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Real Gorgons or Fantastic Chimeras? Re-shaping Myth and Tradition: Alice Thompson's *Justine*

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A significant part of the Scottish heritage for women writers now is the figure of the dangerous woman. In twentieth-century writing she may sometimes seem to align herself with a feminist perspective, but she refuses to become quite ideologically sound. She is too sinister for that. She has appeared since the ballads as the daughter of the other world, with all the danger and the glamour that that implies. In modern fantasy her refusal to accommodate herself to a world of known boundaries and social realism maybe related to her psychological alienation from the patriarchal model. But with the other world open to her, she becomes more than subversive, she is perilous, and perhaps, in terms of accepted moralities, downright evil.[1]

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With these words Margaret Elphinstone described one of the four persistent traditional elements in contemporary fantasy fiction by women in Scotland in an article published in 1992. While introducing the concept of 'the dangerous woman' as a focal point, Elphinstone established three crucial points about this recurring traditional trope:

1. Evil = Glamour.
2. The dangerous woman rejects the patriarchal world.
3. Her role has consequences on narrative tradition and theory.

These statements are extremely relevant to the treatment of the dangerous woman throughout Alice Thompson's fiction: *Justine* (1996), the focus of this paper, *Pandora's Box* (1998) and, more recently, *Pharos* (2002). Before going on to a deeper analysis of the first novel, a couple a general remarks are necessary to explain my title. An overview of the contemporary literary production by women in Scotland shows that Elphinstone's observation from ten years ago has certainly proved to be not only insightful but almost prophetic about the fiction published in the last ten years of the twentieth century. The number of 'dangerous women' in recent novels by women writers is more than remarkable. Sian Hayton's Trilogy (*Cells of Knowledge* (1989); *Hidden Daughters* (1992); *The Last Flight* (1993)) follows the adventure of the semi-mortal daughters of the giant Usbathaden. The giant's daughters are skilled sorceresses and their magical powers are the cause of distress for the monks and the warriors they interact with in the Trilogy. Several of Emma Tennant's characters, including the wicked protagonists of her rewriting of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of A Justified Sinner* (1824), *The Bad Sister* (1978) and of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886), *The Two Women of London* (1989) challenge authority and defy roles and prejudices derived from the patriarchal system. Similarly, sinister witches and dangerous female Dyubucks (Jewish Demons) feature in Ellen Galford's fiction, *The Fires of Bride* (1986) and *The Dyke and the Dybbuck* (1993). Elphinstone's women characters can certainly be ascribed to the dangerous women's category. Naomi, the main character of *The Incomer* (1987), *A Sparrow's Flight* (1989) is a nomad fiddler who plays bewitching music. A charming heart-breaker, she abandones her son leaving him with his father, while Gudrid, the Icelandic old woman of *The Sea Road* (2000) is a trained and skilful witch, who does not neglect her sorcery even after her conversion to Christianity.

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The list could be endless and portrays the dangerous woman in as many forms she can derive from the extensive catalogue of traditional evil females: witches, vampires, mad women in the attic, demons, femme fatales, etc.

3

Tradition is full with evil women, often portrayed as frightening monsters. As early as the binary opposition created in the Biblical split of the good woman (Mary) and the bad woman (Eve), the whore-virgin dichotomy has been a consistent motif in the various man-made myths about femininity.

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The end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, especially during 'La Belle Epoque', started to witness a process of social integration and emancipation women were being involved in. Inevitably, then, 'Women outside their traditional, imposed roles appeared as a threat to [...] [men], as an evil force promising to destroy established institutions, rights and privileges.[2] Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, the dangerous woman becomes more and more ambiguous a creature. In their study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar attempt to explain the origin of the two man-made myths about women. Whether angel or

monster, the American scholars argue that the opposite characters embodied by women inevitably coexist and are ambiguously represented:

Male dread of women, and specifically the infantile dread of maternal autonomy, has historically objectified itself in vilification of women, while male ambivalence about female 'charms' underlies the traditional images of such terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphynx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy.[3]

The dangerous woman escapes definition. She is, simultaneously, a witch and an angel; mother and temptress; sister and lover; a monster and an unobtainable beauty. This is why, in order to define Thompson's employment of the traditional trope, I thought of gorgons:

Gorgons were very popular subjects in ancient art. In the earliest versions they are very uglyb with snaky hair, staring eyes, fearsome grins and lolling tongues, boar's tusks and a striding gait. Later, however, Medusa can be beautiful.[4]

Originally repulsive creatures, gorgons evolve into evil femme fatales. As we will see in Thompson's novel, modern gorgons are beautiful, evil and not easy to capture. Their essence is impossible to comprehend and their beauty impossible to possess fully. Escaping the lover's embrace, Thompson's gorgons, escape definition. This is why rather than the gorgons, it would be more appropriate to talk about chimeras, when trying to discuss Thompson's dangerous women. A mythical monster with three heads (a goat's, a serpent's and a lion's), the chimera epitomises paradox.

Bearing in mind these introductory concepts, this paper will now focus on the analysis of the novel in order to see how effectively we can apply them to Thompson's characters. At the end of the paper, it will be possible to establish whether Thompson's dangerous women are gorgons (beautiful and evil women) or simply chimeras (magic projections of the narrator's mind). Thompson interweaves her novel with a plethora of other literary texts and myths, which allow her to establish, simultaneously, a critical relationship with the sources referred to and what these sources stand for. *Justine* (1996) opens with a quotation from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.

The lunatic, the lover and the poet,
Are of imagination all compact:
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
That is the madman, the lover, all as frantic
5 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
The poet's in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.[5]

The epigraph anticipates the numerous intertextual references in the subplot of the novel, pointing towards a strong presence of literary and mythological tradition in the stories. Moreover, the epigraph anticipates the novel's themes. The plot of the novel is a complex network of obsession and desire for unobtainable objects of beauty. Male characters struggling to control and understand reality, are opposed by the gorgons (or are they chimeras?) that lead them through a path of apparent destruction. Gender identity and roles slowly crumble as the narrator's ability to understand and comprehend collapses. Doubts sweep away any certainty and ability to define and explain, ultimately posing the metafictional question about the possibility for a story to be narrated.

Before any other reference, Thompson's *Justine* echoes the title of three versions of De Sade's novel *Justine* or *The Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791) and *Juliette* or *The Triumph of Vice* (1797). In the first novel Sade tells the story of a beautiful orphan, Justine, who, abandoned to her destiny in the world with nothing but her honour, strives to defend it in the name of virtue. Unlike her twin sister, Juliette is not concerned about virtue but rather keen to exploit the only
6 valuable thing she believes she has been left with: beauty. In a brief synopsis of Juliette's Picaresque life as a prostitute, the readers are informed that she makes her first fortune selling her virginity to eighty different customers. While Justine faces unfair imprisonment, rape and is forced to endure all sorts of torture and sexual abuse in the name of her faith and virtue, Juliette makes her fortune relentlessly deceiving and exploiting her charms and her victims' lusts.

Both of Sade's characters appear in Thompson's *Justine*. As in Sade's novel, Justine and Juliette are, allegedly, twins, although their polar personalities are not as clear-cut as in the French original. The similarities between the two novels stretch further. A particular section of Sade's *Justine* constitutes the direct background to Thompson's novel. In the French novel, *Justine* is attracted by the Marquis De Bressac, the only man she encounters, whose sexual inclination, ironically, does not allow him to take advantage of her. The ambiguous relationship between the decadent gay Marquis and his wealthy mother, arguably, is the direct source for the opening of Thompson's *Justine*. From the beginning, Thompson's narrative, a first person memoir, casts a sinister light on the relationship between the narrator and his mother. The narrator, whose identity remains undisclosed, is obsessed with beauty and collects art to fulfil his desire to possess beauty and be surrounded by it. Gifted with an 'Adonis' face, the harmony of his body is, nonetheless, flawed by a clubfoot, embodying 'the novel's many Gothic dualities and doublings'.^[6] Throughout his childhood, his mother found his malformation impossible to accept and unbearable to look at, an early symptom of the disturbing bond between mother and son and their mutual obsession with ideal beauty. The narrator's love of beauty is acknowledged in terms of voyeuristic attraction towards his mother: 'She would be sitting, half-naked at the mirror, her round full breasts reflected in the glass so that I could feast upon them from every angle' (p. 4). The attraction towards his own mother reaches its peak on one night of the narrator's 'thirteenth summer'. The heat of his bed has drawn him outside where he has a peculiar vision of his mother standing in the terrace of their mansion:

8 Like a ghost, my mother, in transparent silk, her back turned to me, stood on its wide steps. On of her pilgrims stood beside her, his face reflecting blankly the light of the moon. From the centre of the cool water of the lake, I watched this strange man shut his forget-me-not eyes, as with her mouth she plucked out his heart through his open lips. (p. 6)

The reference to the number thirteen, always associated with ill fortune, and the vampiric action performed by the ghostly apparition of the mother are elements that contribute to the strange black magic aura of the scene. This sinister marriage of death and beauty embodied by his mother has haunted the narrator from the earliest stages of his childhood as he admits at the very beginning of his memoir. The obsessive nature of this cult of beauty reaches its extreme in the mother's inability to accept its end. The mother's physical decay is followed by a process of mental disintegration. Unable to cope with the end of the myth she has nurtured all her life, the mother starts mutilating all the objects of beauty she enjoyed collecting when she was blossoming in her youth. The mutilations, reminiscent of the mutilations suffered by Sade's *Justine*, are performed 'with surgical precision' (p. 7) and emphasise the sinister aura permeating the narrator's perception of his own mother.

9 The ageing process triggers a role reversal as the narrator appears to become younger and younger the more his mother's beauty fades, seemingly a paradoxical reference to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891),^[7] published exactly one hundred years after Sade's novel *Justine*. The reference to Wilde's novel becomes more apparent in the last days before his mother's death, when the narrator has his first contact with the lady who is immortalised on one of his canvases and whom he calls Justine. The painting, vaguely reminiscent of the Arthurian legend of 'The Lady of Shalot', shows a woman sitting in a cell 'whose bars flung their shadows across the left-hand side of her face' (p. 10). The same image is mirrored, a few pages later, on the mother's face on her deathbed: 'Mascara ran down her cheeks in black lines like the bars of a cage' (p. 12).

10 The correlation between Justine and death is reinforced by the narrator after he sees Justine at his mother's funeral: 'Justine and Death had a natural affinity for each other: they followed each other around' (p. 14). After the first casual encounter, Justine becomes a real obsession for the narrator, who can see her face on every woman's. When he finally thinks to have found the real Justine, he is disappointed to realise that it is only Justine's twin sister, Juliette. Justine and Juliette are paradoxically identical and polar opposites. Although the narrator is often unable to tell the difference between the two sisters' voices and their looks, at other times, he is, conversely, asserting his ability to distinguish between them. Juliette has a child-like, naïve expression; her emotions run through her face rather manifestly. On the contrary, Justine's beauty grows increasingly more enigmatic as the story develops. Far from being transparent about her emotions, she is rather 'the tabula rasa, [...], that begged me to write all over her' (p. 28). Despite her apparent transparency, Juliette is said to give the impression of having a 'troubled sexuality' (p. 22), while her face reveals an ambiguous vampiric quality: 'She had a smudge of red paint on her cheek near her left ear, that looked like blood' (p. 21). The narrator starts to believe that Juliette is a witch while the expression on her face begins to look increasingly more surreal: 'She was like a cracked mirror, always self-reflecting an image that was deformed' (p. 35). From the moment of his encounter with Juliette, the story becomes a complicated maze of identity and role reversals. Willing to exploit Juliette's attraction for him to reach Justine, the narrator discovers, to his disappointment, that he has, in turn, been the victim of Juliette's plot against Justine: 'I felt violated by the act of sex that had taken place in Juliette's flat. That Juliette had been using her body as a means to an end made the whole encounter seem even more obscure' (p. 49).

12 While the narrator's identity becomes more manifestly confused about his role in the relationship with Justine and Juliette, his encounter with Justine reveals further clues to the process of identity disintegration. Justine starts to

question her own identity when, after the alleged publication of her novel *Death is a Woman*, she is being stalked by a mysterious reader obsessed with the character of her novel. Despite her attempt to understand and rationalise the reasons behind the admirer's obsession, Justine admits that she is 'beginning to wonder who I am' (p. 58).

Halfway through his memoir, the narrator begins to wonder about Justine's identity and questions her existence:

'The real Justine never existed. Justine was an impostor: she was just an empty shell of living insects. Justine, like her picture, wasn't real at all, she was another fabrication' (p. 61). His confusion increases as he becomes aware that he is unable to tell Justine and Juliette apart. The inability to differentiate the two women affects the narrator's loss of his own identity, exemplified when he cannot recognise his own reflection in a mirror. Finally, a glimpse of the truth runs through his mind as he begins to think: 'I wondered in a moment of despair if the last few weeks had only been a dream, an invention of my own making' (p. 70). This theory is also supported by several other episodes in the story. Juliette admits she is Justine's other half while Jack, Justine's lover, believes that 'there are different versions of Justine' (p. 95). Towards the end, the role reversal and identity loss become more evident as he becomes Justine's prisoner in an attempt of setting her free from her abductor. Thompson stresses the process of disintegration of the narrator's mind: 'I then seem to split into two people as I watch, from a position high up in the sky, myself walk inside the house and disappear, the door shutting behind me' (p. 103). The narrator's inner split is emphasised by the echoes of Wringhim's progressive psychological disintegration in Hogg's *Justified Sinner*:

I generally conceived myself to be two people. When I lay in bed, I deemed there were two of us in it; [...] The most perverse part of it was, that I rarely conceived myself to be any of the two persons. I thought for the most part that my companion was one of them, and my brother the other.[8]

The place he finds himself in is 'on the verge of unreality'. This, together, with countless other references to the dream state and hallucinations of the opium smoking narrator throughout the story, is a crucial statement to understand the meaning of the novel.

The narrator has finally become aware of the hallucination he has started since his mother's death. The identification between Justine and his mother is also emphasised by the fact that the narrator begins his hallucination immediately after his mother's death. Witnessing his mother's beauty decay and her death has made the narrator paranoid about the impossibility of pursuing and keeping the myth of beauty forever. This is why Justine is both unobtainable beauty and death, just like the title of her novel *Death is a Woman* that, symptomatically, has never been published. The narrator's obsession with beauty creates the dream of the dangerous woman Justine/Juliette, who embodies the paradox typical of all Scottish doubles from Hogg's *Justified Sinner* to Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*. Thompson's use of the double allows her to build on a literary tradition to deconstruct it at the same time.[9] In particular, her re-writing of Sade's novels reveals this subversive intention in three ways, which reflect Elphinstone's definition of 'dangerous woman' quoted at the beginning of this paper.

Firstly, evil dresses up in glamour. The female characters epitomising virtue and vice in Sade's novels become one ambiguous dangerous woman embodying beauty and evil, prisoner and victim, prey and pursuer. Unlike Sade, Thompson merges the characters into one woman who is unintelligible because of her ability to be everything: whore and femme fatal, reality and dream. Secondly, the authority of the patriarchal system is defied as the narrator becomes the victim of Justine's evil power, an inversion to Justine's victimisation in Sade's novels. The power reversal is another clear element of Thompson's feminist critique to Sade's male-dominated narratives, stressed by the fact that the narrator has become a victim of his own victim. Finally, the issue about Justine's power ceases to be just a gender issue but develops into a discourse about fiction, which suggests a questioning of the validity of narrative and the tradition it refers to. Taking the steps from Sade's notion that remorse is a mere chimera,[10] Thompson adopts the concept of the chimera in her critique of the French model. Justine represents a double chimera. She is the dream of the unobtainable beauty. Simultaneously, she embodies the impossibility of being captured by the narrator's imagination.

In conclusion, the narrator is trapped by his own chimera. Justine is the jail keeper and the victim in a paradoxical narrative that leaves many questions unanswered. The possibility of writing a story is deconstructed at the very end when Justine hands over her 'blank book', challenging the narrator to find out who she really is. Fiction and reality merge and the boundaries between the two are very blurred. As the narrator admits: 'She had her own thoughts and desires which had manipulated me. There was a parallel universe and it belonged to her. Worse, she had dragged me into it' (p. 125).

[1] Margaret Elphinstone, 'Contemporary Feminist Fantasy in the Scottish Literary Tradition', in *Tea and Leg Irons: New Feminist Readings from Scotland*, ed. by Caroline Gonda (London: Open Letters, 1992), pp. 42-59 (p. 45).

[2] Reinhold Heller, 'Some Observations Concerning Grim Ladies, Dominating Women and Frightened Men around 1900', in *The Earthly Chimera and the Femme Fatal: Fear of Woman in Nineteenth Century Art* (University of Chicago: Congress Printing Company, 1981), pp. 7-13 (p. 9).

[3] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven and New York: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 34.

[4] Jenny March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Cassel and Co., 1998), pp. 337-8.

[5] Alice Thompson, *Justine* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996), vii (epigraph). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[6] Carol Anderson, 'Emma Tennant, Elspeth Barker, Alice Thompson: Gothic Revisited', in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, ed. by Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 117-130 (122).

[7] See Anderson.

[8] James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), pp. 125-126.

[9] See Anderson.

[10] 'Remorse is a chimera. [...] It is nothing but the imbecile murmur of a soul so weak that it dare not kill its own imaginings'. De Sade, *Justine or The Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791), (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1996), p. 120.

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