

# New myths, new scripts: Revisionist mythopoesis in contemporary South African women's poetry

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## Abstract

Considerable theoretical and critical work has been done on the way British and American women poets re-vision (Rich 1976) male-centred myth. Some South African women poets have also used similar strategies. My article identifies a gap in the academy's reading of a significant, but somewhat neglected, body of poetry and begins to address this lack of scholarship. I argue that South African women poets use their art to re-vision some of the central constructs of patriarchal mythology, including the association of women with the body and the irrational, and men with the mind and logic. These poems function on two levels: They demonstrate that the constructs they subvert are artificial; and they create new and empowering narratives for women in order to contribute to the reimagining of gender relations.

**Keywords:** feminist poetic subversion, feminist poetry, patriarchal myth, revisionist mythopoesis, South African women's poetry, the Muse, women's bodies

## Introduction

In her classic study, *Stealing the language: The emergence of women's poetry in America* (1986), Alicia Ostriker mentions the necessity for women poets to debunk, revise and rewrite male-centred myths. Together with critics such as Liz Yorke and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Ostriker has made a substantial contribution to the way we understand American women poets' revisioning of patriarchal myth. In recent years there has been a great increase in poetry published by South African women, but unfortunately no study of these texts commensurate with Ostriker's has been undertaken. The scholarship on South African women's poetry, such as the recent special issue of *scrutiny*2 (16[2]2011) dedicated to the topic and Cecily Lockett's book, *Breaking the silence: A century of South African women's poetry* (1990), offers useful starting points for an exploration of the terrain, but does not focus specifically on the revisioning of myth in the poems. My article builds on the foundation of these works by exploring how some South African women poets have used poetry to re-vision myth. In selecting poets for study in this article, I have attempted to focus on some of the more prominent writers at work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, of all races. Hence the work of Ingrid de Kok, Michelle McGrane, Lebogang Mashile and Phillippa Yaa de Villiers is analysed here. I have also tried to give attention to lesser-known poets, such as Sindiwe Magona, who is better known for her fiction than for poetry. Nevertheless, many poets and poems are not mentioned here for reasons of space.

First, though, it is necessary to examine exactly what I mean by 'myth'. Patrick Murphy's (1989, p. xviii) essay on revisionist mythopoeia mentions that women's poetry defines 'as fiction, as "myth", once-sacred beliefs and assurances'. According to this definition, items of received wisdom that generally go unchallenged can be perceived as fiction or myth. Murphy's reference to 'once-sacred beliefs and assurances' draws on an idea of myths as fictional narratives that exert a shaping influence on society. Many of these founding narratives are drawn from strongly patriarchal societies, and they naturally reflect male-centred views of the world and human interaction. They tend to encode disparaging views of women, such as the idea that women are physically and emotionally weaker than men.

Ostriker (1986, pp. 212–213) draws on this understanding of myth as an important narrative, set in its culture's past. She also explains the significance of these narratives for feminist poets:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.

This definition points to the fact that myth may be a narrative or a trope (that is, it may *not* take the form of a story), and it also emphasises the potential for appropriation that resides within these discursive forms. Feminist revision takes its impetus from the fact that myth tends to privilege men and what are seen as 'masculine' values, such as aggression, rationality and physical resilience. One of the most prominent mythic tropes is the hero-figure (analysed in depth by Joseph Campbell in *The hero with a thousand faces* [1972]). The masculinist bias inherent in the classical hero-figure has been explored and subverted by various feminist literary critics, who point out that heroes are not necessarily men, and that heroism does not necessarily only inhere in masculine behaviours.<sup>1</sup> Several other examples of masculinist myth, such as the myth of the nine muses, are also relevant to this discussion.

Liz Yorke, whose book, *Impertinent voices: Subversive strategies in contemporary women's poetry*, focuses specifically on women poets as revisionist myth-makers, adds another dimension to our understanding of myth when she emphasises the reconstructive aspect of feminist poets' revisionist mythopoeia (Yorke 1991, p. 3, emphasis in the original): '[W]omen poets are more and less consciously engaged in an even larger project, that of constructing a new symbolic which would re-organise the socio-symbolic systems of patriarchy.'

Since a definitive or final definition of myth is near impossible, my argument will refer to all three of these definitions of myth and revisionist myth-making. I argue, along with Yorke (1991, p. 3), that some South African women poets aim at 'constructing a new symbolic which would re-organise the social socio-symbolic systems of patriarchy'. There are, therefore, two impetuses at work in the poetry I analyse here: First, to expose the falsity of male-centred myths about gender; and, second, to create new discursive spaces that are empowering for women.

There are a host of myths that circulate in patriarchal culture about women and gender. They all have the implicit or explicit effect of disempowering women relative to men. Unfortunately, this

article cannot examine all of them in depth. Rather than attempting to be exhaustive, I have chosen some of the most common myths which feature in South African women's poetry for detailed analysis. These are: The figure of the muse, which appears in Classical mythology and in Western poetry as a woman whose role is to inspire a man to creativity; the myth of heterosexual marriage as the ultimate source of women's fulfilment; the beauty myth (as Naomi Wolf calls it); and the myth of women's bodies as weak and asexual. In my reading of the way South African women poets appropriate and refashion these myths, I will demonstrate that they use them as cultural resources to help craft a new and empowering symbolic order for women.

## Refiguring the muse

Ostriker tellingly entitles her book *Stealing the language* because, for many women poets, merely writing is an act of subversion. A woman who assumes the pen is rebelling against the male-centred literary canon, where only men are empowered to speak and (so the assumption goes) to write 'great' poetry. The myth of gendered artistic expression, which Virginia Woolf expresses as 'women can't paint, can't write' (*To the lighthouse* 1927[1987], p. 149) has been perhaps the single most powerful factor preventing women from writing poetry. Instead of writing in their own voices, women, in the Western literary canon, were restricted to functioning as men's muses, much as Laura did for Petrarch: They were the objects of unfulfilled desire, which provided the spur for literary creation. The figure of the muse derives from the Classical Greek myth of the nine muses, who were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (the goddess of memory). Each of the muses presided over a particular form of art. Their role was to provoke desire (*mosis* in classical Greek; see <http://www.greekmyths-greekmythology.com/nine-muses-in-greek-mythology/>) in a human artist to pursue artistic expression. The muses' femaleness reflects the fact that artists in Western societies have historically been men who derived their inspiration from women – and usually from women's bodies. Many women who have chosen to write poetry have refused the role of the muse in favour of speaking for themselves.

In taking up the pen and thus defying women's silencing, three South African women poets have remythologised the figure of the Classical Greek muse: Ingrid de Kok, Michelle McGrane and Phillippa Yaa de Villiers all write poems that, to use Adrienne Rich's (1976) term, re-vision the muse. In refusing to be muses for men's creativity, each of these poets, like other South African women writers, grapples with the source of her own literary creativity. In the absence of the Classical Greek trope, they draw inspiration from a variety of sources: Joan Metelerkamp (2003) and Finuala Dowling (2008), for example, are moved to poetry by their experiences of death. Like them, De Kok (2011, p. 51) draws on mortality, and boldly re-genders her muse in her poem 'My Muse is a Man':

While most muses are cryptic,  
wild, mild or remote,  
(or so I am told)  
my muse has strong views.

He asserts the primacy of sound,  
 the way language must sing  
 in and for its cage of meaning.  
 Is scornful of lower case,  
 the elongated line,  
 the sentimental rhyme,  
 generic trees and birds,  
 harsh images of fathers.

Believes the best poems speak of death.  
 Also love, but mostly death.  
 That's why my muse is a man.

This poem, whose tenor is possibly the closest to a Western cultural register of the three explored here, articulates a multi-layered reversal of gender norms: Not only is the muse not a woman, as in the canonical tradition, but the poem also subverts the trope of unrequited love between the poet and his [sic] inspiration. The conventional relationship between male poet and female muse has the woman in an entirely supportive, passive, non-proactive role, much like the social roles that are assigned to women by patriarchy. By reversing the relationship, and re-crafting it as powerfully ambivalent instead of marked by simple unrequited desire, De Kok reveals that it is a construct based on the assumption that women do not or cannot write poetry. Her muse is no romantic ideal. He resembles a schoolmaster, punctilious, exacting and demanding; he appears dry and passionless, except when he is working to enable language, in a magnificently resonant sensory image, to 'sing / in and for its cage of meaning' (lines 15–16). This poem achieves several revisionist goals. First, it describes the male muse in terms that deconstruct hegemonic masculinity as primarily physical, embodied or rational. Second, it subverts stereotypes of female creativity as fuelled by the unbridled outpouring of emotion. Third, it undoes sentimental notions of love as the proper subject of poetry, pointing instead to impermanence, mutability and death as more appropriate spurs to creativity. Finally, it implicitly asserts the right of the woman poet to choose (and imaginatively create) a muse that suits her poetic goals, instead of being chosen as the passive, and usually erotic, inspiration for a man.

In a similar deconstructive mode, Michelle McGrane's (2011, p. 29) poem 'The Recalcitrant Muse' offers an ironic view of the entire process of inspiring others:

She is late for the morning's first appointment  
 with a middle-aged divorcee at 52 East Avenue.  
 It's not all it's cracked up to be, this muse business.  
 She's tired of being aloof, untouchable.

*Give me strong hands, warm flesh, a hairy chest,  
a plunging prick, fucking on the formica table.*  
She could use a drink. A few hours' sleep.  
Immortality doesn't pay the bills.

This muse is far removed from the classical figure of otherworldly beauty: She is thoroughly, and jadedly corporeal, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes to wake her up in the morning like any other South African urban professional. The poem's colloquial register, likewise, subverts the notion of the language of 'great' art as necessarily ahistorical and formal. Throughout the poem, McGrane insists on the muse's female embodiment, refusing the supposedly spiritual role of inspiring male artists from a tantalising distance to great feats of creativity. Her muse is recalcitrant on several scores. Like De Kok's male muse, she rejects the conventional role that has been assigned to classical female muses. She is rooted in her own body and sexuality, as indicated in her lustful fantasy, and the poem subtly encourages the reader to believe that she is well able to live out this fantasy. In my view, McGrane's muse does not merely reinforce the myth of women as needing men in order to function. Rather, the poem gives the lie to the notion that a woman can – indeed, should – inspire men without having any needs of her own. It also empowers women to assert their own needs for care and energy, rather than always playing supportive roles.

Phillippa Yaa de Villiers's (2010, p. 86) poem 'Muse' imagines how a poet might perceive her equally unconventional muse:

I said to my muse: you never do anything around this place.  
She was lying in bed reading poetry. I said  
other muses carry water from over two kilometres away.

She asked me to make her a cup of tea.  
From the kitchen I shouted: Do you want a biscuit with that?  
She said no. She's not greedy or excessive and she tells me

at least twice a day that she loves me. But I can't help feeling  
that she's taking advantage somehow.  
It's hard to get good help these days.

De Villiers's muse, like De Kok's and McGrane's, refuses to stand around looking beautiful and providing inspiration. In fact, in the opening lines the relationship between the poet and her muse is portrayed as conflictual, as the muse drains the poet's domestic resources – but De Villiers also, subtly and pertinently, reminds the reader that women still shoulder their traditional responsibility for the home. For the speaker of 'Muse', poetry is an activity that takes place in the home, and, in a functioning household, the poet needs 'help' with it, just as she does with other chores.

The muse in the first three stanzas of De Villiers's poem is thoroughly unsatisfactory. She does not seem able to inspire anyone, least of all the poet. But then, in the fifth stanza, De Villiers implies a lesbian sexual relationship when the poet invites the wakeful muse to 'come back to bed'. This small gesture is easy to overlook, but has far-reaching effects of deconstructing the theory of creativity as fuelled by heterosexual attraction. The muse then changes her mode and:

... she says: shhh..... can't you hear the leaves making love  
the heavy heartbeat of the buildings?

There's a crane with its fingers in the mountain's purse ... (De Villiers 2010, p. 86)

Spurred by love, intimacy and connection, all contained in the invitation to come back to bed, the muse proves her worth by supplying the poet with evocative and original images, demonstrating the value of 'her headlamp eyes' (2010, p. 86) in perceiving the natural and human worlds in new ways, as poetry must always seek to do. Having destabilised and subverted the woman's traditional role as muse and inspiration for a man, De Villiers empowers both the poet and the muse to co-create poetry drawn from the specifics of the South African landscape without referring to a man at all. The muse's utterances constitute a 'new symbolic', in Yorke's terms, founded on the deconstruction of outdated patriarchal ideas of poetic inspiration.

## Marriage and/or fulfilment

The notion of compulsory heterosexuality has been challenged by numerous feminist and queer theorists (such as Adrienne Rich [1980] and Stevi Jackson [1999]), and is also a target for revisionist mythopoeia by women poets. Such poetry exposes the existence of the mythic construct of the marriage script, which dictates that marriage and devotion to a husband and children are women's destiny and source of ultimate fulfilment. There is an urgent need for women to resist these constructs and to create new and empowering scripts in order to work towards freedom and choice. In this process, revisionist poems by women can play a significant role.

Lebogang Mashile's poem, 'Womanchild' (2008, p. 16), investigates and powerfully deconstructs the myth that women are destined by their biology to find fulfilment in marriage to a man:

At 11, she stood on the precipice  
With dolls floating behind her ears  
And new worlds expanding below her waist  
Without wings, her body was a prison

...

At 17, she was sold to the highest bidder  
Her ringed finger a prize  
For a husband three times her size  
Without warning, her body was a trophy

In the first stanza, the girl, who is unnamed and so is representative of African womanhood in general, is figured as entering adolescence. When the stanza ends with the line ‘Without wings, her body was a prison’ (line 4), Mashile evokes Freud’s dictum that ‘Anatomy is destiny’ (Gay 1995, p. 23), which refers to the way sexed bodies define social roles. The pre-pubescent girl’s body proves to be her destiny, not at the hands of fate, but of social forces, when she finds herself ‘in prison’ before the end of her physical development – married at seventeen. In the final stanza, the poet depicts the marriage as a sale in terms that are reminiscent of Sherry Ortner and Harriet B. Whitehead’s research into the role of women as units of exchange between men, which is based on Claude Lévi-Strauss’s research finding that “‘the exchange of women’ in marriage transactions in some sense constitutes human society’ (Ortner and Whitehead 1980, p. 11). Mashile joins Lévi-Strauss, Ortner and Whitehead in debunking the romantic myth (Rich 1976, n.p.) and showing that marriage is an economic, not an emotional or interpersonal, transaction. The line about the husband being ‘three times her size’ implies that the man is not an attractive sexual partner; and also, more ominously, that there is a possibility of domestic violence being inflicted on the much smaller and physically weaker woman. Aside from its intertextual Freudian references to women’s bodies as sites of oppression, ‘Womanchild’ draws on particularly African marital practices to demonstrate the dangerous falsity of the pervasive myth that marriage, symbolised by the ring on the girl’s finger (line 16) heralds fulfilment for a woman. The girl-child in the poem is not heading for a life of happiness, but owned by a husband ‘three times her size’ – a man for whom she is an object and a possession. ‘Womanchild’ refigures marriage by vividly exposing the myth that it represents ultimate happiness for women as a Western construct with limited application to South Africa. At the same time, it warns South African society of the damage wrought by arranged marriages that take place while the bride is still a child.

Ostriker (1986, p. 216) mentions that one of the key strategies of revisionist mythopoeia among women poets is ‘the simple device of making Other into Subject’. This term refers to women poets’ practice of rewriting Classical Greek and Roman myths in which women are the objects of male action, placing women at the centre of events. The device is also used by South African women poets, targeting specifically (South) African myths about gender. Sindiwe Magona (2009, p. 36) does not allude overtly to myths about gendered identities, but exemplifies this indirect approach in ‘What Africa Needs’:

But, above all, Africa needs good, honest governments.  
 And what Africa does not need are killers! In all their manifold  
 Guises: greedy power-mongers; rapists; pimps; many-wived vainglorious  
 Men, brains residing below the navel.

Magona is the most explicitly situated of all the poets examined in this article and her revisionist mythopoeia is firmly rooted in South African realities. Here she explodes the myth of a benevolent male government, giving a gendered spin to the figure of the ‘killer’, who is always a man and frequently a polygamist, whose sexual behaviour is open to criticism because, inverting the Freudian myth that ‘anatomy is destiny’, she claims that men think with their genitalia. There is

another reversal of myth here: Magona subverts the association of masculinity and rationality, and the corresponding association of women with the body and emotion, which is used to prop up the notion that men have a monopoly on the right to govern. The 'good, honest governments' which Magona wishes Africa to have, should not be headed by men whose brains reside 'below the navel', but might be better headed by women. This would offer women an empowering alternative.

'What Africa Needs' alludes to the famous South African myth of the woman as 'mother of the nation', which underpins the slogan 'you strike a woman, you strike a rock' or '*wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo*'. This is a reference to the slogan of the famous 'Women's March' against the South African pass laws in 1956, which was advertised with the words: 'Now you have touched the woman, you have struck a rock; you have dislodged a boulder; you will be crushed' (Dawson 2013). While the original slogan was an expression of defiance, in Magona's (2009, p. 13) hands it becomes an assertion of a new subjectivity for women:

Don't pick on me. Don't be so damned astounded.  
 Those cracks you see are battle scars, my friend.  
 Daily, I do battle.  
 Daily, I wage war.  
 Daily, I dodge and run and flinch and smile,  
 Deflecting blows.  
 Deflecting unthinking rained-upon-me blows;  
 And blows in the national psyche deep, deep ingrained.

And then you ask: Why do you bleed?

I am a rock  
 Sturdy and strong.  
 Were it not so,  
 I wouldn't be here to tell the tale.

In this poem, Magona reverses the mythical binary opposition that portrays men as strong and women as weak, in the same way as the original slogan of the 1956 protest march asserted women's voice and right to be heard. The poem, though, goes further, attributing to women qualities that are usually associated with men: Hardness and resilience; warrior-like prowess in battle; and endurance. It also evokes the stereotypical notions of passivity and stoicism that have often been attributed to women instead of proactivity. Here Magona associates strength with women, rather than men, but at the cost of losing agency. She has, in Ostriker's terms, turned the 'Other' (the woman/rock) into the subject of the poem. Her focus on women in this and other poems in *Please, take photographs* implies that women are central, not marginal, to politics and history in Africa and, in this way, sculpts a new, empowering symbolic order for women.



## Women as bodies

Patriarchal writing, including poetry, has frequently constructed women's bodies in negative and disempowering ways. This most often takes the form of representing women as only bodies (without minds) or only as objects of male sexual desire. Both of these perceptions are the result of myths about bodies and gender. For example, in popular culture, women are subjected to powerful pressure to be decorative. This implies that men are seen as effective in accomplishing tasks, while women are relegated to the (optional) sphere of the merely aesthetic. Naomi Wolf is one of the most prominent theorists to show, in *The beauty myth* (1991), that the ideal of woman's physical beauty that is promoted by the media is designed to tantalise and torture women with unrealistic and unreachable 'ideals' that have nothing to do with real women's actual bodies and everything to do with male-centred myths about youth, smoothness, thinness and impossible proportions. Several other theorists, such as Susan Bordo (1993) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994), have examined and subverted the patriarchal association between women and corporeality. They have demonstrated how this association functions to trap women in artificial inferiority, since the womanly body is perceived as inferior to the manly mind. They have also examined the ways in which women are required to conform to certain male-defined standards of physical attractiveness. Feminist theorists and poets have long known that received views of women's bodies (for example, the belief that women are weak) are neither true nor natural, but are constructed and maintained through discourse. These views help to disempower women. Yorke (1991, p. 117) expresses this state of affairs aptly, within her overall analysis of the role of the body in feminist revisionist mythopoeia, when she says that 'the body may be seen as "an element in a particular construction" produced within and through the dialectical exchanges and organisation of social relations'. Women poets who want to reconfigure the dominant representation of women's bodies must both resist these powerful mythical images and create, in their place, more empowering perspectives on women's embodied selves.

The need to redress gender inequality in social and discursive arenas takes on renewed urgency in the South African context, where we have one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world and where lesbians and teenage girls are raped to death. Clearly, in our society, something is profoundly wrong with the prevailing images of women's bodies and the acceptable ways of engaging with them. Michelle McGrane's poem 'A girl like that' (2013) addresses the South African phenomenon of 'corrective rape' of lesbians and points to the urgent need for change in the way women's bodies are perceived:

Two manly relatives decided  
to straighten her out  
once and for all, give  
her strong medicine down  
on her knees, the cheeky  
cunt had it coming.

A girl like that, what did  
 she expect? Shameful lesbian  
 bitch brought dishonour  
 to the family name,  
 refused to come round  
 to their way of thinking.

This poem exemplifies McGrane's hallmark use of deconstructive irony. The discursive target is the false perception, or myth, that lesbians are to blame for being raped. The adjective 'manly' provides a microcosm of the poem's strategy. The relatives parade their hyper-masculinity by supposedly subduing the unruly lesbian, but their actions reveal that their supposedly heroic manhood is a sham and a pretext for abusing others. In a similar way, the epithets hurled at the young woman – 'cheeky / cunt' (lines 11–12) and 'Shameful lesbian / bitch' (lines 14–15) – are markers of the negative light in which she is viewed by her abusers, instead of having any authentic relation to her social or sexual being. The poem's central reversal of conventional ideas lies in its portrayal of the rapists as criminals, while the girl and her mother are helpless victims of bigotry and gender violence, in an inversion of the way her unruly sexuality is seen by patriarchy. The poem demonstrates that an understanding of 'corrective rape' as being the lesbian's fault is mythical in the sense of being fallacious and distorted. McGrane returns all the participants in 'corrective rape' to their appropriate roles, and thus demonstrates that revisioning these male-centred ideas can free the victims of guilt and blame.

### **The sexed and gendered body**

The ideal status that is accorded to certain imaginary versions of women's bodies, elevating them to the status of myth, is compounded in postcolonial societies such as South Africa by the vector of race and the construction of certain kinds of racially marked bodies as 'better' than others. In the context of these competing value systems, the body takes on an important role in women's self-concept and understanding of themselves. One of the most powerful beliefs about women's bodies places a taboo on the subject of the vagina: As Naomi Wolf (2012 p. 25) notes, 'we have been terribly misconceiving the vagina'. Lebogang Mashile breaks this mythical taboo in her poem 'Cake' (2008, pp. 33–34). I quote two stanzas here:

Kuku  
 Pussy  
 Cake  
 Coochie  
 Twat  
 Mkhekhesu  
 Coconut

Nappy dugout  
     Gwede  
 Nywana  
     Sekhwama sa boya  
 Qwet  
     Mapetlepetle  
 ...  
     I have never felt at home  
 In my pussy  
     I have never felt at home  
 In my home  
     Maybe that's why my head  
 Is full of scenes of consolation  
     Where I am cried for  
 Prayed for  
     Loved ...

‘Cake’ forcefully, and in a wholly South African register, insists on and celebrates women’s sexuality, flying in the face of assumptions about women having no sexuality (for example, the stereotype that a woman’s sexual role consists only of receiving a man’s desire). In the first stanza of the poem, Mashile gives names for the vagina in several South African languages including isiZulu, isiXhosa, Setswana and Sepedi. She proudly names her vagina in a public space (the published poem) and in a ceremonial way, as one might open a praise poem to a famous historical personage. The stanza forces the reader (especially if he is male) to acknowledge that the vagina, and women’s sexuality, are important. In Ostriker’s terms, it turns the ‘Other’ (women’s sexual being) into ‘Subject’ by making it central to the poem’s meaning.

The second stanza, though, does not follow through on the poem’s initial assertion of pride in the woman’s sexuality. Rather, it seems to fall back on a patriarchal view of the vagina as a source of weakness. Mashile writes: ‘I have never felt at home / In my pussy’, expressing alienation from her own sexuality and, by extension, from her own body. This experience is not surprising in the face of the beauty myth, where women are represented in literature, art and visual culture as objects, not subjects of sexual desire. This alienation makes the speaker feel cut off from herself, split between the contradictory pull of the other’s desire for her and her own desire. The remainder of the poem refigures the speaker as the object of desire, being ‘cried for / Prayed for / Loved’ – anything but actively desiring. In the shift from the first stanza, which places women’s sexuality in the centre of the poem, to the second, where the speaker expresses her own difficulty in feeling connected to her own sexuality, the poem enacts the way patriarchal discourse distances women

from their own sexual desires. The first stanza's apparent empowerment of the speaker, who can address and evoke her vagina, quickly fades into an admission of her alienated position as the receiver of others' emotions, rather than the authentic locus of her own.

Jenna Mervis's 'Poems are daughters too' also celebrates women's embodiment and sexuality, metaphorically depicting a poem as a young girl on her first visit to a gynaecologist. The reader is positioned as an invasive specialist who probes the body of the poem (Mervis 2011, pp. 4–5):

I accompany my poem on her first visit  
 into the consultation room, hold her hand  
 while you feel for lumps in her text.  
 You count her ova as syllables –  
 Find the rhythm disturbed and irregular  
 In the polycystic verse.  
 I hate that you know her secrets.

...

I sit dumb through the interrogation:  
*Are you regular* (no)  
*Is your flow heavy* (yes, when it comes)  
*Is there pain* (there's always pain)  
 I watch you scrawl a prescription.

For some reason,  
 I feel violated,  
 for some reason  
 I feel responsible.

This poem likens the act of creativity to a woman's body that can be subjected to gynaecological examination, as though there were something wrong with it merely because of its susceptibility to menstruation and feminine biology. The speaker is portrayed as a woman who has, in a reversal of the convention of the male writer as the 'father' of the text, given birth to a poem/daughter and now accompanies the text to an examination by the reader/critic. This person is depicted as possessing 'cold hard reason' much like Jean-Martin Charcot, who, at Salpêtrière Hospital, treated women who were suspected of suffering from hysteria. Patients were subjected to cruel 'cures' including objectification, obsessive photographing and demands for public performances of hysteria (Huberman 2004). These practices spring from and partake in the myth that holds that women are emotionally and physically weaker than men. The speaker/mother sees the 'doctor' in the poem

in the same terms: As invasive, violating and fault-finding, especially when ‘he’ declares that ‘the rhythm [is] disturbed and irregular’ and then quizzes the poem/daughter about her ‘flow’. At this point in the poem, the speaker subversively introduces an association between women’s menstrual ‘flow’ and the ‘flow’ of creativity that has given rise to the poem. This suggests that, for this poet at least, creativity springs from the woman’s possession of a female body; from her womanhood. In this way, ‘Poems are daughters too’ has affinities with the thinking of French feminists such as Julia Kristeva, who writes in *Powers of horror* (1982, p. 71) that ‘menstrual blood stands for the danger issuing from within the identity’. The doctor/reader does not notice this link, but the repetition of the word ‘flow’ makes it clear that a counter-myth to the myth of the womb as the seat of womanly weakness is being created. This poetic subversion is far-reaching: It revalues an aspect of femininity that is disregarded in patriarchal thinking, positioning it as a source of creative power. The poem also represents the doctor/reader, although possessed of the conventionally masculine powers of examination and analysis, as less creative than the mother. His ‘cold hard reason’ points to his inability to deal with a woman’s body except by writing ‘a prescription’ to correct the irregularities of menstrual flow and poetic creativity. While this unassuming poem possibly does not go far enough in overtly opposing the myth of male reason and corresponding female frailty, it does revalue the female body, through menstruation, as the source of women’s creativity.

## Conclusion

By interrogating and subverting gendered myths regarding compulsory heterosexuality, the sexual script that holds marriage up as women’s destiny, and the nature of women’s bodies, the South African poets whose work I have explored in this article open up discursive spaces for the creation of new and empowering scripts for women. These scripts do not entrench women’s weakness, irrationality or dependence on men for emotional security. Rather, they emphasise women’s agency and choice, while also probing the relevance of Western myths about women and gender within the (South) African context. It would be tempting, but mistaken, to hope that this trend in poetry could bring about a new gender dispensation in a country where the majority of the population do not read anything, much less poetry. Fortunately, South Africa has a vibrant tradition of spoken word poetry, sustained by such initiatives as Jozi House of Poetry and the Feela Sista poetry collective. Modjaji Books, run by Colleen Higgs, has published several volumes of South African women’s poetry under its main imprint and has done much to make poetry more widely known and read. By offering alternative mythic constructs, poets such as Mervis, Mashile and McGrane, De Kok, De Villiers and Magona, revalue women and open up the reader’s imagination to the possibility of hope for a new and more equal gender dispensation. In this way they bring about new subjectivities for women and, ultimately, construct ‘a new symbolic which [will] reorganise the socio-symbolic systems of patriarchy’ (Yorke 1991, p. 3), at least within the pages on which they are published.

## Note

- 1 See, for example, Joanna Russ's *How to suppress women's writing* (1983), Carol Pearson's *The female hero in American and British literature* (1981) and Sylvia Kelso's article 'Evolutions of the fantasy hero in Peter Jackson's *The lord of the rings* and Lois McMaster Bujold's *The curse of Chalion*' (2006).

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