates all kinds of (w)riting; she opens the boundaries of the canon by not privileging, as the patriarchy does, left-minded, logical writing that fits into specific genres. The phallic pen of the Fathers becomes, in Warland's text, the nippley nibs of the Mothers with which they claim their voice of "author-I-ty" (8.286). Once these women writers take up their nibs, become snake-like in their approach to language, and find their voice of author-I-ty, they become, like the snake, "an open circle / word without end" (8.209-210).

The subtitle of serpent (w)rite is (a reader's gloss). The text is a commentary on or explanation of the acquisition of language for women. In this context, "gloss" is a significant choice of word because of its associations with "tongue." The serpent's tongue has been important in this discussion of language, and through this text, Warland's speaker speaks in tongues, creating her own language. The speaker summarizes her activity:

> the scense of opposition
> dis-cover
> language, lingua, tongue
> has many sides
> dialects
> a variety of languages that with other varieties
> constitutes a single language of which no single
> variety is standard. (8.231-238)

Warland's text is the creation of a new dialect, a female

language of the body and through it, she encourages other women to discover their own dialect as well.

Lorna Crozier is also concerned with the issues of language and naming. The poem "Fear of Snakes" ends with an acknowledgement that there are different kinds of language. The snake pinned to the telephone pole twists and the speaker sees "the beautiful green / mouth opening, a terrible dark O / no one could hear" (20-22). No longer free to move, free to create its own language, this snake speaks the silence of its terror and oppression. The speaker, a victim of patriarchal oppression, comprehends the snake's non-verbal language.

At the conclusion of "Sleeping With Snakes," the speaker also mentions two kinds of language - those of the snake and the woman. Although they do not speak the same verbal language, there is communication and union between them:

> In the pause
> between seasons,
> between two languages
> she sleeps among snakes,
> the smell of her
> on every listless
> dreamy tongue. (28-34)

Like Eurynome, the woman chooses to mate with a snake, and together they overcome language barriers.

In "Mother Tongue," Crozier's speaker explains the kind of language the free-moving snake is able to express as it crawls over Eve:

> The sibilant syllables
> speaking the flesh,
> its whole body a primitive tongue
> sliding over us,
> spelling itself as it moves,
> what it is and what it says
> inseparable,
> womb-words,
> the secret names that Eve knew
>
> before Adam lined up all the animals
> and carved his cold hard alphabet
> beginning with the first
> letter
> of his own name. (24-36)

The snake - that primitive tongue - which knows its language, moves in its language, and is its language, is a model for women poets - it speaks the flesh. It speaks a language that Eve knows but does not articulate as Adam, who rigidly lines up the animals, begins the patriarchal process of naming in a most solipsistic manner. We can get back to that language if we listen to our own primitive tongues, if we, like the snake, speak the flesh.

The fear preventing women poets from speaking the flesh is one of patriarchal backlash. The patriarchy defines and categorizes, and anything that does not fit into that closed circle of meaning is disregarded. Witness: of the eight Canadian women poets whom I mention or discuss in this paper, only three, Macpherson, Page and Atwood, are considered in the canon, and Crozier may be on the periphery of that tight circle. Poets such as Crozier have experienced the patriarchal backlash first hand because of the sexual energy of her work. In "Speaking the Flesh," she considers

the source of the patriarchal opposition:

> There would be outcries about other feminist poems and novels that do not deal so explicitly with sexuality if those who shout "obscenity" could find a way of expressing their criticism. They can't with any legitimacy (even in their own minds) cry, "Ban this because it's new, because it upsets the balance of power." So they hook their protest on the sexual imagery because they have a precedent and a vocabulary for doing so. They can cry, "filth," "dirt," smut," and not have to face what is really upsetting them - that feminist writers are challenging the very way we see and live in the world. (92)

Feminist poets must continue to challenge the logocentric vision of the patriarchy because, as Warland expresses it in her poem-essay, "the breasts refuse,"

> if we continue to accept language as a
> given, ghabh-, malady
> we must ask ourselves
> are we then accomplices
> of our White Fathers' Monopoly Game To End All Monopoly Games
> our White Fathers' Master Race / Space Plan
> our White Fathers' Big Bang. (II.98-104)

If women poets continue to write without examining the medium in which they work, they are complicit in their own victimization. The role of the feminist poet then is to seize her own language. As Atwood acknowledges, "Feminism has done many good things for women writers, but surely the most important has been the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights" ("If You Can't Say..." 24). The snake has been considered a shadow in patriarchal mythology, but these women are bringing it into the light, and thus turning the spotlight on themselves as

well.

For these Canadian women poets, the snake image is an emblem of possibility. It suggests the possibility of expression in non-phallocentric language, it offers the possibility of rewriting oppressive patriarchal myths, and it offers a model of a non-logocentric, female language of the body.

These Canadian women poets disassociate the snake from the phallic symbolism imposed by the male literary imagination by emphasizing the importance of non-visual experience. In her poem-essay, "the breasts refuse," Betsy Warland articulates the significance of the sense of touch to women:

> sentence, sentire, to feel
> over & over she's caught red-handed
> feeling her way
> with her own
> sense, sent-, sentence
> her own
> language, lingua, tongue. (II.6-12)

Not only is the sense of touch important to women, it is significant in women's writing. Women poets express their experience of the world in terms of how the world feels, how the world responds to their touch, how it feels to be touched by the world. This emphasis on non-visual responses to experience is a way for women writers to de-phallusize the vision of their culture.

Another way these writers alter the vision of their

culture is by revising the dominant myths of the patriarchy. Lorna Crozier, in her essay "Speaking the Flesh," describes the impact of feminist writing on the predominantly patriarchal canon:

> Feminism is, after all, a revolution. It has stormed the bastille of our literature as well as other fortresses in our society. It is upsetting the tradition, the patterns, the literary canon. It has changed what is being written about, and how, and by whom. It has changed the oldest of stories, revised what many thought were untouchable texts. (93)

In Feminism and Poetry, Jan Montefiore opposes revisionary mythmaking because it appears to be a counterproductive enterprise which only draws further attention to the patriarchal texts. She suggests another approach:

> The work of creating a woman-centred discourse in poetry is not only a matter of imagining lost matriarchies. Equally important is the effort to rethink history in predominantly female terms, retrieving from oblivion not a lost matriarchy but a community of women.... (85)

In the poetry of these Canadian women, the snake provides a language in which these poets not only imagine lost matriarchies (as the Eurynome poems and the many Eve poems suggest), but also find a community of women. They find a generation of mothers, they find themselves, and, as the echoes and allusions indicate, they find each other.

The image of the snake in these poems is that of a creator making and living its own language. The necessity of this creation of a new tongue, a new dialect, or a new constellation of meaning, cannot be overemphasized. In Stealing the Language Alicia Ostriker comments on the

dangers of the pervading patriarchal language:

> Though the language we speak and write has been an encoding of male privilege, what Adrienne Rich calls an "oppressor's language" inadequate to describe or express women's experience, a "Law of the Father" which transforms the daughter to "the invisible woman in the asylum corridor" or the "silent woman" without access to authoritative expression, we must also have it in our power to "seize speech" and make it say what we mean. More: there is a desire to make female speech prevail, to penetrate male discourse, to cause the ear of man to listen. (211)

The need for language which truly reflects women's experience is significant and it is also important that this be a language that is heard by the patriarchal establishment. Perhaps like the snake's tongues which licked the ears of male philosophers of ancient eras to bestow wisdom upon them, the snake's tongue of female language can penetrate the ears of the fathers of western culture. Perhaps the fathers will be wise enough to listen and to learn, and then to begin the task of unwriting their own destructive mythologies which have kept women, like the snake nailed to the telephone pole, stuck in one place.

While ideally feminist women poets may write in order to illuminate the patriarchal establishment, they also write to satisfy their own need to communicate their frustrations and celebrate their triumphs. The act of writing these snake poems is not merely personal; these writers contribute to and participate in a Canadian community of women poets. Ostriker observes one difference between the poetry of men and women: "If the deep truth discoverable in men's poems is

that all men are each other's rivals, the equal and opposite truth discoverable in women's poems is that we are all allies and portions of one another" (193). One of the great discoveries to arise from the poetry of a women's community is, as Atwood observes in "If You Can't Say Something Nice...":

> Women are not Woman. They come in all shapes, sizes, colours, classes, ages and degrees of moral rectitude. They don't all behave, think or feel the same, any more than they all take Size Eight. All of them are real. Some of them are wonderful. Some of them are awful. To deny them this is to deny them their humanity and to restrict their area of moral choice to the size of a teacup. (22)

What comes out of poetry of a community is not only similarity, but difference simply because women are different. Macpherson, Page, Atwood, Conn, Crozier, and Warland form an interesting community of women writing snake poems. Certainly there is similarity since they all have an interest in experimenting with the snake image. But there are significant differences as well. For instance, can Jay Macpherson, a dedicated adherent to Northrop Frye's rigid structuralist concepts of mythological patterns, really be considered a feminist poet? Perhaps, if we examine her poetry for subversive subtext, she is a feminist poet. There are other poets on the periphery of this community who should be mentioned. Diane Keating, a lesser known poet, concludes her snake poem, "Bottom of the Garden," with an invocation: "O Mother of Stones / teach flowers to moan. / I learn to write / with chalk of bones" (16-19). While her

poem is not as sophisticated as others discussed here, mostly because it is unclear who the speakers of various stanzas are, Keating does express an interest in language and uses a snake poem to do so.

If the snake poem by Marlene Nourbese Philip is indicative of her poetry in general, she should be reexamined because her message is valuable and she expresses it in a sophisticated manner. The speaker of "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue" angrily expresses the difficulty of finding an appropriate language, for not only is this speaker a woman, she is black. Toward the end of the poem, she finds a way of creating this appropriate language:

> I shall
> lie
> with them
> bed them with silence
> these snakes
> wisdomed
> with the evil
> of words
> to breed the again and
> again
> in breed
> -- a new breed
> -- a new race
> -- a warrior race
> of words
> -- a nest-egg
> that waits
> to hatch the ever
> in wait. (V.18-36)

Recognizing the evil of the words of the dominant white culture, the speaker expresses her need for another language to reflect her experience. She proposes, like Eurynome who sleeps with Ophion and hatches the nest-egg that becomes the

world, breeding a new language by mating with the snake. As Philip makes clear, the problems of patriarchal language are not diminished when issues of gender are reconciled. The patriarchy has assumed it is superior not only because of its gender, but also because of its colour, and this issue too must be addressed by a community of feminist writers.

The importance of belonging to a community of poets cannot be underestimated. As Mary di Michele confesses: "I need these women writers to make me feel at home in the act of writing" (104). For this community of poets, the snake is a significant image through which they address the problems of language and naming in patriarchal culture. The snake's tongue - be it black, red, forked, or flicking - is especially significant because of its link to language, as a tool of expression, and also because it is a model for women poets seeking a new tongue, a new dialect, a language of the body, in which to communicate their experience.

APPENDIX

SLEEPING WITH SNAKES

Thick as her arms,
all skin and muscle
and hidden bone,
they nuzzle her
like a horse's mouth
feeding from her palm
or bunt her
with their flat, blunt heads
like cats.

Mostly they lie still
as the green
on the underside of ice,
barely breathing,
drugged with cold

In the spring they'll begin
to stir like water
close to the boiling point.
A change of heart,
a change of skins.

For now
they are tolerant,
insouciant,
as they puff and snore,
their yellow eyes
old as amber. Strange
how she can warm herself
at such cold fires.

In the pause
between seasons,
between two languages,
she sleeps among snakes,
the smell of her
on every listless
dreamy tongue.

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