

A Cixousian Reading of Adrienne Rich's 'Diving into the Wreck', 'The Floating Poem', and 'I Dreamed the Death of Orpheus'

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As a feminist poet, Adrienne Rich has constantly scrutinised the female subject in her poetry, examining both her emotional turbulence and physical yearnings. As a lesbian, her exploration of the feminine world has included and often concentrated on the experience of homosexuality between females, becoming the voice of the peripheral lesbian community in the last decades of the twentieth century. Such characteristics had led to the creation of a specific domain in her poetry, whose full dimensions are only graspable by taking into account the feminist-gender theory of the famous French thinker, Helene Cixous. Some of the main tenets of Cixous' theory, such as the rejection of gender-based dichotomisation, the resistance against subjugation by the 'phallographic system' and *écriture féminine*, are well reflected in the poetic universe of Rich. This article aims to expose the relevance of Rich's poetry to Cixous' theory, by examining Rich's 'Diving into the Wreck', 'The Floating Poem', and 'I Dreamed the Death of Orpheus', in the light of Cixous' theory.

Keywords: *Gender-based dichotomisation, phallographic system, écriture féminine, lesbian, homosexuality.*

Introduction

Adrienne Rich, the renowned American poet and feminist activist, was born on 16 May 1929, in Baltimore, Maryland. By the age of 30, she had given birth to three boys and had released two books of poetry. After her disappearance from the literary scene for a few years, this housewife returned with a new book of poetry, *Snapshots of a Daughter in Law* (1963), which foreshadowed her later feminist and lesbian sympathies. Soon, after the publication of

Snapshots, Rich joined the civil rights movement and became deeply involved in the women's liberation movement. Her involvement with the women's liberation and civil rights movements deeply impacted her political views and poetry, and she transformed from a housewife into a militant feminist and political activist. Her association with feminist and liberalist communities also encouraged her to be open about her sexuality and to live openly as a lesbian (Sickels 1-4).

Rich's lesbian passion and feelings are well illustrated in her later volumes of poetry which sometimes even border on erotic poetry, describing the most intimate physical moments that two women might share. However, Adrienne Rich's honest and direct study of the female subject was not merely limited to sheer eroticism. Rich's bold style of writing and deep engagement in the politics of gender roles, which is also reflected in her poetry, created a kind of space in her writing which tends to resolve the gender conflicts that are inherently rooted in age-old patriarchy. In *Diving into the Wreck*, one of her most remarkable and anthologised poems, Rich narrates the journey of a personae who dives into deep water to examine the wrecks of a drowned ship. The poem touches on many themes such as exploration, the relation of man to his natural environment, etc., but what is often neglected in the poem, is its treatment of gender roles and relations; the poem goes beyond an emotive exploration of buried treasures and near its end, becomes a commentary on the nature of gender relations. The unnamed diver of the poem, who is also its speaker, climbs down a ladder into the water to learn a buried fact on the human gender which was hidden from his or her view so far:

“This is the place./ And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair streams black, the merman in his armored body. / We circle silently about the wreck we dive into the hold. I am she: I am he whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes whose breasts still bear the stress whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies obscurely inside barrels half-wedged and left to rot we are the half-destroyed instruments that once held to a course the water-eaten log the fouled compass” (Lines 6-9).

In these lines, the speaker first positions itself as a female, as a “mermaid whose dark hair streams black,” just to subvert this position instantly with its opposite, “merman in his armored body.” It is quite noteworthy that in both cases, the speaker attributes stereotyped features to the merman and mermaid she/he is: “dark hair streams black”/ “armored body.” The streaming black hair is associated with female beauty and tenderness, while the armoured body brings to mind images of a strong male body and masculinity. The use of these two clichés stresses on gender divisiveness, while the poem's speaker simultaneously and paradoxically occupies both genders and is entitled to both clichés. This paradox becomes even more tangible as the speaker simultaneously uses both male and female pronouns to designate himself/herself: “I am she: I am he...”. The emerging question is, what do such

blatant gender paradoxes stand for, and the poet speaker is trying to convey what kind of experience? In attempting to answer this question, resorting to the gender theory of the famous French feminist, Helen Cixous can be quite useful. Influenced by the French post-structuralist movement in her 1975 essay “*sorties*”, Cixous explains:

“Thought has always worked by [...] dual, hierarchical oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) oppositions. And all the couples of oppositions are *couples*. Does this mean something? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought – all of the concepts, the codes, the values – to a two-term system, related to ‘the’ couple man/woman (264)?”

In Cixous’ theory, the answer to this question is yes, the man/woman couple is the cornerstone of all binary oppositions that logocentrism has imposed on our thinking system. Therefore, binary oppositions which might seem completely unrelated to male/female binary at the first glimpse, reveal to be variants of this familiar binary on a closer inspection. Such innocent binaries like light/darkness, writing/speech, or culture/nature, which seem totally gender-free, are in Cixous’ view, built upon the fundamental male/female binary. From this view, what Adrienne Rich accomplishes in her *Diving into the Wreck*, is precisely a deconstruction of this pervasive binary and the logocentric logic which has produced it. It is noteworthy that in the poem, immediately after designating itself as a mermaid and a merman, the speaker proceeds to refer to itself with the ‘we’ pronoun: “[A]nd I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair streams black, the merman in his armored body. / *We [italics mine]* circle silently about the wreck we dive into the hold”. By blending the two genders into one entity, Rich robs the poem’s speaker of a specific gender and creates a hermaphrodite being reminiscent of Hindu deities. Furthermore, this deconstruction is accompanied by a dismantling of cultural constructs and stereotypes that are attached to the two genders. As it was mentioned before, the speaker attributes features to the merman and the mermaid that are reminiscent of the stereotyped cultural constructs that are often summoned to border the genders — “dark hair streams black” symbolic of tender beauty, and “armored body” indicative of physical masculine strength. Thus, the transformation of the speaker into a gender-blind entity is followed by the abolition of the cultural constructs that are pinned to each gender. As the ‘he’ and ‘she’ are merged into a single ‘we’, the streaming dark hair and the body of armour are also merged into a single entity that defies stereotypification. Such merging and deconstruction on Adrienne Rich’s part, is considered by Cixous as completely crucial for human progress. As Hans Bertens explains what Cixous calls ‘the solidarity of logocentrism and phallo-centrism’, it damages us all, females and males alike, because it curbs the imagination and is therefore oppressive in general. “[T]here is no *invention* possible,’ Cixous argues, ‘whether it be philosophical or poetic, without the presence in the inventing subject of an abundance of the other, of the diverse’ (156-157). It is remarkable

that for Cixous, phallo-logocentrism is not merely harmful to females but is detrimental to men as well and an androgynous status is crucial for the act of creation. Following the same line of thinking, Rich's deconstruction of the male/female binary is emancipatory for both sexes as the hermaphrodite of her poem resists submission to an oppressive logocentric classification. In addition to that, the poem's transformation of opposite genders into a single entity provides the 'abundance of the other, of the diverse' that Cixous regards as the most important ingredient of the act of invention. In other words, the merging of opposite genders in Rich's poem realises Cixous' precondition for intellectual invention. It is noteworthy to mention that this line of thinking, that Cixous and Rich adhered to, is preceded by Virginia Woolf's theories on artistic creation. Similar to Cixous, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf points to the intellectual merging of sexes as the precondition for artistic innovation:

"... it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly [...] Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated" (108).

It can be argued that Cixous extended Woolf's account of the marriage of opposites to other areas of intellectual life, as it is evidenced in her premise that invention of any kind (poetic or philosophical) is unattainable without accomplishing this marriage. This marriage makes a cornerstone of Rich's poetic discourse but this is not the only way in which her poetry corresponds to Cixous' feminist theory and subverts phallo-logocentrism. In her influential 1972 essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous prescribes strategies for subverting 'the phallogocratic system': "Cixous suggests that laughter, sex (if not policed by patriarchal heterosexuality), and writing may have liberating effects" (Bertens 166).

Among Cixous' strategies, 'sex' is most pertinent to Rich's applied subversion of the phallogocratic system. As it was mentioned before, Rich has gained quite a reputation for the description and rendition of explicit sex in her poetry. Her erotic poetry does not shy away from describing the most intimate sexual contacts. However, what makes Rich's erotic poetry most pertinent to Cixous' suggestion of sex as an antidote for phallogocentrism, is the fact that it is 'not policed by patriarchal heterosexuality. Patriarchy only sanctions heterosexual sex as the legitimate model of copulation among humans and tends to label un-heterosexual sex as abnormal, pathological, or aberrational. Therefore, unorthodox forms of copulation, such as homosexual and bisexual sex, pose a serious threat to the doctrine of patriarchy and tend to destabilise it. This is precisely what Rich's erotic poetry achieves; as a lesbian, Rich completely transgressed the red lines of the phallogocratic system and presented some of the most tender and voluptuous instances of female sexuality and same-sex copulation in her poetry. This fact is well exemplified in her *The Floating Poem, Unnumbered* from *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1973):

“Whatever happens with us, your body will haunt mine — tender, delicate your lovemaking,/ like the half-curved frond of the fiddlehead fern in forests just washed by sun./ Your traveled, generous thighs between which my whole face has come and come — the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there — the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth — your touch on me, firm, protective, searching me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers reaching where I have been waiting years for you in my rose-wet cave — whatever happens, this is.”

Rich’s intense lesbian sexual imagery blends eroticism with sensuous emotions (as in ‘waiting years for you in my rose-wet cave’) in a way that not only is it sensually exiting for the lesbian readers, but also it arouses the heterosexual readers. This fact is well evidenced in a letter Rich once received from a heterosexual friend, in which she had admitted that reading her poetry has helped the sex life between her and her husband (Birkle 156). Therefore, Rich, in her erotic poetry, not only evades the policing of patriarchal ideology but also, in terms of its effect on her readership, she deeply challenges the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy that is yet another product of phallo-logocentric discourse. Thus, Rich fully opposes the patriarchal forces, that according to Cixous, curb imagination and sterile invention, and are forces that try to draw fences between genders and limit sexual exploration to heterosexual relations. In her poem, *I dreamed of the death of Orpheous*, Rich raises the level of her opposition to a poetic mission:

“I am walking rapidly through striations of light and dark thrown under an arcade./ I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers and those powers severely limited by authorities whose faces I rarely see./ I am a woman in the prime of life driving her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce through a landscape of twilight and thorns./ A woman with a certain mission which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact./ A woman with the nerves of a panther a woman with contacts among Hell’s Angels/ a woman feeling the fullness of her powers at the precise moment when she must not use them/ a woman sworn to lucidity who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires of these underground streets her dead poet learning to walk backward against the wind on the wrong side of the mirror.”

In this poem, Rich blatantly touches on themes that are alluded to or indirectly treated in the rest of her poems. Here, she describes herself as ‘a woman in the prime of life’, running through a light and dark arcade, threatened by certain ‘authorities’ who curb her ‘certain powers.’ The powers that the speaker speaks of can quite adequately refer to the feminine powers that a woman possesses and the mysterious authorities whose faces are rarely seen by the speaker quite well represent the forces of the patriarchy, which by definition, attempt to ‘limit’ those powers. From this perspective, the poem can be read as a decrement of female rebellion against the confining forces of patriarchy which limit her powers, in this case, not

only as a woman but as a lesbian woman. The speaker speaks of herself as ‘a woman with a certain mission,’ ‘a woman with the nerves of a panther a woman with contacts among Hell’s Angels,’ someone ‘who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires of these underground streets’. This panther woman with a lucid sight represents a revolutionary figure armed against the mysterious authorities who try to curb her powers. It is noteworthy that this woman has ‘contacts among Hell’s Angels’, a reference to the lesbian community and ‘sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires...’, indicating her ability to see beyond the false consciousness of patriarchal ideology. Thus, the poem tells of the poet/speaker’s determination to fight with the curbing forces that limit her potentials as a lesbian woman. However, there can be a slightly different reading of the poem as well which divulges its full subversive power. In the poem, there are some references to poetry: ‘I am a woman in the prime of life driving her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce through a landscape of twilight and thorns’, ‘her dead poet learning to walk backward against the wind on the wrong side of the mirror’, and additionally, the Orpheus of the title is an ancient poet. These indications to poet and poetry can lead us to conclude that writing is included among the powers that the ‘authorities’ deny from the poet/speaker. Thus, the death of Orpheus that the speaker dreams of parallels a rejection of the monopoly of the male (symbolised in the figure of Orpheus) over the craft of writing. Herein, we are dealing with the third strategy that Cixous suggests for liberation from the phallographic system, namely, writing. Cixous named her suggested way of writing *écriture féminine*, feminine writing, but for her this liberating style of writing is by no means limited to females, but males can practice it too. For Cixous, *écriture féminine* belongs to those who are pushed into the margins and serves as an instrument for them to oppose the ‘phallographic system’:

“It is impossible to define an *écriture féminine*, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, encoded –which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallographic system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatism, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate” (“The Laugh of Medusa” 253).

As a lesbian poet, Rich’s status is that of a peripheral figure, standing at the margins of a centre that is dominated by heterosexuals and heterosexual discourse. Additionally, she blatantly (as exemplified in *I dreamed the death of Orpheus*) rejects subordination and subjugation by the ‘phallographic system’, as her writing is aimed at (as exemplified in three studied poems) surpassing ‘the discourse that regulates the phallographic system’. Therefore, it can be concluded that Rich’s figure and writing is a concretisation of Cixous’ theory of liberation from phallographic discourse, as her peripheral *écriture féminine* seriously challenges the dominance of the system.



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