

BATTLEMAIDS OF DOMESTICITY:
DOMESTIC EPIC IN THE WORKS OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS
AND SYLVIA PLATH

by

VALERIE DORIS FRAZIER

(Under the direction of Dr. R. B. Miller)

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I argue that particularly during the 1950s and early 1960s there was a reification of beliefs and codes of conduct similar to the nineteenth century "cult of domesticity," which encouraged women to subsume personal desires and aspirations in favor of emphasis on family and home life. To rewrite these scripts of domesticity, Brooks and Plath revise, in their poetry written during the 1950s and 1960s, the traditional epic genre and invent a new subgenre—the domestic epic—that expands the traditional epic to encapsulate a distinctly feminine pattern of figurative warfare. In this way, they destabilize patriarchal and societal structures and assert the primacy of new visions of feminine growth and creative expression. As a part of the structure of the domestic epic, the two poets employ poetic and narrative strategies such as encoded meanings within names, shifts in narrative voice, the infusions of mythology, and conflations of birth and death imagery to subvert and redefine traditional definitions of domesticity.

INDEX WORDS: Domesticity, Epic, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sylvia Plath, Twentieth century poetry, African American poetry, Women's poetry

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M.A., University of Georgia, 1999

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The
University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2002

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August 2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my committee members, Dr. R. Baxter Miller, Dr. Barbara McCaskill, Dr. Douglas Anderson, Timothy Powell, and Tricia Lootens, for their invaluable help in completing this project. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their continued support and prayers. Most of all, I would like to thank God for making the completion of this dissertation possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The 1950s and 1960s saw the ascendancy of two women writers—Gwendolyn Brooks and Sylvia Plath—who inscribed their visions of domesticity and gender-relations on post-World War II American literature. Certainly, the two writers stand out as pivotal figures in twentieth century American literature, influencing the direction of modern poetry and fiction. Moreover, the work of the two authors serves as a testament to the enduring power of women writers in articulating their visions. Both authors earned the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry—Brooks in 1950 for *Annie Allen* and Plath posthumously in 1982 for *The Collected Poems*.

On the surface, the worlds in which these two women authors lived seem vastly different. Brooks, born in 1917 between the World Wars to working class parents, was an African American woman in a time in which racial segregation and prejudice were daily realities. A resident of Chicago's Southside, she and her family struggled constantly for financial stability and adequate living conditions within the redlined Bronzeville district.

Sylvia Plath was born the daughter of an entomologist and a school teacher in 1932. As a white middle-class woman coming of age in the 1950's, Plath became a graduate of Smith College. She was therefore both privileged and confined by privilege. Despite the relative comfort of her economic circumstances, she felt circumscribed by the societal norms that specified marriage and motherhood as the only acceptable outlets for a woman's creative power. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* encapsulates the frustration and anger that women of the era felt as they were forced to confine their aspirations.

Despite the overt differences in their backgrounds, both women lived and wrote at a critical crossroads in American history, a time of flux and changing cultural and social norms. With World Wars I and II only recently past, and the Korean and Vietnam conflicts on the horizon, women found their roles in society changing. They had entered the workforce during the era, while providing a much needed source of labor. Soon they were forced to return to domestic duties. The post-war decades of the fifties and sixties brought on the Red Scare—a crazed fear of worldwide domination by Communism. In reaction to these uncertain times, increasing emphasis was placed on maintaining the sanctity of the home. Elaine Tyler May terms this focus a

"containment ideology," as a defense in the wake of potential dangers of the Cold War and nuclear conflict (10-11). Women became mandated symbols of domesticity. The former soldiers returning from war replaced women in factories and offices. Brooks speaks of the effects of World War II in the changing dynamics of the domestic realm for black women ("Why Negro Women Leave Home," 1951):

Many a woman who had never worked before went to work during the last war. She will never forget the good taste of financial independence. For the first time, perhaps, she was able to buy a pair of stockings without anticipating her husband's curses...without risking a hysterical inquiry...She could buy their child a new overcoat without planning an elaborate strategic plan, or undergoing the smoke and fire of a semi-revolution...She felt clean straight, tall, and as if she were part of the world...Women who cannot obtain such regard will increasingly prefer to live alone" (qtd.in Schweik 116)

In a letter home from college in 1949, Plath also voices fears of constriction: "I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free" (*LH* 40). Brooks and Plath resist the return to domesticity and seek outlets for creative

expression to rewrite authority and control in the post-war world.

During the 1950s, marriage and motherhood were cornerstones of American life. The average age women married was 20.3, and enormous pressure was placed upon women to center their life aspirations on raising families (*A Novel of the Fifties* 1). Due to the huge impetus to marry and produce offspring during the decade, the national population rose by 18.5 percent (5). Magazines such as *The Ladies' Home Journal* counseled women on finding a husband and maintaining a household (4). The influence of the conservative society affected pervasively the careers of both poets who used their poetry to create complementary portraits of domesticity. It is these portraits of domesticity that reveal the shifting definitions of women's roles. Brooks and Plath expand definitions of women's roles in society. To accomplish this transformation, they revise the epic form to produce new cultural narratives.

I argue that conflicts and turmoil coalesce in each poet's work into a comprehensive pattern of war that I have termed "domestic epic." Such a form incorporates all areas of domestic existence, including both household and familial ties. As defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "domestic" means "Of or belonging to the home,

house, or household; pertaining to one's place of residence or family affairs; household, home, 'family'." Volumes by Brooks and Plath provide a counter-narrative to the conservative discourse of the era which, so similar to the "cult of domesticity" in the nineteenth century, encouraged women to sublimate personal desires in the favor of domestic life, if one presumes a mutual exclusion. I shall therefore explore domesticity within the context of a gendered history and an epic tradition.

During the Agrarian era, women took on tasks such as weaving, cooking, and gathering food stuffs, while men farmed or herded animals. Domesticity facilitated economic production. Although the era was one in which men wielded social and political authority, it was also what Ehrenreich and English term "gynocentric" in that "the skills and work of women (were) indispensable to survival" (7). Women leveraged their performance of domestic duties to attain a degree of creative autonomy (Cooperman 20- 21).

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the concepts of domesticity and women's roles changed. Society moved away from the gynocentric model (Ehrenreich and English 7), while the factory replaced the home as the center of economic production. Men and women worked in different places, on the one outside the home and the other

inside it. The public world of men was supposedly logical and impersonal, while the private world of women was, at least theoretically, a site of humanization, emotion, and intimacy (Cooperman 24).

In a capitalistic society, the public world took precedence. Home life was a private, protected sphere. Domestic women faced marginality and therefore invisibility. And the public world depreciated their traditional work. In Cooperman's words, "Assigned truths of piety and virtue as their realm, middle class white women became angels in the house, adherents of the Cult of True Womanhood. In order to act effectively in the world without participating in its daily commerce, they learned to manipulate deftly the moral tensions between the public and private realms, whose values were often directly opposed" (25). White middle-class women thus provided an emotional base for the family, therefore engendering the female with a degree of power in the family.

For African American women of the colonial period, the domestic realm provided fewer creative opportunities than those for white middle class women. Driven by the system of slavery, black female labor was forced, yielding profits not for their families but for the slave owners. African American women performed integral tasks such as making

soap, extracting dye from bark, fixing meals, and spinning wool (Jones 30). Yet, they operated at the behest of white slave masters and mistresses. Jacqueline Jones, in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, contends that because slave women were forced to perform the same type of manual labor as men, there was a strict division of labor based upon gender enforced in the slave homes and communities (13). The private realm provided an opportunity for African Americans to control their lives in some degree. Particularly for black women, motherhood provided a level of self-assertion. To Jones, "Black women's attention to the duties of motherhood deprived whites of full control over them as field laborers, domestic servants, and brood-sows" (13). Since Black women often had to complete childcare and familial duties secretly, the domestic realm became a strategy for the survival of the family.

In the first half of the twentieth century, discrimination in hiring made domestic work as maids, nurses, and cooks one of few avenues available for black women seeking employment. The conditions were poor and exploitive, while black domestic workers were paid low wages for long hours. Black women's labor was often bartered on street corners, much like the slave auctions of the nineteenth century. Thus the domestic sphere, on one

level, represented a de-humanizing experience for black women who were often mistreated. But work done at the black women's home for loved ones instilled a sense of dignity and purpose.

Although the domestic realm represented diverse challenges for women of different races and classes, such females shared a desire to define domesticity on their own terms. They wanted autonomy to express themselves creatively *within* and *outside of* the domestic realm. Hence, the domestic epic became the perfect vehicle for women poets such as Brooks and Plath who facilitated an integration of private and public worlds. The epic, the most elevated and esteemed of poetic forms, came to make public what once was private. Through poetic devices such as encoded meanings within names, shifts in narrative voice, and a conflated imagery of birth and death, Brooks and Plath help modify-possibly even revolutionize-the traditional form of the epic to create a new cultural narrative of women.

Since ancient times, writers have employed the epic to relay the cultural and historical memory of a people through the tales of heroic deeds. In such poetic narratives, men represent the destiny of a race or nation. M.H. Abrams defines the traditional epic as "a long

narrative poem on a great and serious subject, related in an elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race" (50). He includes five characteristics of an epic in his definition:

- 1) The hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance...
- 2) The setting of the poem is ample in scale, and may be worldwide or even larger...
- 3) The action involves superhuman deeds in battle...
- 4) In these great actions, the gods and other supernatural beings take an interest or an active part...
- 5) An epic, a ceremonial performance, takes place in a ceremonial style which is deliberately distanced from ordinary speech. Style is therefore proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject and epic architecture. (Abrams 51)

Epic typically centers on a male poet, who, instigated by a female muse, begins with an argument or theme, with the hero's often asking the muse a question. In traditional epic form, narrative is the vehicle used to convey the action of the poem, which often starts in medias res, the middle of a crucial point of action (Abrams 52).

Abrams's definition lays out the conventions of epic, emphasizing the grand scale and scope of the form.

Epic has been considered a male dominated genre. Susan Stanford Friedman argues that for much of the literary history, women have felt an "anxiety of poetic genre" in relation to employing the epic form. Contending that epic tradition has often been seen as masculine-identified, presenting actions within the public domain and in the process instilling western patriarchal values and norms, Friedman asserts that "writing within the epic tradition has been an extension of a culturally granted masculine authority to generate philosophical, universal, cosmic and heroic discourse" (205). She says that women have lacked the cultural authority to enter the genre, as "the epic has been the last bastion among poetic genres for women to approach" (205).

Despite women's hesitancy to write within the literary tradition of epic, some women poets have attempted the form. Poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D., in the respective masterpieces *Aurora Leigh* (1857) and *Helen in Egypt* (1961), have revised the epic genre, inserting women's voices into the male-dominated structure. *Aurora Leigh*, in the *Bildungsroman* tradition, chronicles the life

of the title character, a young female writer patterned after the author, who refuses to subsume her artistic identity to the Victorian roles for women. *Helen in Egypt*, H.D.'s "epic of consciousness," retells the story of Helen of Troy from Helen's perspective. *Helen in Egypt*, grounded in modernist techniques, has a circular layered narrative that focuses more on the reflections of events than on the events themselves. (Friedman 217). Susan Friedman says that these women authors conflated the novel and lyric forms in order to derive their feminized epics. She argues that this hybridization of form represents "gender-specific responses or genre" (206) that facilitate the entrance of women writers into the epic tradition. Brooks and Plath similarly revise epic conventions to invent a new poetic form allowing the poets to respond to changing times.

With the advent of the twentieth century, writers such as Brooks and Plath found the newly envisioned domestic epic as a vehicle for redefining women's space creatively. While several women writers provide useful models for domestic epic, I did not choose to include all of them in this study because of limits of space and time. I consciously selected two writers from the same era in order to capture women's responses to a post-war world characterized by sexism and racism. H.D., a contemporary of

Brooks, spent a great deal of her time in exile in Europe, and her vision may differ dramatically from those who usually lived in the United States. Brooks and Plath seem to make for a better sisterhood.

I was also influenced by perspectives on an American epic tradition. Scholars such as James Miller and Michael Andre Bernstein have identified an American tradition of epics in which writers have worked to expand boundaries of epic. Miller, in his groundbreaking study, *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman's Legacy in the Personal Epic*, writes that Whitman's "Song of Myself" provided the foundation for twentieth century writers to expand the definition of epic, making it uniquely reflective of American cultural history. This new form of epic was termed "personal epic." The hero thus becomes the embodiment of his time and place"(35). Instead of being grounded in the past, the personal epic joins the past and future, hence implying the circular nature of time. The personal epic, one that rejects old myths of culture and history, sets about redefining its own new myths, or "Supreme Fictions," to borrow Wallace Stevens's term (Miller 34-36).

Michael Bernstein, in *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic*, locates the epic as a site

of change in terms of cultural definition. Emphasizing that the project of epic is to articulate communal voices, the poet should work to express the cultural, mythic and historical heritage of the reading audience. The study also discusses the conflation of narrative, prose, and historical records, in efforts to "give voice to historical forces transcending any single consciousness or moment "(272).

By loosening the form and focusing on creating new conduits through which to re-envision cultural and national history, writers produce narratives that equally value the individual and the community as integral components of domestic epic. Such studies as those of Miller and Bernstein provide a gateway or lens through which to view women's long poetry. No longer does the valuation of experience have to be based upon an inflexible fidelity to past paradigms or conventions of literary history as most conservatively construed. With this framework in place, writers such as Brooks and Plath expand the borders of genre and realize the potential of domestic epic.

Critics have often associated the work Gwendolyn Brooks with epic tradition. R.B. Miller, in his groundbreaking article "'Define...the Whirlwind'": Gwendolyn Brooks's Epic Sign for a Generation" (1986), argues that

throughout the course of her literary career, Brooks strove to write the epic *In the Mecca* but failed (160). Brooks advances toward a major achievement in epic form, culminating in the creation of *Mecca*. I too see Brooks's oeuvre as a progression, but propose that rather than failing to create a traditional epic (Miller argues her success), she helps write a new subgenre—the domestic epic—which centers around the interests of women.

Ann Folwell Stanford,¹ also recognizes the centrality of gender in Brooks's formulation. She calls "The Annaid" an epic with a difference and asserts that Brooks sustains an analysis of femininity, romantic idealism, and thwarted imagination in the poem and highlights the intertextual parallels to Virgil's *Aeneid* (286). Recognizing the social and political overtones of the work, Folwell asserts that sexual politics help shape the work into a feminine-oriented epic (297-298). Tracey Walters², counteracting the totalizing trend towards labeling "The Anniad" as an epic or mock epic, contends the work more accurately can be called "both and neither," thus escaping simple

¹ An Epic with a Difference: Sexual Politics in Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Annaid" (1995).

² "Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Annaid" and the Indeterminacy of Genre" (2001).

categorization (366). The indeterminacy of genre in Brooks's work, according to her, should be appreciated instead of being viewed as problematic (366). What is notable about these critical perspectives is that they open a portal for expansion of discussions of genre and the potential for various interpretations of epic form.

No studies explore the possibilities of epic form in Plath's work. But since her death in 1963, some scholars have come to identify affinities between her poetry and the traditional form. Ted Hughes remarked,

how faithfully her separate poems build into one long poem. She faced a task in herself, and her poetry is the record of her progress in the task. The poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear—even if the origins of it and the *dramatis personae* are at the bottom enigmatic (187).

Peter Axelrod and Nan Dorsey recognize a unifying motif in her poetry, and says "all of Plath's poems, early and late, comprise a single metapoem" (78). Though these commentators do not use the word epic directly, the observed characteristics suggest an epic. Beginning with *The Colossus*, Plath experiments with voice and distance while examining issues of domesticity such as marriage,

pregnancy, and children throughout her oeuvre, finally, culminating in later poems such as those in *Ariel*. When one examines the poems collected in *Ariel* in the order Plath originally intended, a pattern emerges that suggests a cosmic battle for survival. "Morning Song" culminates the yoked images of birth and motherhood, and "Wintering" shows a victory over adversity. The sequence follows the basic structure of epic, which, according to Miller "portray[s] the narrator's journey, the obstacles encountered, and the final vision of victory" (Miller 160).

Brooks and Plath use encoded meanings within names, shifts in narrative voice, revisions of traditions of mythologies, and confluences of birth and death imagery to redefine definitions of domesticity. The two writers reveal the social structures that confine and limit female growth and infuse a cultural critique into their works, exploring the variety through which race, class, and gender achieve female consciousness.

Inherent within the domestic position are encoded meanings within the etymology of the names of the Brooks poem "Sadie and Maud." Embedded within the names is the expression of the battle between the roles of woman as artist/creator in contrast to mother, daughter, and wife. Maud, with its Germanic derivative means "strong in battle"

or "battlemaid,"³ while Sadie, a Hebrew derivative of Sarah, means "royalty" and "princess." The name also represents an impetus towards domesticity and motherhood, as the biblical Sarah became the foremother of the nation of Israel. Thus, with the juxtaposition of the names Sadie and Maud, Brooks lays the foundation for the domestic warfare that cuts to the core of her work and of Plath's. Plath's title *Ariel* conceals an encrypted message of the "double bind" of women—symbolized by Shakespeare's fairy-slave — caught between the creative impetus of the artist and the duties of the domestic.

In the first two sections, I examine the poetic oeuvre of Gwendolyn Brooks, looking at the major works *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949) along with *The Bean Eaters* (1960) and *In the Mecca* (1968). Her works exist against the backdrop of the social and political wars of the time—World War II, Korea and Vietnam, all affecting the lives of her personae. Brooks uses narrative shifts to highlight the tensions inherent in the female position and presents a figurative battle of survival. In addition, she revises the epic as exemplified in Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *The Aeneid*, in order to

³ All references to name etymologies are from Alfred J. Kolatch's *The New Name Dictionary: Modern English and Hebrew Names*. New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1989.

place women in the forefront of a battle to defend their home as land and find victory in their quest for autonomous selves. The idiom appears even through the encrypted names of the characters.

I examine the early and transitional poetry of Plath, while discussing how the works progress towards a redemptive victory within the domestic realm. I focus on *The Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1971), and *The Collected Poems* (1981), including the infusion of Greek mythology, the imagery of birth and death, and the significance of naming. Using the new sequential order for the *Ariel* poems, as suggested by Marjorie Perloff⁴, I agree that there is a heightened sense of urgency and cumulative power in the original ordering that reveals Plath's manipulation of sites of feminine agency as opposed to victimization. I will look at the way the poetic oeuvre brings to light a war imagery that reaches epic levels. Historical movements such as the Cold War, the Red Scare of the nineteen fifties and the post-war conservatism situate her work in a time of transition and change.

I conclude by looking at the implications of the domestic epic for redefining traditional poetics. While the

impetus of scholars of the late twentieth century was to establish a women's tradition that acknowledged the creativity and aesthetic worth of women's texts, the twenty-first century moves toward exploring new avenues to resituate women's literature within the framework of American literature as a whole. Domestic epic provides a new lens through which to view the works of women writers such as Brooks and Plath, who, though different, write similarly an idiom of domesticity.

⁴ Marjorie Perloff's "The Two *Ariels*: The (Re) Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon" (1986).

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN OF THE STREET AND THE HEARTH:

FEMALE DOMESTIC VISION IN GWENDOLYN BROOK'S *A STREET IN BRONZEVILLE* AND ANNIE ALLEN

With the August 15, 1945 publication of *A Street in Bronzeville*, one day after V-J Day marked the end of World War II,¹ Gwendolyn Brooks issued the first battle cry of her domestic epic—beginning a metaphorical war that would encompass the majority of her literary oeuvre and revise the epic genre. The forty-one poems in *A Street in Bronzeville*, ranging from ballads and lyrics to sonnets, coalesce to assert the primacy of a domestic aesthetic that centers upon the journeys of female heroines who combat the challenges of poverty, racism, and sexism while asserting their identities both within and beyond the confines of the domestic sphere. Epic dimensions are reached through the scope of subject matter that Brooks deals with—women

¹Although the official celebration of the surrender of Japan to the Allies occurred on September 2, 1945, news of the event was made available August 14, 1945. For more information about the publication history of *A Street in Bronzeville*, see D. H. Melham's *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1987).18.

battling to articulate visions of self-growth—as well as through the cultural redefinition of women's roles in society. In particular in 1945, at the end of World War II and the beginnings of a conservatism brought about by changing American cultural values, the domestic epic became an outlet for critiquing cultural values and systems that stymied the growth of females, limiting definitions of self to the domestic sphere.

Significantly, with the domestic epic Brooks reclaims the urban home as a battlefield and uses the tableau of women characters to script new visions of self-identity. The battles of domestic epic are literally and figuratively fought on the streets of Bronzeville, in the alleys, sidewalks, houses, and beauty parlors of this real life Chicago "black belt" community. As Brooks points out in *Report from Part One*, the term "Bronzeville" originated with the *Chicago Defender* as a reference to the black area of Chicago (RPO 160). Bronzeville encompassed about forty-blocks in Chicago, from 29th to 69th Streets, and thirteen blocks east and west from Cottage Grove to State Street⁵. Because of racial redlining, Black Chicago was confined to this one thin strip of land, and living conditions were

². For more information about the historical Bronzeville, refer to the sociological study *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a*

extremely inadequate to meet the needs of the growing black population, which from 1940 to 1950 grew from 277,731 to 492,265 (Kent 94). Despite the exponential growth, the area that blacks were forced to live in was not expanded. With such an overpopulation in the black district, even the poorest quality apartments were at a high premium, and blacks were crammed into rundown, exorbitantly priced one-room kitchenette apartments that provided little space or comfort. At least nine major race riots erupted during 1945-1954, reflecting the frustrations of the times (Kent 94).

Bronzeville represents a microcosm of the breadth of life of black America, particularly for black women. In this chapter I shall explore how Brooks's poetic vision encapsulates the urban experience for black women. Domestic epic becomes a vehicle to relay the real life challenges to survival. Faced with a "job ceiling" that made domestic service one of the only employment options available to them, as well as racial redlining that made it extremely difficult for blacks to obtain adequate housing, women fight a two-pronged battle for respect and equity in the domestic realm. They fight first to obtain and maintain a home of their own. Secondly, they fight for

respect and dignity in their own households as well as in the households of the people for whom they work. Brooks embeds her epic within European form, using encoded meanings within names, the infusion of Greek mythology, as well as shifts between subjective and objective voice to establish a multidimensional dialogue between the self and the "other" in a quest for a construction of female identity.

A Street In Bronzeville is composed of three different sections: "A Street In Bronzeville," a section of individual portraits of residents of Bronzeville, and the sonnet sequence "Gay Chaps in a Bar." The "A Street in Bronzeville" section is comprised of vignettes that give a snapshot of the daily lives of urban residents of different races, classes, and ages. The individual portraits shed light on the inner thoughts of specific members of the community. Of particular interest is the Hattie Scott sequence because it examines the life of a domestic service worker and explores how she navigates between the public sphere of domestic labor and the private domestic sphere.

The centrality of the domestic sphere within *A Street in Bronzeville* is clear from its opening poem, "the old - marrieds," which reveals a marriage at an impasse, stunted

Harcourt, 1962) by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton.

by a lack of communication. The poem both begins and ends with the line: "But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say" (19)⁶, intimating a distance between the couple that belies the union implicit in the title "old-marrieds." Despite the piping of "pretty-coated birds," "lovers in the little side-streets," and "morning stories clogged with/sweets" (19), the couple is stymied by "the crowding darkness" (19) and cannot communicate with one another. They are removed from daily living, unresponsive to the sounds and sights that define one as human. In direct contrast to the images of spring and renewal, as indicated by "the time for loving" and the season of May, the couple is blighted and silenced by stagnancy. A cold war of sorts has caused a halt to meaningful discourse between the two people. By beginning a domestic epic with stagnancy between married people, Brooks reveals the figurative descent into hell as one of silence and lack of communication—a seething fury just below the surface that demands attention. The goal of the domestic epic is to reconnect conversation and communication in order to facilitate understanding between men and women.

³ All primary text references to Brooks's work are from *Blacks*. 7th edition. (Chicago: Third World P, 1994). Page numbers are referenced in the text.

In "kitchenette building" Brooks identifies the kitchen as the defining space of the home. She uses the kitchenette building as an emblem of the economic and discriminatory practices that forced large numbers of African Americans to live in segregated neighborhoods in cramped apartments in Chicago's Southside. Just as the building comes to represent containment for African Americans, so too does the kitchen become a synecdoche of restriction for all women. The environment shapes and structures the actions of the residents of the structure, constricting the dimensions of their lives. The speaker uses the first person "we" to encapsulate her position as well as the position of the other residents of the building, "things," not people—emphasizing the dehumanizing conditions.

The realm of choice is a "Dream" that is termed "giddy," while everyday concerns such as "'rent,'" "'feeding a wife,'" and "'satisfying a man" take precedence over wispy dreams. The kitchen comes to define the domestic boundaries of existence, just as the fumes that emanate from it define their lives. Phrases such as "onion fumes," "fried potatoes," and "yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall" reveal the waste in determining the lives of residents. These smells fight with and stifle the dreams

of life. With the closing lines, attention again focuses upon the sole concerns of banal existence—the lukewarm water’s representing the calls of basic survival.

As an example of one whose dreams have been greatly restricted, “the mother” thinks about her life choices. Appearing early in the *Bronzeville* volume, the free verse is a dramatic monologue that reinforces the centrality of motherhood. Immediately striking is the irony in the term “the mother,” because it is the very state of motherhood that the speaker reacts strongly against and, through abortions, ends her pregnancies. Even though she had aborted the lives of possible children, she still lays claim to the title “mother” as an emblem of the potency and connection of regenerative life. The poem uses full rhyme and is irregularly metered, with the first stanza rhyming five couplets and the second changing rhyme in the first six lines and ending with a couplet. The meter is rolling and unrelenting, relaying the distress of the speaker (Melham 23). In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker immediately sets up a dichotomy between memory and children: “Abortions will not let you forget. /You remember the children you got that you did not get”(21). Distance is established in the first stanza of the poem as the second person “you” to objectify the connection between

the audience and the speaker. Brooks employs the second person "you" to force the reader to become personally connected to the poem and to interject their perspective into the scenario.

With the movement to the second stanza of the poem, the second person shifts to the first. As the speaker contemplates her role in the death of her children, the guise of the objective is dropped to more fully contemplate the ramifications of her actions for her life and that of the children "gotten but never got." The speaker reviews the dead on the battlefield of her life not as an objective bystander but as an active participant: "I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my/ dim killed children" (21). The term "dim-killed" works to blur the degree of accountability the mother feels about aborting the fetuses, as dim implies a lesser degree of wrongdoing.

The repetition of the conditional "if" in the second stanza raises the question as to whether she has truly robbed her children of life or merely spared them from the pains of the world. The verbs "sinned," "seized" "stole," and "poisoned" insinuate that some wrongdoing is attached to the mother's actions. Yet, Brooks cleverly uses enjambment to imply that the mother may have some justification for her actions. She consciously splits

"deliberate" and "marriages" to the verbs "mar" and "liberate." And she reveals a counter script that implies that the mother did not mar their opportunities but rather liberated her children from a life circumscribed by poverty, sexism, and racism. Thus, when the speaker declares, "Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not de-/liberate," she readily accepts responsibility for their deaths and acknowledges that she spared her children from the problems of life that she has had to bear. Her actions reveal a deep and abiding desire to spare her children hardship, much as Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* desired to save her children from the horrors of slavery.⁷

(Brooks's version came at least a generation earlier.) In the same way that Sethe wishes to spare her children, the mother makes a conscious decision to end the cycle of poverty and deprivation for future generations. For this, the mother does not apologize.

In this poem, the speaker, like Virgil's Aeneas, psychologically visits the dead and finds a state of redemption in which she reclaims her connection to all of her children. She ends this contemplative state with the closing lines: "Believe me, I loved you /All" (22) and

⁴ In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), Sethe, a runaway slave fearing her pending capture, makes the conscious choice to kill

gains cumulative power with the last word "all," as it implies that she has found a place of grace in her unborn children's hearts.

The ballad "Sadie and Maud" encapsulates dueling aspects of domesticity. Embedded within the names of Sadie and Maud⁸ appears the quintessential expression of the battle between the roles of woman as artist/creator as opposed to mother, daughter, and wife. Maud, with its Germanic derivative, means "strong in battle" or "battlemaid," while Sadie, a Hebrew derivative of Sarah, means princess. Sadie stands, just as the biblical Sarah did, as the seed bearer of future generations. Maud, who travels a different path, is isolated because of her unconventional choice to go to college while remaining unwed. Her battle and success are just as elemental to the definition of woman as are Sadie's struggles. The relative merits of both women's odysseys must be considered and appreciated without privileging one over the other.

From the opening lines of the poem, the dichotomy between artist/creator and homemaker/wife is clear: "Maud

her children in order to spare them from the horrors and indignities of slavery.

⁵ All references to name meanings are from Alfred J Kolatch's *The New Name Dictionary: Modern English and Hebrew Names* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1989).

went to college. / Sadie stayed at home"(32). The two paths are placed in direct opposition to one another. With the departure from home to college, Maud begins an epic journey that expands her knowledge and defines her identity outside of the roles of mother and daughter. "Sadie stayed at home" suggests this sister's close identification with domesticity. Sadie's life is a "fine-tooth comb," a symbol of domestic utility with which she has scraped every drop of life. Sadie lives life to the fullest: "She didn't leave a tangle in./Her comb found every strand" (32). The epic dimensions of Sadie's life reverberate in the epithet that she "was one of the livingest chits/In all the land." (32). Her journey of life experiences has been recorded for future generations, with "In all the land" evoking the aura of a fairy tale or a parable of life, imparting a lesson for future generations. The unwed mother of two daughters has relished every moment of life and leaves the legacy of scraping life from a fine-tooth comb to her daughters.

Maud, by making the decision to attend college and remain unwed, "Is a thin brown mouse,/She is living all alone in this old house" (32). Like Odysseus, the Greek hero who, after many epic adventures, returns to his home as an interloper, she returns to find that herself a pariah

in her own homeland—isolated, unrecognizable, and discontented. The description as “a thin brown mouse” (32) underscores her disconnection from the world around her, emphasizing a nondescript appearance. But just as Odysseus emerges from the Trojan War as a battle worn hero who never concedes defeat, so too does Maud persevere as a warrior who survives the domestic battle. While on the surface it appears that Sadie had selected the better path, as one of the “livingest chits” of the land, it is Maud who is alive at the end of the poem to guide Sadie’s heirs.

Some critics have failed to see the depth of domestic epic warfare in the poem, focusing more on the supposed failures of Maud and Sadie than on their successes. John Grey says, “While at first reading Maud may appear as one who has failed to live “naturally,” in fact neither woman succeeds by any discernible social standards to establish an identity” (50). In a similar vein, Beverly Guy-Sheftall contends that Maud, like “the unnamed woman in ‘obituary for a living woman,’ has followed society’s rules, but life has lacked the vitality and fullness which make one’s existence meaningful” (236). I see these interpretations as oversimplified. I contend, on the contrary, through the choices Sadie and Maud make we learn a valuable lesson about ourselves and the roles of women.

The stories of Maud and Sadie reveal that rather than having the artistic and maternal levels labeled as mutually exclusive of each other, in order to win the battle of domestic epic, the two planes must complement each other.

The " independent man" works with a subtle edge to underscore the centrality of the domestic in defining the relative positions of males and females. Though the title purports to be about a man's claim to autonomy, it cautions males against becoming female-identified, trapped within the confines of the limited female space: "Now who could take you off to tiny life/in one room or in two rooms or three/And cork you smartly, like the flask of wine"(33). At all costs, the independent man must avoid (being "corked") domestic obligations. When read through the prism of domestic epic warfare, the title itself—"independent man"—imparts a message that for women, independence, by its very nature, is antithetical to their limited existence. By structuring the poem around the idea of male independence threatened by female domestication, Brooks strategically works to highlight constrictions placed upon women whose spaces are akin to being caught between Scylla and Charybdis—hard to navigate and full of danger. Brooks ends with a note of irony, implying that a female should be grateful for any cursory, temporal

attention from a man: "A woman would be wise to think it well/ If once a week you only rang the bell" (33). The domestic epic challenge is to retain one's autonomy.

In "obituary for a living lady," we see a persona who, having failed in her battle to define herself, loses her man and discovers the "country of God" (33). Women, according to domestic epic, should revel in being "decently wild"(34). When the persona strays from such a path, and moves towards a stifling conservatism, she loses part of her identity. While "the independent man" eludes capture by women with "tiny lives," the persona of "obituary" fails to adapt the codes of courtship to her specific relationship, and is thus rejected by her suitor in favor a woman who wears red and is more amenable to his advances. The dichotomy between society's dictums of proper behavior and human desire appears as female dignity: "She fell in love with a man who didn't know that even if she wouldn't let him touch her breasts, she was still worth his hours" (34). A woman's valuation and worth depend on her ability to retain the attention of a man. Before the narrator reached maturity, she experienced a freedom and liberty repressed as she grew older.

The "Hattie Scott" sequence holds a pivotal place in the *Bronzeville* volume, negotiating a space between the

competing demands of her job as a domestic day worker and her personal life. In the tradition of Langston Hughes's "Weary Blues," Brooks infuses the ballad with the musical rhythm, capturing the bittersweet melancholy that defines Hattie's life through the rhyme scheme of a b c b. The dual impulses of exploration and domesticity inform the name, for though Hattie means "mistress of," Scott means "wanderer." While domesticity informs so much of her life, she longs to relax in the setting sun. But her busy routine prevents her from taking such a break.

As Hattie completes her domestic duties and contemplates a release from work, she compares her position to the star: "But the sun and me's the same, could be:/Cap the job, then to hell with" (51). Her life mimics the diurnal cycle of day and night, the rising and setting of the sun signaling the beginning and end of the workday. Refusing her employer's demand to complete additional chores, Hattie prioritizes her own domestic space. While the employer can define public domestic labor, it is Hattie herself who will structure her own private life.

Hattie imagines how she would combat domestic abuse. The opening lines give an immediate sense of the urgency to the situation: "MOE BELLE JACKSON'S husband/Whipped her good last night/A knock-down-drag-out fight"(55) Angered by

the violence of a neighbor, she ruminates on methods of retaliation and imagines new forms of domestic attack. While the critic Gary Smith argues that "'the battle ends not on a note of personal triumph for Hattie, but rather resignation and defeat" (44), I contend that her potential retaliation is covert rather than overt. Hot grits, in other words, are an old fashioned weapon of attack for African American folk women to burn and scar their erring mates. Thus, Hattie subconsciously arms her sister for the battle of domestic warfare.

In "Queen of the Blues," Brooks alternates between the third person and first person in the confessional song that reveals both Mame's family history and her thoughts. Brooks conflates musical and poetic form to replicate the twelve bar pattern of the blues (Melham 37). Mame's song is one of melancholy, pain, and eventual triumph. Brooks's use of musical form and shifts in narrative voice serve to make public Mame's private battle to defend her domestic space. Without a father or brother to wield patriarchal authority over her, she emerges into a fully blown blues career. By implication, it is freedom from these familial roles that allows Mame to grow and affirm her will. Mame's past exploitation by a male suitor results in her working in someone else's kitchen for long hours and low pay. She

laments that she "Scrubbed hard in them white folks'/Kitchens/Till my knees was rusty" (58). "Kitchens," capitalized and set apart in its own stanzaic line, emphasizes the centrality of domestic space as a place of containment that stymies her potential. Physically and psychologically confined in other people's kitchens, Mame finds an avenue of escape through her career as a blues singer. As "Queen of the Blues," she reclaims her dignity, ending the poem by asking, "Why don't they tip/Their hats to a queen?" (59).

"The Gay Chaps in a Bar" sonnet sequence, based on letters Brooks received from black soldiers, projects the domestic battle on to a global stage. Brooks strikes a parallel between female domestic warriors and male soldiers. The sonnet "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell" encapsulates the epic dilemma women face in reconciling the competing demands of creativity and service. Ann Folwell Stanford asserts that the poetry

employs domestic imagery to describe the deferral of dream that both war and racism entail. The poem is especially interesting for its introduction of images usually relegated to the traditionally female sphere, which is not a *naturally* female realm. The poem takes symbols that are markers of gender and exploits them

to their fullest potential in what is a subversive relocation of "dreams and "works." ("Dialectics of Desire" 192)

Stanford correctly articulates Brooks's poetic design, recognizing the infusion of images traditionally categorized as feminine. I would add that what Brooks aims to accomplish through the conflation of the domestic sphere with the traditionally masculine realm of war is to reinvent women's experiences as human (Miller, *Black American Literature and Humanism* 110).

Domesticity is the inferno that must be redeemed:

I hold my honey and I store my bread
In little jars and cabinets of my will.
I label clearly, and each latch and lid
I bid, Be firm till I return from hell. (66)

Once more the soldier's act of storing memories within a domestic framework suggests restricted spaces that characterize women's lives. As with the other heroes from classic epics, she anticipates a return to the self-home, a final haven from war. The hope of epic return is a fundamental convention that rebirths of cultural identity that restore a sense of normalcy to life (Frye 318). During an era swept by world war, the hope for return encourages both the soldiers and the country embroiled in

conflict. The speaker anticipates the journey's end: "As I can manage, remember to go home" (66). The memory that links him to his homeland provides a hope for epic victory. Thus, war fails to destroy the essence of life—its sweet, and sustaining domesticity.

Even in the midst of success in "The Progress," a combination of Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet forms, the soldier cannot relish victory completely. The portals of change and the unknown speak of a new world order:

For even if we come out standing up
How shall we smile, congratulate: and how
Settle in chairs? Listen, listen. The step
Of iron feet again. And again wild. (75)

In this modern era, uncertainty will likely prevail. The impending threat of war, "the step/Of iron feet," will persist into a post-modern age, while the poet's modern spacing between "again" and "wild" in the closing lines implies the chaotic unknown. Even there is a hope for a rebirth.

Annie Allen (1949), the Pulitzer prize-winning volume, ushers in a mature domestic epic in which Brooks focuses upon the personal journey of a woman whose quest it is to find and maintain a home for herself. The volume begins with the "Memorial to Ed Bland," a man who "wanted to see

action" and live life to the fullest. Annie Allen who wants to see global action of a vastly different sort must continually pay the costs for her desire. In a most complementary way, Ed Bland defines the historical moment in which Annie Allen lives.

For this long poem, Brooks experiments with language and form, relying on complex symbolism, esoteric diction, and intricate devices. While the pedantic approach may appeal to critics and scholars, the consequent obscurity may prevent some readers from understanding fully the rich context of the narrative. Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti) argues that the book was written for whites and the dense textual content causes many African Americans to shy away from the text (*RPO*, Preface, 17). It is perhaps because of this criticism that Brooks's post- 1960 work reflects a simpler, more overtly political consciousness. Yet the strain of domestic epic protest remains continuous throughout her oeuvre.

The encoded meaning within Annie Allen's name lends cumulative power to the domestic epic quest, with Annie meaning "grace" and Allen meaning "harmony." Annie ["Grace"] Allen ["Harmony"] seeks to maintain personal peace in the midst of global war. As Ann Folwell Stanford proposes, "Feminized by both title and subject matter,

Annie Allen foregrounds a resistance to male co-optation and female passivity and offers a critique of sexual politics focusing on the imbalance of power that frequently characterizes relations between the sexes" (283). One must rectify the imbalance in order for women to redefine themselves.

Annie Allen includes three sections—"Notes From the Childhood, and the Girlhood," "The Anniad," and "The Womanhood"—all buffering Annie's quest to assert her autonomy. The first section begins with "the birth in a narrow room which delimits the route of both a newborn child and a woman before they reach full self - actualization. The domestic epic requires a figurative breaking of the social sack. Annie's birth -"something new/Blurred and stupendous"—marks the transcendence of a new female warrior. "Bashful" intimates the submissive role assigned to women in patriarchal society, while the "yellow apron spilling cherries" situates the female as occupying the domestic role as bearer of food. The speaker predicts Annie's eventual awakening to discontent:

Now weeks and years will go before she thinks

"How pinchy is my room! How can I breathe!

I am not anything and I have got

Not anything to do!"—(83)

A period of idyllic childhood momentarily suspends the impending knowledge of women's constricted roles.

The poem "Maxie Allen" serves as a changing of the guard in the domestic epic warfare, as Maxie represents the old order's facing the challenges of a metaphorical war that has spanned generations. Maxie Allen, who provides a necessary link to the matrilineal heritage, must now instruct her daughter, a budding warrior, on the current state of conflict. In representing the traditional conservatism of post-War America, she teaches her daughter about the material properties of life:

For eye that let her see so far
For throat enabling her eat
Her Quaker Oats and Cream-of-Wheat,
For tongue to tantrum for the penny,
For ear to hear the haven't-any,
For arm to toss, for leg to chance,
For heart to hanker for romance. (84)

The things that Annie is taught to appreciate, such as her sensory abilities, are, for the most part, temporal and physical. The daughter Annie achieves a broader quality of existence by introducing new techniques or strategies of warfare: "Sweet Anne tried to teach her mother / There was

somewhat of something other"(84). Annie recognizes a need for a broader sphere of experience, with the "something other" representing the endless possibilities for growth and exploration. She longs for signs of romance and gothic such as "veils and God," "whistling ghosts," and "fleet love" (84). Maxie, grounded firmly in the reality of daily living, recognizes that her life as a wife and mother has a stymied potential. Annie has gateways of opportunity—"lots of jacks and strawberry jam"—that are unavailable to the mature Maxie. Lamenting that she has to support a husband who no longer woos her, Maxie Allen works to break the romantic idealism of Annie Allen, forcing the daughter to consider the deeper ramifications of marriage and domestic existence.

Throughout Brooks's domestic epic, as in "sunday chicken," women and chicken are linked, as the chicken signifies the angst and containment of the domestic sphere that women's position represents. Both the chicken and the protagonist, of course on different semantic levels, find themselves awaiting the pleasure of a man. When the man fails to make an appearance for dinner, both the chicken and the woman are in uncertain states. The inequity of their situations, they who have highly valued themselves, becomes clear: "Elite among the speckle-gray, wild white/On

blundering mosaic in the night/Or lovely baffle-brown. It was not right" (87). A rage seethes beneath the surface, which the speaker masks with a wry note of irony: "You could not hate the cannibal they wrote/Of, with the nostril bone-thrust, who could dote/On broiled or roasted fellow thigh and throat"(87). The assertion "You could not hate" serves to draw awareness to the very thing that it purports to shy away from, opening gates for hate to flood in. The speaker continues her quasi-justification for the man's behavior: "Nor hate the handsome tiger, call him devil/To man-feast, manifesting Sunday evil" (87). As in "man-feast" and "manifest," the two words combine to symbolize man's desire to expand patriarchal borders of control, much in the same way that western expansion, propelled by the doctrine Manifest Destiny, expanded the white frontier in part by disenfranchising Native Americans.

Annie's high sense of romanticism and idealism lingers to the very end of the poem as she ruminates on the qualities of a suitor. She sets the bar high for the man who would win her affections. What is at stake for her is a real human connection that necessitates compatibility—"gist and lacquer/With melted opals for my milk,/Pearl leaf for my cracker"—and understanding.

"Throwing out the flowers" marks the end of her romantic ideals about love and marriage. The romanticism that buffered her in early poems has now abandoned her, and she is left with a reality in which the idealism of youth has died. What is left is rotten food, and rotten flowers seem to whisper of the hopes and dreams that have evaporated. Images of rot and decay pervade the poem, as the "broccoli, yams and the bead-buttermilk/Are dead with the hail in the hall, All"(91). The food marks the remnants of a battle lost. The phrase "before it was over and all" speaks of the failed relationship with the paladin, a relationship that had come to envelope every aspect of Annie's life. Throwing out the flowers takes on the aura of a death ritual, with the speaker's coming to anticipate an end to a marital union as a release. Annie now can set about the project of reestablishing an autonomous self.

"do not be afraid of no" offers the weapon of "no" in the battle of domestic epic. The speaker in "do not be afraid of no" calls for active resistance against patriarchal dominance. And women who answer "yes" are akin to the dead on the battlefields of domestic epic. Those who bear the emblems of the war cannot articulate a rallying battle cry to their comrades. The ideal heroine takes the route of active resistance, preferring even

indecision to facile acquiescence: "It is brave to be involved,/To be not fearful to be unresolved." (91). Yet, for Annie Allen, the process is a gradually real battle of which she can only make the first step by imaging dissent: "Her new wish was to smile/When answers took no airships, walked a while" (93). It is only after her progression through the "Anniad" and "The Womanhood," that she can move beyond a facile idealism. Claudia Tate argues that Annie's life "reflects a virtual absence of acts of conscious volition and emotional complexity. In fact, her life seems to be composed of her deliberate refusal both to act decisively and to reveal her emotional responses" (141). I assert, on the contrary, that Annie advances decisively toward more self- confidence as she develops. Rather than refusing to act, Annie only finds space to articulate the vision of self after she has resolved her personal conflicts within the domestic realm.

"The Anniad" serves as the pivot of *Annie Allen*, revealing the heroine's epic battle to reconfigure her identity apart from her husband. It is steeped in epic tradition, with Brooks employing conventions of epic formula, such as the use of the Greek suffix -ad in the title to represent descent from a period of time, a group, or an epic in celebration (Melham 61-62); the use of

esoteric language ; as well as her decisions to begin the poem with an invocation and start the narrative in medias res. Brooks, opening the poem in medias res, reinscribes her epic formula so effectively that the term domestic epic is more fitting than either traditional epic or a mock epic. Her task is not simply to insert her voice with the traditional strain of epic. The decades of the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties, according to Andre Bernstein, "speak to the tribe" of, in this case, women who battled for survival under the weight of racial and gender discrimination. Domestic epic is a fitting term because it encapsulates women's desire to define their independent role as persons. Women claimed the right to become warriors in a quest to defend their homes as land and to rewrite cultural scripts that limited their democratic roles in the society. "The Anniad" thus serves as the epitome of domestic epic.

Brooks originally titled the epic poem the "Hesteriad." Hestia, a possible derivative of Hester, refers to the Greek goddess of the hearth, a symbol of the home and the kitchen (Melham 56) D.H. Melham says that Brooks's change in the title to "Annie Allen" distances the work from domesticity: "Hearth-oriented she is not" (56). Actually, Brooks underscores the centrality of the

domestic epic quest by evoking resonances with Virgil's *Aeneid*, emphasizing a need to establish a new nation or homeland in the midst of loss and self-sacrifice. For Annie Allen, the new homeland is an expansive space for female creative growth and expression within the domestic sphere. Just as Aeneas had to fight many excruciating battles, to lose his great love Dido, to survive a journey into hell, and to establish the foundations for a nation he does not live to see flourish in order to fulfill his epic destiny, so too does Annie Allen have to lose her husband Tan-Man, survive disillusionment with the confining restriction of socially scripted roles of womanhood, and call for a reconciliation in race, class, and gender.

"The Anniad," written in Brooks's trademark version of rhyme royal, is composed of septets and contains forty three stanzas (Melham 62). She alternates between rhyme and half-rhyme and closing couplets to lend a sense of unity to her domestic epic. In the epic tradition, Brooks begins "The Anniad" with an invocation in which the reader is asked to

Think of sweet and chocolate
Left to folly or fate,
Whom the higher gods forgot,
Whom the lower gods berate.

Physical and underfed

Fancying on the featherbed

What was never and is not. (99)

Annie is presented to the reader as a confection—sweet and delicate—at the mercy of the gods in whose hands her fate rests. Romantic daydreaming occupies the majority of her time. As B.J. Bolden points out, higher gods may refer to the Euro American society that fails to acknowledge a young black woman, while lower gods represent the black community that acknowledges her existence through criticism (97). The line “What was never and is not” speaks of both the past and the present that are stifled and constricted—with imagination being the only outlet for freedom of expression for an African American woman. The line moreover reifies awareness that a vise now constricts the level of possibilities to which Annie can attain within the domestic realm. In the opening stanzas of the epic poem, it is the paladin who is described as expansive and “ocean-eyed”(99).

The potential within Annie is dormant, only to be awakened by the paladin:

Think of ripe and rompabout,

All her harvest buttoned in,

All her ornaments untried;

Waiting for the paladin

Who shall rub her secrets out

And behold the hinted bride. (99)

Annie's creative abilities and talents are corked, as opposed to the freedom experienced by "the independent man" in the Bronzeville volume, who must avoid connection to women, and by extension, the domestic at all cost for the sanctity of her existential self. All of Annie's frustrations are bottled within. In a landscape that socially and politically negates her position as a black woman, she deploys her imagination as a weapon to maintain her sense of self-worth. In this way, she is able to appreciate her brown skin tone and African features.

Annie's romantically idealized lover Tan Man enters the domain subsequently and shifts her idealized musings. Just as in "the birth in a narrow room," Annie enters a new world that will potentially circumscribe her life and her freedom. Under the spell of infatuation, Annie gives the paladin control over her life, and he promptly "consumes her where she falls/In her guilt humility" (100).

Influenced by fairytale traditions such as Snow White and Cinderella, she eagerly accepts her new secondary position, believing it to be golden and solid, yet actually "guilt" with superficiality. Her romantic idealism leads her to place Tan Man on a pedestal:

In the beam his track diffuses
Down her dusted demi-gloom
Like a nun of crimson ruses
She advances.

...

Which she makes a chapel of. (101)

The realities of poverty and racism derail the Cinderella story. The "lower room" signifies a state of domesticity and marriage that erodes her opportunities for artistic growth. The socially scripted roles of women as sacrificing self and personal desire in favor of home and family comes to the forefront while the rebellious nature of Annie Allen seemingly lies dormant. An undercurrent of subversive power goes almost unacknowledged. What Brooks does here is raise the consciousness of her readers, possibly reserved warriors of female self assertion. The more Annie sleepwalks to the dangers of idealism, the more that we as readers are aware of the impending battle, for both the writer and reader know the epic conventions, though the persona does not. Such is the basis of structural irony understood between the narrator and her audience. Hortense Spillers recognizes the impetus indirectly: "We protest on Annie's behalf. We want the dream to come true, but Brooks does not concede, and that

she does not confirm the intent of the poem: a parodic portrayal of sexual pursuit and disaster" (226). Actually, Brooks has a larger intent in that she reveals the forces that lead women, of necessity, figuratively to arm themselves in the battle for space and autonomy.

When Tan Man, the husband, returns from World War II, he is a former shadow of himself. He projects his frustration and impotence on to Annie and views his marriage as stifling. Like "the independent man" from *A Street in Bronzeville*, he is "corked" within a narrow space. After his years at war, Tan Man returns not as the conquering hero but rather as a socially limited black man who receives his submissive wife as reward. Her introspection seems to make her far less impotent than he—she is, on the contrary, the bard who exposes the irony of modern Troy—world war without any real rhyme or reason. Tan Man distances himself from Annie: "wonders how /Woman fits for recompense./Not that woman?" (104). The emphatic "not" in conjunction with "woman" emphasizes the perception of woman as being inadequate to fulfill the existential needs of a man. Woman becomes synonymous with the restrictions and narrow confines of the domestic sphere. Annie is thus objectified, something to be bartered or exchanged as

"recompense" (104), such as money or reward. In his disillusionment, Tan Man turns to other women for comfort.

After Tan Man's betrayal, Annie sets off upon a quest of her own for independent identity. First, she seeks solace in nature, through all of the various seasons. While reading the classics, she is bombarded with images that evoke the maternal:

Petals at her breast and knee...

"Then incline to children-dear!

Pull the halt the magnificence near,

Sniff the perfumes, ribbonize

Gay bouquet most satiny; (107)

In this instance, domesticity provides consolation during times of turmoil and re-examination. Annie's sense of anguish and betrayal is akin to that of the mythological Dido, queen of Carthage. After the fall of Troy, Dido offers respite to Aeneas, the future founder of Rome. She falls madly in love with him, and the two enjoy a brief period of domestic tranquility. When recalled to his epic destiny by the gods, Aeneas leaves the heartbroken Dido to continue his journey. In her despair, Dido kills herself, and the fire from her funeral pyre is the last sight that Aeneas sees as he leaves Carthage. Yet, unlike Dido, Annie does not succumb to a sense of bitterness or despair.

When a repentant Tan Man, who is ill and dying, returns home, Annie forgives him. She is no Dido, who, having revisited Aeneas in purgatory, turns her back on his apologies. Annie's romantic dreams had dissipated, and "She remarks his [Tan Man] feathers off" (108), seeing him as a flawed mortal as opposed to the idealized immortal, or perhaps only demi-god, of her earlier imaginings. With his death comes her continued responsibility of raising her children. She "Washes coffee-cups and hair,/Sweeps, determines what to wear." (109). Now she determines for herself the duties of life. The epic thus ends with Annie "Kissing in her kitchenette/ The minuets of memory" (109). She has begun the process of reconciliation within her domestic space and reclaimed her autonomy.

As the final poem in the "Appendix to The Anniad: Leaves from a Loose Leaf War Diary," "the sonnet ballad" has a battle-weary Annie Allen recount the destruction that war has brought to her life, including her visions of an ideal marriage. The lament: "Oh, mother, mother, where is happiness?" serves to underscore the sense of loss that has resulted from war. Death becomes a "coquettish" courtesan "whose impudent and strange/Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)/ Can make a hard man hesitate and change" (109). Resonating with similarities to the poem

"do not be afraid of no,'" "Annie Allen" presents Tan Man as a beaten veteran enamored of death, and as the subject of an African American female narrator who can determine the fates of men. The reversal of male and female polarity serves to re-empower the feminine posture. Some critics have found the ending of "The Anniad" to express resignation. George Kent says that Annie Allen has moved from romanticized youth "to the prosaic and disillusioning realities provided by married life" (94). But Annie experiences a rebirth of consciousness that invites her into a world that bears little resemblance to the "prosaic": it is, on the contrary, gritty, bold, and subversive.

"The Womanhood," the final segment of *Annie Allen*, expresses a reawakening of maternal instincts. Herein the bearing of children as a pivotal rite of passage for woman. Moreover as Gladys Margaret Williams asserts: "...in these sonnets she [Brooks] sings with full throat, communicating to the uninitiated the strains of survival upon a woman, a mother, confronted by hostile circumstances" (40).

People who have no children can be hard:

Attain a mail of ice and insolence

Need not pause in the fire, and in no sense

Hesitate in the hurricane to guard (115)

Those without children are outfitted with an armor of ice and insolence that lends safety but also arrogance marked by a lack of genuine humility and magnificence

Just as Virgil's *Aeneid* spanned Heaven to hell, so too does *Annie Allen* map the landscape of human epic. Children redefine the battlefield in which the individual operates, shaping attitudes and behaviors. Of the childless, the speaker asserts:

And when wide world is bitten and bewarred

They perish purely, waving their spirits hence

Without a trace of grace, or of offense

To laugh or fail, diffident, wonder-starred.(115)

Indifference hardly substitutes for human bonding.

"Bitten" and "bewarred" by life's tumults, those without children seemingly escape the engagement of existence. But the very same domesticity that imprisons women ironically creates in them a profound sense of human suffering that should empower them to lead a more peaceful world.

In the second poem of the sonnet quintet, "what shall I give my children? Who are poor," the legacy for one's children comes to the forefront. Both material and spiritual legacies are at question here, as Brooks first looks at the battle within the domestic sphere for children who are poor. African American children did not have equal

access to education or economic opportunities. As the speaker asks in the opening octet:

What shall I give my children? Who are poor,
Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,
Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
No velvet and no velvety velour;
But who have begged me for a brisk contour,
Crying that they are quasi-contraband
Because unfinished, graven by hand
Less than angelic, admirable or sure. (116)

The terms "lepers" and "quasi-contraband" highlight the position of poor children as pariahs or anomalies in the land of plenty. Significantly, the phrase "quasi-contraband" conjures up connections to warfare, with the children serving as unwanted spoils of victory who demand, by their very existence, sustenance and support.

Frustrated by her inability to change the circumstances of her children, the speaker opens the sestet by lamenting: "My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device./But I lack my proper stone /And plentitude of plan shall not suffice" (116). Like a female David who has no "proper stone," the speaker feels at a disadvantage against the goliath-like problems of poverty and racism. In this section, the speaker decries the inability of plan to

overcome the realities of inequities in gender, race, and class relations. She is left with the knowledge that neither "plan," "love," or "grief" will be sufficient to "ratify" or open doors of opportunity and better lives for her children.

Many critics see the fourth sonnet in the sequence, "First Fight. Then Fiddle," as a centrifugal pivot of the volume. Specifically, B.J. Bolden contends that it is at this point that "the mother rises from supine helplessness to a commanding stance of would-be-warrior as a model of survival for her children "(109). D. H. Melham sees a similar significance in the poem, arguing that "War has moved from foreign battlegrounds to home, to the self that must shape the dignity of its destiny before creating other beauty" (72). The opening lines of the poem call for warriors to: "First fight. Then fiddle," with Brooks emphasizing the immediacy of war and its centrality in defining life in terms of turmoil. The speaker warns that before artistic endeavors such as fiddling can be enjoyed, one must battle. Women must fight socially scripted roles that limit their creativity and envision a domestic existence that incorporates and celebrates the connection to self and family. Only after this hard fought battle is won can they then "play [the] violin with grace." It is

then that artistic voice can come to the forefront and flourish.

Brooks ends *Annie Allen* with a call for a new order in race, gender, and class relations, asking: "Grant me that I am human, that I hurt,/That I cry" (139). Invoking the wisdom of past generations, the narrator advocates a mutual estate," that ushers in a new order of universal acceptance. She serves finally as modern oracle, modern in the sense of transcending boundaries of prescription and limitation but oracle in the sense of prophetic vision. The chasm between the classic and the modern means that writers in each ensuing generation must rewrite an epic vision that resonates with the citizens of that specific time and place, but the poetic forms of the variable times share a similar task to connect the past, present, and future through the universality of human experience: "And the report is /What's old is wise" (140). In these epic times we are asked to

... Rise

Let us combine. There are no magic or elves

Or timely godmothers to guide us. We are lost, must

Wizard a track though our own screaming weed. (140)

No longer deceived by romantic fantasies, Annie readily admits that "There are no magics or elves/Or timely

godmothers to guide us" (140). To achieve an epic return and human community, people must work together to achieve a peace at the journey's end of "our own screaming weed" (140).

In *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen*, Gwendolyn Brooks skillfully lays the foundation for the domestic epic, a new subgenre that reinscribes the traditional form to reinvent a cultural narrative that moves domesticity to the very center of public discourse. She retrieves the figures of women from the margins of power. She reconfigures the traditional paradigms of domesticity for her turbulent times of the post-war era. With *A Street in Bronzeville* in 1945 and *Annie Allen* in 1949, Brooks transformed the landscape of American and female poetry. Her revolutionary vision would eventually culminate in *The Bean Eaters* and *Mecca*.

CHAPTER 3

"OFFENSE, DEFENSE, AND RESPONSE":

SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES OF DOMESTIC EPIC IN BROOKS'S *THE BEAN EATERS* AND *IN THE MECCA*

The Bean Eaters, published in 1960, marks a transition point in the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, the domestic epic warfare motif moving from the undercurrents to the surface, buoyed by the tumultuous times of the Civil Rights Movement and the Korean and Vietnam Wars, as well as social ills such as sexism, racism, and poverty. Encapsulated within the title itself is the reference to Homeric epic tradition, *The Bean Eaters* bearing parallels to the Lotus Eaters, the inhabitants of the mythological land who enjoyed lives of indolence and idyllic contentment, often resulting in fatal apathy. The Lotus plant, with its drug-like effects, was the emblem of the lives of the residents of the land. In the same way, beans become the symbol of residents of Bronzeville.

Beans, both nourishing and hardy, yet bland, suggest the domestic realm and the dual thrusts of both a sustaining power and an inertia that threaten to stifle the hopes and dreams of Chicago. During difficult economic

times such as the Depression and war time years, beans became a staple of daily meals, sustaining the population of the city and the country as whole. Yet, beans, with their bland taste, suggest inertia in the lack of variety and monotony that constant bean eating imply. Notably, Brooks come to wield beans as an emblem of implosive potential power in her poetry, an art she mastered early as she literally cooked inventive meals of beans for her family as a means of nourishment in times of economic difficulties (Kent 33).

The Bean Eaters has more of an overtly social consciousness or polemical overture in the poems, as evidenced by its composition: one third of the thirty-five poems in the volume are political in content (Melham 102). Brooks's remarks during a 1974 interview reveal this perspective. After agreeing that being black is "political," she added: "Of course, to be anything in this world as it is 'socially' constructed is 'political.' Whites, too, and all other distinctions, operate politically as to offense, defense, and response—even when they don't know it'" (Melham 101).

In *The Bean Eaters* women resort to strategies of "offense, defense, and response" to establish existential freedom. As a part of the socially conscious vision,

Brooks mentions specific political events and contexts throughout *The Bean Eaters* in order to raise social consciousness. In addition, there is a shift in style, as Brooks employs more irregularities in terms of meter and form, moving to employ more lyrics and free verse in her poetry (Melham 101). Particularly in terms of the domestic epic motif, we see a flourishing as to the roles of women as mothers and barometers of the social and political impetus of the period. Brooks was criticized for moving towards polemics instead of lyricism, as Melham notes, "Along with specific issues of consciousness, gender in *The Bean Eaters* also tempers the heroic role. ...But women undergo a subtle metamorphosis and heroic definition throughout the books, with transition apparent here"(103).

In this chapter I shall inquire into the ways that Brooks employs the domestic epic as a vehicle to restore what Ehrenreich and English and refer to a "gynocentric" model in which women's work is indispensable to the survival of the family. Through personae such as Mrs. Smalls, the Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat, the Egg Boiler, and Miss Sallie, Brooks attributes dignity and honor to women. In *The Bean Eaters* and *In the Mecca* Brooks shifts the epic quest from that finding a home to that of active efforts to maintain the safety and comfort of the home.

Women, in their roles of wives, mothers, and creators of domestic space, thus stand at the forefront of this endeavor as defenders of their homefront.

Brooks begins the volume with an elegiac poem to her father, "A dryness is upon the house/My father loved and tended," locating the domestic home as central, leaving the legacy of defending it and all that it represents as for future generations. She fuses, in other words, the processes of domestic nurturing and public commemoration. Just as David Anderson "Translates to public Love/Old private charity," Brooks interweaves public protest with an articulate vision of self-assertion.

Early in *The Bean Eaters*, she marks the beginning the of domestic warfare through odyssey of women who escape the hell of male domination. In "The Explorer," the first poem of the volume, a male, wrestles with the magnitude of the freedoms of decision. But the persona "My Little 'Bout Town Girl" relishes the opportunity to explore and move beyond the domestic home front. She has moved beyond the reach of the patriarchal eye: "None shall secure her save the late the/Detective fingers of the moon" (328).

"The Bean Eaters," the title poem, deals with a couple, lulled not by forgetfulness or apathetic indulgence like the mythological Lotus Eaters whom Odysseus encounters

on his epic adventures, but rather by memories. The couple appears as an "old yellow pair," color emphasizing the faded quality of their lives. But, despite the limited activities of their lives, they are not defeated. Daily chores sustain their life force: "they keep on putting on their clothes/And putting things away." Memory encapsulates their humanity: "Remembering, with twinkings and twinges, As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that/is full of beads and receipts, and dolls and clothes/tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes" (330). Each of these items serves as an aspect of life—a past battle of domestic existence fought and won. Beads represent jewelry; receipts mark past purchases of items of sustenance; dolls imply the presence of children, and clothes affirm human presences past. Tobacco crumbs suggest a male presence, while vases and fringes add a touch of femininity, hence the desire to embellish a home, to make it uniquely one's own.

Unlike Sadie, who "scraped life with a fine tooth comb," living life to its fullest, Old Mary feels, in the poem titled for her, the pull of travel, like a Penelope figure perpetually at home. She laments: "It hurts to know/I shall not go/Cathedral-hunting in Spain/Nor

cherrying in Michigan or Maine" (332). Now at the end of her days, she acknowledges the missed opportunities.

"A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi While a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" culminates Brooks vision of domestic epic warfare in *The Bean Eaters*. Through the real life story of Emmett Till¹, a fourteen year old boy lynched for supposedly wolf whistling at a white woman in Mississippi in 1955, Brooks sketches a landscape of domestic conflict that pervades the entire work by accomplishing an ironic twist through the supposed white victim's point of view. It is only through the course of the poem that the fairy tale speaker realizes that she is engulfed in a domestic war that shapes her life. Much as the African American Annie Allen uses romantic daydreams to sublimate longings for the creative opportunities of women, so too does the white southern woman use romantic imaginings to understand her macho husband who helps lead the lynching mob. The poem, in fact, opens with the Mississippi woman's imagining herself as heroine in a ballad that she does not understand the conventions of:

¹ The murder of Emmett Till and subsequent acquittal of the accused murders galvanized both the North and the South and served as a pivotal marker if the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. The case perhaps affected Brooks most deeply as Till and his mother were residents of the Chicago area.

"Herself: the milk-white maid, the maid mild /of the ballad" (333). Her ruminations distract her from completing chores such as cooking breakfast and tending to the needs of her family. Yet, the lapse in attention leads to her burning the bacon accidentally—causing mishaps without intention, just as she inadvertently causes the death of the young Emmett Till. She hides the bacon in the can just as the body of Till was hidden in the river.

Ironically, in this war, the villain that she needs protection against does not fit the traditional fairy tale description: She is disturbed by the marring of the fairy tale: "The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified when the Dark Villain was a blackish boy/of fourteen" (334). Her imaginary position as a damsel in distress is threatened. As the Mississippi Mother continues to ruminate about past events, she also begins to question the legitimacy of her "Fine Prince" husband who, despite his status as a "grown up," and the wisdom accorded with age, decided to attack and kill the youth. Almost reluctantly, she admits that there was something "Ridiculous in the picture of the Fine Prince" "rushing to hack down (unhorsed)/That little foe" (335).

The boundaries of reality and fairy tale become blurred and the Mississippi Mother cannot clearly delineate

her space: she questions who is the enemy and even the justification of racial war: "So much had happened, she could not remember now what/that foe had done/Against her, or if anything had been done" (335). The domestic war of existence that she had become familiar with is one of weapons for survival such as cooking well, taking pride in the "eggs and sour-/milk biscuits[that]/Did well" (333-334) and "her new quince preserves" (334), and maintaining her appearance, the "beautiful wife" looking in the mirror "with her comb and lipstick" (335). Such images are no longer adequate as defense mechanisms to protect her position as "milk-white maid: "For sometimes she fancied he looked at her as though/Measuring her. As if he considered, Had she been worth It?"(335). She feels she is suddenly losing the battle to retain her position as the representative of ideal white southern womanhood.

Her dilemma derives from her dual and irreconcilable roles as both domestic and racial hero, for the former would insist that she champion the child rights and rites of the black youth whose death she has unwittingly provoked. But her racial role of the chivalric southern white woman in distress forces her in another direction. She must play the part of Trojan women, the violated

daughters of Priam in the Greek legend. She is therefore both heroine and whore, guardian and betrayer:

The one thing in the world that she did know and knew
With terrifying clarity was that her composition
Had disintegrated. That, although the pattern
prevailed,

The breaks were everywhere. That she could think
Of no thread capable of the necessary
Sew-work (335)

She has failed to write the artistry of her existence. To her chagrin, she discovers that the domestic duties that define her role as wife and mother no longer work, as she can "Think/Of no thread capable of the necessary/Sew-work" to secure her position and definition of self. She is unable to secure her role as maternal protector. When her young son is harshly slapped by her husband for throwing the molasses pitcher at his brother, she becomes overwhelmed by a sense of impotence. She cannot speak, but can only stare at her "baby-child." And she thinks inadvertently of the blood that must have covered the young son of the Bronzeville Mother. Her only thought is of "a lengthening red, a red that had no end" (337). Stifled by rage and frustration, she issues no overt protest—fear is "tying her as with iron" (338). Despite

her children's whimpering, she "could not protect them" (338). "Gripped in the claim" of her husband's hands, she is paralyzed by flashes of red of blood, "seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly,/Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,/And over all of Earth and Mars" (338). Mars, of course, is the brutal god of war. Accountability and guilt wave over her. In her own way, the burdens would almost seem to equal the twelve labors of Hercules or the great weight which the titan Atlas bore. Memories of the courtroom scene rush to her mind, and she cannot escape the image of the "Decapitated exclamation points in that other Woman's [Till's mother's] eyes" (339).

Psychologically she positions herself in silent opposition to her husband, the false-Fine Prince, who has caused death to one mother's child and pain to her own: "a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,/ And its perfume enclasped them—big, / Bigger than all magnolias" (338). The initial chivalry, so steeped in the Southern denial of Evil, gives way to the modern reality of race in America.

"The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" complements the vision in a "Bronzeville Mother." In pieta-like style, the Bronzeville mother "kisses her killed boy" (340), implying analogues to the Virgin Mary clasping the body of the slain Messiah. Once more the slain child

points to the certainty of revolutionary change in the world, "Chaos in windy grays/through a red prairie" (340). Eerily, the references to the red room the mother sits in and the red prairie reinforce the guilt that seeps over the Mississippi Mother in the earlier poem. It is indeed the romanticized ballad.

The poem titled "Mrs. Small" reveals the complexity of the posture, with the name itself suggesting a narrow existence. But, as Mootry astutely points out, Mrs. Small's first name Delphine underscores an innate wisdom and shrewdness as a housewife. Small's preoccupied behavior takes on the importance of a Delphic priestess, who rather than looking for money as the insurance is, looks for truth. (182). She says:

"I don't know where my mind is this morning,"
Said Mrs. Small, scorning
Apologies! For there was so much
For which to apologize! Oh such
Mountain of things...(341)

While the speaker in "The Womanhood " seems to plead for a mutual understanding among races and genders in order to better the community, Mrs. Small stands firm in her feelings of justification and the right to dignity in her own home. She is on her own metaphoric turf now resisting

the patronizing insurance man, who due to his position as white male, assumes gender privilege. In fact, she "scorn[s]" apologizing for her existential position as black and woman, locating the insurance man's visit as a minor interruption in her fulfilling her domestic duties as wife and mother, quickly returning to six daughters and four sons. Her "world's business" (341) occupies, as she is engaged in the domestic chore of her making an apple pie, the consummate symbol of American identity. Just as she makes an apple pie, through the nurture of her children and husband, she helps grow future generations to fulfill the promise of the American dream.

"In Jesse Mitchell's *Mother*" portrays a conflict between a mother and daughter who represent different generations of womanhood, but who share common issues and challenges to their existential identity. The daughter rebels against domestic chores and obligations, seeing them as stifling and limiting, while the mother takes refuge in her light skin color as a sign of distinction. Although their positions are linked by poverty and racism, the two women mistakenly emphasize the differences in their relative positions. Jessie thinks of her pregnant mother, swollen with another child, as: "a pleasant sort of fool without the least iron" (344). The mother, on the contrary,

reflects upon her daughter's potential threats to her autonomy: "So straight! As if nothing could ever bend her over" (344). But precisely the men who bend women will limit the daughter's reach for growth and expansion. For a brief moment, the mother astutely recognizes their similarities, "Comparisons shattered her heart, ate at her bulwarks" (344). Sometimes domestic generations are apparently incapable of understanding that they stand on the same side of a sexual war.

"The Lovers of the Poor" serves as a precursor for the epic poem *In the Mecca*. Going to the tenement building for the ladies of the Ladies' Betterment League represents a descent into hell. Yet, for the residents of Bronzeville, it represents a homeland that must be defended. When the rich, white ladies try to patronize a "citizeness" of the building, "Who, arms akimbo, almost fills a door" (349), they are enveloped in the domestic reality of the resident's life, seeing "All tumbling children, quilts dragged to the floor/And tortured thereover, potato peelings, soft-/Eyed kitten, hunched-up, haggard, to-be-hurt" (351). Decimated with guilt and shame at this stark, realistic picture of the challenges of domestic existence for one family, they move towards the door, encountering the metaphorical hell of " the puzzled wreckage/Of the

middle passage, and urine and stale shames"(352). The ladies rise out of the hell of the ghetto, looking not to improve the lives of those in desperate need, but rather to dispense their "loathe-love"(352) on some less disturbing area. Black women, like the "citizeness," are left in the hell of poverty and deprivation to eke out a means of survival for themselves and their children in a world which,(see "what shall I give my children") considers them "lepers" in their own country, "quasi, contraband" whose existence is unacknowledged.

In "The Crazy Woman" the blues of life have changed a gay song to one of gray—dealing with the everyday challenges of sexism and racism has made her a battlemaid whose warrior cry" (360)is a song that people do not understand and dub crazy. And yet it is this gray song that keeps the speaker sane, causing people to stare. The song is her articulation of protest against a world that would stifle the female voice.

"A Penitent Considers Another Coming of Mary" reinforces the power of the mother. As Melham notes, the poem "furthers the heroic conception of women, specifically through the maternal role" (121). The poem is written with wartime impetus in mind, with Mary's granting clemency to men as a natural expression of her forgiveness and maternal

power. The word "ratify" is particularly important because, through Mary's wielding of the power to approve, she is empowered to bestow legitimacy and formal sanction to the world. The existential center is therefore shifted from the male Messiah to the female mother who would "forgive, as Mothers may" (366). Mothers promote change in the world. The advent of a new world order would emerge from female agency.

"Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat" continues the tradition established in poems such as "The Queen of the Blues" and in the novel *Maud Martha* by presenting a black woman forced, due to economic circumstances, to serve in the role as domestic worker. To the white woman employer, through whose eyes much of the action appears, the black woman seems an unleashed and exotic power who represents "The semi-assault of that extraordinary blackness" (367). The language of warfare establishes the polarity between the positions of the two women as the speaker lends dimension to the woman by giving her the red hat, an emblem of rebellion and self-assertion in bleak circumstances. Implying the hardships that have forced her to work in another woman's kitchen, she has "eyes of heavy care" (376). Despite a similarity of gender, the white female cannot identify with her plight. Just as in the "at the

burns coopers'" section of *Maud Martha*, the kitchen becomes the synecdoche of the battle for existential identity for women.

The white matron sees her son's affection for the black maid as a defection to another camp. Once the battle lines are drawn, the white woman looks for strategies of counterattack, and the child clings to the warmth and concern of the Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat. The white mother is vanquished in a needless war, devastated by the picture of "Child, big black woman, pretty kitchen towels." Once more the white woman can see her gendered ally as only a threat and enemy. Unlike the Mississippi Mother, she achieves no epiphany of commonality.

"Naomi" evinces greater exploration and self-articulation for women. Like the biblical analogue, the persona, who is willing to move beyond the boundaries of what is known and familiar, instinctively employs guerilla strategies, recognizing, like the women in "the date" and "Jessie Mitchell's Mother," that life's meaning "is not among the dishes and brooms" (374). While parentheses are usually employed to provide supplemental information, they express the ironic understatement of Naomi's existential identity. The demeaning of the creative achievement and contributions of women has almost literally become a side

note to history. Brooks uses parentheses to understate the importance of the information within brackets.

"Callie Ford" deconstructs romantic illusions. At first, the speaker seems to advocate a following of traditional ideas of courtship and shaping her happiness around a whirlwind romance with a "man whose eyes are brown" (375). Holding hands, touching, and shared kisses express traditional signs of courtship. While the female is "very sweet" implying complacency and docility, the male is sufficiently "clever" to be a thinker and leader. The social scripts collapse in a return to reality and everyday living—the dawn, representative of a new phase of their lives together. Having to live up to their assigned sexual roles leads the woman and man to "hate each other forever"(375), the binary having destroyed the romantic vision with which both they and the poem began.

Through the form of a Shakespearean sonnet, the speaker in "The Egg Boiler" contemplates how boiling an egg is "a heavy art"—emblematic of creative possibility within. The juxtaposition is a startling and delightfully original one: "You come upon it as an artist should, / With rich-eyed passion, and with straining heart." (382). Hence the cook is a creator deeply dedicated to her craft. Regarding

the prescribed roles for women at the time and even now, Brooks's insight is revolutionary.

Egg boiling, figuratively speaking, is an art that transcends gender binaries—"Is your Enough and art for any man" (382). Perhaps it is this deconstruction of gender roles in the domestic sphere that has encouraged many critics to identify the Egg Boiler as male. Says William Hansel: "The man cooking the egg is a poet of sorts—he cuts his "poetry from wood—in that he brings passion and love and skill to his task" (271). Even the white female critic Melham argues that "The man presents a narrowly utilitarian view of life and art" (126). On the contrary, Erlene Stetson asserts about the poem : "It explores counter-bourgeois values while it applauds the achievement of the black homemaker...Boiling an egg is a simple and yet rich metaphor for the world that woman inhabit" (xx).

By suggesting that both men and women can celebrate domestic tasks, Brooks reveals the power of the human within presumably domestic drudgery. She liberates the role of cook into that of artist and thereby that of domestic woman into that of creator, turning the traditional sexual roles on their heads. That her brilliance in doing so is so subtle makes the achievement no less true. And she has been far more gifted in nuances

of the sort than even many of her best female critics have yet to appreciate. Homage to creativity and art must be paid literally at home and often in the kitchen.

In the Mecca represents a monument in Brooks's domestic epic —pulsing with the turmoils and conflicts of the 1960s. Published in 1968, the epic marks a critical stage in her artistic growth. She experienced a renewed sense of racial consciousness, after her attendance at the Second Annual Black Writer's Conference at Fisk University in 1967. Galvanized by the energy and commitment of politically conscious writers at the conference, she became very sensitive to the urgency of the times (*Report from Part One* 167). Thus, not surprisingly as Melham notes, "*In the Mecca* bears the spiritual imprint of the turbulent sixties" (156). The full blown Civil Rights Movement, burgeoning protests against the Vietnam War, and the Feminist Movement all coalesced in a vision of the era. Says the poet in her inscription: "I was to be a Watchful Eye; a Tuned Ear; a Super-Reporter" (Melham 157). She was therefore a griot whose role was to preserve the tale of history.

With 807 lines, "*In the Mecca*" is Brooks' longest poem. It is divided into fifty-six stanzas of varying lengths. For her most sustained epic endeavor, Brooks employs free verse as well as variations of slant, internal

and random rhyme schemes. Brooks also uses deviations from standard capitalization to infuse modernist techniques into her vision, speaking of the birth of a new world order.

The Mecca building serves as an emblem of lost potential and disillusionment in the modern era. Originally designed as "a splendid palace, a showplace of Chicago" (404), the Mecca had deteriorated and become an overcrowded housing project. The long poem opens with what the building has become: "a great gray hulk of brick topped by an ungainly smokestack, ancient and enormous, filling half of the block north of Thirty-fourth Street between State and Dearborn" juxtaposed with the grand vision of the original glory of the building. A resident tellingly confesses: "There comes a time when what has been can never be again" (404). With a change in the world order has come a need for a redefinition of self and a new order.

Brooks's innovations to epic form are that the reader must translate the antiquity of quest into modernity. And the reader is actually the shared ego of the heroine: This sense of change and disruption is evident in the opening lines: "Sit where the light corrupts your face/Mies Van der Rohe retires from grace. / And the fair fables fall" (407). Light fragments the mythic tale of traditional American values. Van der Rohe, the architect of the Illinois

Institute of Technology, the very building facing the Mecca, only serves to remind the reader of the way that the slum betrays its aesthetic grandeur. His lessons and ideals have dissipated. Space, nurture, and Nature—the healthy requisites of domestic harmony—have all disappeared. Mecca therefore failed to provide a home to the people piled into its huge confines.

Mrs. Sallie Smith, protagonist and questing knight, expresses the attributes of the heroic. Her quest —to go home—shows her life pursuit: to anchor her weary soul. The narrator's juxtaposition of "home" with "Mecca" emphasizes textual ironies. Clearly, the ideality and reality of home conflict with each other. The "sick and influential" stair represents her home as blighted. Mrs. Sallie appears as "A fragmentary attar and armed coma./A fugitive attar and a district hymn" (407). She is an oxymoron, an "armed coma" (407). Laurel Smith writes: "The notions of "fragment" and "fugitive" suggest something not fully realized about this woman; the "coma" reflects a lack of consciousness or another definition, some outer ring beyond the core" (118).

As Sallie ascends the stairs, one encounters women who have used divergent strategies of survival. St. Julia, whose name is Latin for "Jove's descendant," revises the

23rd psalm, " And I lie late/past the still pastures. And meadows. He's [the Lord's] the comfort/and wine and piccalilli for my soul./He hunts me up the coffee for my cup"(408). She uses food imagery to conjure up her relationship to God, identifying the spiritual source of her sustenance.

To Brooks, sustenance is physical and psychological food that sustains the body and soul. Just as beans serve as an emblem of survival in *The Bean Eaters*, coffee, ham hocks, yams, and even Doublemint gum connect the residents of the Mecca to their identity as African Americans. Women also use food as an outward display of the fulfillment of their duties as wives and mothers. Thus, the impact of food on the world of the women of the Mecca is monumental.

Ida, whose name is a Germanic derivative of work and labor, as the poem subtly alludes, has led the life of a domestic warrior. Her husband, Prophet Williams, bears a striking resemblance to Chaucer's corrupt Summoner and Pardoner. Such pressures wear Ida down: "she was a skeleton./...a bone./...died in self-defense" (408). Her wifely role seems important, if for no other reason than this is probably the first time in Brooks's oeuvre that death appears as a viable option for self-esteem, and ironically, self-preservation. The speaker achieves the authority of a

Greek chorus: "(Kinswomen!/ Kinswomen!!)/Ida died alone"(408). In this instance, women have become a nation and a people who support each other in times of war. Pat Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, emphasizes the importance of networks of women, describing the processes of "mothering and other mothering" and the ethics of caring in which women look after one another and share childrearing duties, regardless of blood line relations(189) as a pivot of the female community (sometimes minimalized by racial difference as we have seen). It is this lack of mothering and "other-mothering," as well as an ethic of caring that contribute to Pepita's tragic fate. None of the women in the Mecca can spare the time to keep an eye out for Pepita. Because Mrs. Sallie does not have this support system, she is forced to become a lone battlemaid, a single warrior without her battalion. She is, in a way, the Greek army without the strength of the sulking Achilles whose return to the fray must take place to assure victory.

Mrs. Sallie's ascent to her apartment is marked by a boy breaking glass, shattering the sanctity of the home, foreshadowing the discord that will await her.

Mrs. Sallie makes it home to her apartment and her children. Ironically, it is here that we find the answer to the rhetorical question in *Annie Allen* (1949), "What shall I give my children who are poor?," for the mother returns with "hock of ham" (420). The hearty meal also includes yams and cornbread made with water.

She puts the pieces to boil in white enamel, right
Already with water of many seasoning, as the back
Of the cruel stove. And mustard mesmerized by
Eldest daughter, the Undaunted (she who once
Pushed her thumbs in the eyes of a Thief), awaits
The clever hand. Six ruddy yams abide, and
Cornbread made with water. (410)

Mrs. Sallie is transformed into a conjurer in her kitchen, fighting to make a nourishing meal for her family with the most basic of materials. The legacy of survival has passed on to the eldest daughter, who fights everyday for survival, "push[ing] her thumbs in the eyes of a Thief" in order to protect her family.

The kitchen becomes an albatross around Mrs. Sallie's neck, her "soft antagonist," "headlong tax and mote," and maniac default"—reminding her of the limited sphere in which she lives with small children: "'I want to decorate!" But what is that? A pomade atop a sewage. An

offense./First comes correctness, *then* embellishment!'"

(410). To decorate, and by extension, to shape the world in which she lives expresses her creative talent. But such efforts frustrate her as they did Maud Martha in Brooks's world fifteen years earlier. Smith, who lacks the raw materials to create her motherly art, fails at every turn in her attempts to make a stable home. The women must either stifle the domestic potential or devalue those who have it. Yvonne, who centers her world on providing Doublemint gum for her lover, cannot control the larger environment in which she lives. As a mechanism of self defense, the children dislike signs of home prosperity: they

Hate sewn suburbs;

Hate everything combed and strong; hate people who
Have balls, dolls, mittens and dimity frock and trains
And boxing gloves, picture books, bonnets for Easter.
Lace handkerchief owners are enemies of Smithkind.

(412)

Because the fruits of domestic desire exist far beyond their reach, they are enemies of "Smithkind." Hence the two sides are two nations in conflict—the Greeks and the Trojans.

Melodie Mary feels empathy for the roaches and the grey rat that share a similar fate with the human "trapped in his privacy of pain" (412). The indifference of the world to the plight of the rat and the roach mirrors the imperviousness of the world that fails to deliver "frantic bulletins/when other importances die" (412). The domestic is devalued in favor of the global, just reflecting the indifference that cuts like a knife.

Items of food such as chocolate, ice cream cones, and English muffins signify the inadequacies of Mrs. Sallie's kitchen and her economic position. Yet in their place are staples of African American cuisine—soul food—that succor the embattled psyches of the Smith family. Just as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* utters "Yam I am" to express African American identity, so too do the speaker's greens, ham hocks, and sweet potatoes become emblems of identity construction.

Mrs. Sallie's frustration about what she is unable to provide for her children is projected on the child of her employer. She contemplates assuming the role of mistress instead of the one of maid. She would cherish providing for her children as does her white employer. Pervasive irony emerges: "And I would be my lady I my lady" (415), says Sallie, whose name is a derivative of the Hebrew Sarah,

princess. Her conditional desire of "I would be my lady" advances to the ultimate self-affirmation of "I my lady." As the omniscient narrator says at the end of Miss Sallie's monologue, "What is there to say but everything" (415), speaking of the untapped potential of Miss Sallie's life.

Now Mrs. Sallie discovers the disappearance of her daughter, Pepita from the family epic. Immediately, the question of the girl's fate comes to the forefront, the capital letters ("WHERE PEPITA BE") serving to underscore the seriousness of the situation within a narrative intrusion:

our Woman with her terrible eye,
with iron and feathers in her feet,
with all her songs so lemon-sweet,
with lightning and a candle too (415)

The intrusion jolts the reader into a state of consciousness that demands personal involvement in the poetic drama. The rhyme becomes erratic and discordant. No longer are the rhyming lines in pairs, but rather interspersed throughout the stanzas. The specious assertion, "I fear the end of peace," actually reminds the reader of the lack of peace since the embarkment into the world of Mecca.

Neighbors deny seeing Pepita but acknowledge historical events of the sort. Great Gram, a long time veteran of domestic warfare, remembers the slave cabin in which she grew up: "The floor was dirt./And something crawled on it. That is the thought stays in my mind " (417). The centrality of home comes to the forefront in her vision of her cabin, as her description emphasizes the terror and discomfort the cabin symbolized. The home provided little shelter and no sense of safety. Ever constant was the creeping of an unknown pest that disturbed the peace.

Peace for Brooks is therefore a sign of the psychological and physical security of the home. Brooks uses capitalization and disruptions in rhyme scheme to express shifts in security and comfort. Through imagery, Brooks encapsulates the intense emotional upheaval and anxiety produced by an uncertain environment. Vivid pictures of menacing insects are thus used to signify real danger to the sanctity of the home.

As a means to fight back, the girls become expert "poppers," defenders of their only home. To Great-great Gram, slavery means the lack of the home. As with the slave narrator Harriet Jacobs, Great-great Gram laments the lack of a safe, comfortable domestic realm in which to

live. The quest for an autonomous, secure home extends beyond a desire for material comfort. As Claudia Tate asserts in *Domestic Allegories of Desire*, when women writers such as Jacobs "voiced their black and female desire for self-authorized households for themselves and their children...they simultaneously gave voice to their desire for an equitable society" (24). Thus, importantly, at stake with the home is space for self-determination and self articulation. It is for this reason that the home becomes a powerful symbol of freedom.

Boontsie De Broe, "a Lady/among Last Ladies(418), is enraptured by a world of "massive literatures, of lores,/transactions of old ocean; suffrages" (418) and has little time for human interaction. As power and strength are often tied to active participation within African American female communities, Boontsie's distance locks her into a position of limited power—she has no allies other than massive lores that lock her into a past world that has little connection to the difficulties of life that these women face daily. Her distant pride and learning seem almost irrelevant.

Aunt Dill arrives to provide comfort for the family, who has gotten only assistance from the police in the search for Pepita. Just as her name implies, Aunt Dill

[pickle] bears a sourness of disposition that nullifies her efforts to help. Recounting tales of slain victims of crime , she offers no positive outcome for the dilemma. A parody of self sacrifice, she is "the kind of women you peek at in passing and thank your God or Zodiac you/ May never have to know" (432). Dill has experienced a life of great tragedy herself, as all of her children were stillbirths (432). All she has to hold on to are objects such as "bits of brass and marble," "Franciscan china," and "crocheted dollies (432). She has her religion to sustain her, but even it encourages her "never [to]mature, [nor]to be lovely, lovely" (432). She bears her story of sorrow, ironically, in her efforts to do Good, acting as a scout who warns of impending danger in battle. She is an old soldier who would only fade away. She is a kind of ancient mariner, a Janie Crawford Starks who returns from the muck in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) to speak the imperative truth of her tale. The story she brings back from the front tells the modern truth of Mecca and therefore of the American slum. Her pessimistic and defeatist perspective is nevertheless pivotal.

Hyena, on the contrary, acts as a scavenger of European culture, preferring to dye her hair "sun-gold" (408) than to keep it its natural color. As a mock

Cinderella, she prepares for an imaginary ball that obfuscates the real dangers of the world in which she lives. To her, Pepita is "a puny and putrid little child" (423).

As Mrs. Sallie continues in quest of her daughter, she encounters Edie Barrow, who speaks of her blighted interracial love affair. The enemy is the white woman her lover will marry "come falling of fall" (425). Edie, who concedes the official battlefield, plans to resort to guerilla warfare in which she will love in secret as "queen of the summer storm." Sallie also passes by prostitutes, the three Maries who are filled with "vagueness and surprise," as well as "the limp ladies" (427). Thus the women hint at their subversive struggle against racism, sexism, and class, the various shapes through which injustice appears.

Insane Sophie becomes a sign of the danger that

...If

you

You scream, you're marked "insane"

But silence is a *place* in which to scream!

Hush (428-429)

In the tradition of "The Crazy Woman" from *Bronzeville* (1945), she becomes a flag bearer for a femininely

concealed rage. As a human shape of female articulation, Sophie becomes a martyr, an easy target for attack. With such discrediting comes the loss of potentially adorning clothes, and a deeper level, even the possibility of sexual love. Her name means wisdom, and her Greek archetype was a mother who died of grief after her three daughters were martyred.

[Maid] Marian immerses herself in cooking. While "Mary," means "sea of bitterness," "rebelliousness," Ann signifies grace. Marian, a natural oxymoron, hides an anger that belies the outward calm expressed to her husband and brother as well as to the greater world. Her cowardly inertia of retreat rather than engagement in the sexual fray seems nearly insufferable.

Jamaican Edward has raped and murdered Pepita, whose corpse lies beneath his cot:

Beneath his cot

A little woman lies in dust with roaches.

She never went to kindergarten

She never learned that black is not beloved

"I touch—she said once—petals of a rose.

A silky feeling through me goes!" (433)

She was, in other words, a potential poet, a figurative Gwendolyn Brooks who never happened. Pepita, "whose little

stomach fought the world," even in losing her battle for life, leaves a legacy for those black women who remain. She is an epic hero of a most unexpected and revolutionary sort—so much so as to redefine the very concept. Pepita is the figurative source of which the legends by Aunt Dill must be told.

"After the Mecca," a series of eight poems, serves as a postscript to "In the Mecca." It is the conduit of epic return for the volume, bringing hope and regeneration after the apocalyptic vision of "In the Mecca." Brooks intersperses snapshots of the political, social, and artistic climate of the 1960's, including portraits of leading Civil Rights leaders, gang life, and a meditation on aesthetic value in her epilogue. The last poems in the volume, the First and Second "Sermons on the Warpland," serve to bridge the gap between a desolate past and a hopeful future, undergirded by a spiritual rebirth.

Ironically, it is the Winter that brings new life after Pepita's murder. The speaker in "To a Winter Squirrel" investigates the validity of the Great Chain of Being in which every living thing has its assigned role and characteristics: "That is the way God made you" (437). The poem echoes Countee Cullen's "Yet do I marvel," for just as the earlier speaker questions why God made a blind mole to

dig continually, according to the same poetics of irony (437), the persona Merdice has natural talent that would seem to perish in oblivion—"Merdice/the bolted nomad.". Melham astutely recognizes embedded meaning within Merdice's name, the French "mer" or sea coupled with "dice" or chance. (176). The observation is quite cute, though Brooks has rarely, if ever, used the French language as a major element of her poetics.

The winter squirrel enjoys a greater freedom than does the female persona of the poem, while the narrative "you" signifies the distance between them. The squirrel marks the emblem of what it means to roam free. Her seemingly infinite limits of motion signify a natural freedom. She is more responsive and imaginatively sentient than the repressed housewife cannot usually be. As Melham notes,

Going out to the snow means warmth; remaining in
chilly safety means becoming spiritually inert, like
the woman's posture at the stove. Yet alliteration
firms her image; the mountain and star metaphors hint
at departure. A winter squirrel, moreover, implies
retrieval and—evoking the Pepita quatrain—the coming
seasonal change to spring" (176)

Brooks ends *In the Mecca* with a vision of empowerment and encouragement for foot soldiers in the battle of domestic

epic. "The Sermon on the Warpland" (Warp Land/Waste Land) calls for men and women to fight together. The epic of women has become the epic of the African American nation, for insofar as the two both express a communal quest for freedom and equity, they are ultimately the same. But the continuing and complementary variety of gender plays a definite role in what the definition of freedom means. Finally, the narrator of the poet's world emerges to complete the assertion of the once magical but now modern self as Annie Allen declared nineteen years before. Language empowers change: "Say that the River turns, and turn the river" (452). On the existential level, the urgency calls to arms an African American nation, one largely defined by men, to achieve self-definition in language and therefore the power over the social constructs that depend continuously on the power of articulation. Such insistence points equally to the role of the female poet, and therefore African American women, in crafting language and hence freedom that emerges from it. Poetry means female agency, a spirit of humanity. Dependence on old ways of life—religions, customs, tradition—is impossible, for these new uncertain times have produced "the collapse of bestials, idols" (451).

A new foundation, a new faith must be established as the speaker tells her audience to "Build now your Church, my brother and sisters" (451-452), echoing in biblical cadence the close of Margaret Walker in *For My People* (1942). Love is the bridge that connects the readers to a new world order—one that facilitates an appreciation of cultural identity. But the narrator is a modern knight who must cleanse the world of both the patriarchal conventions of epic and the representations of the knight himself as male. Hence, Brooks rewrites both contemporary sexuality and epic convention.

"The Second Sermon on the Warpland" serves as a capstone of regeneration, "blooming in the noise of the whirlwind"(453). It is as if the troops of humanity are called to armor for the upcoming battle, for ultimately the struggle of women and blacks encapsulates that of the one human race of which Joyce's Stephen Daedalus wrote of. As R. Baxter Miller notes: "For her [Brooks's] generation, the defining emblem is ultimately the whirlwind, the collapse of self-confidence, the failure to transform social ill once more into epic victory and to reclaim from the time before the Holocaust, and the later accusation of 'reverse discrimination' in the United States, the heroic ... [bluesy] will of Black hope" (162). Notably, hope and belief in the

power of the whirlwind are the sustaining elements for black women engaged within the domestic epic warfare. The whirlwind becomes an embryonic emblem of the potential for articulation of protest and expansion of self.

Particularly within the turbulent era of the 1960's, in the wake of World War II and the Korean War, Brooks's whirlwind takes on additional significance and staying power as black women confront change and challenges within the domestic sphere. Big Bessie stands as a living testimony of survival, marching on despite the setbacks:

feet hurt like nobody's business,

But she stands—bigly—under the unruly scrutiny, stands
in the wild weed

In the wild weed

She is a citizen,

And is a moment of highest quality; admirable (456)

The last words of *Mecca* acknowledge the difficulties of survival and yet a continuation: "It is lonesome, yes. For we are the last of the loud/Nevertheless, live/Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind" (456). So it is that black women articulate a newly

exhortatory poetry that inspires new generations to define their identities within a revolutionized reshaping of the epic.

CHAPTER 4

RECOVERING PHILOMELA'S VOICE: DOMESTIC EPIC IN SYLVIA PLATH'S EARLY AND TRANSITIONAL POEMS

Plath's early and transitional poetry¹, written between 1956 and 1962 and primarily compiled in *The Colossus*, *Crossing Water*, and *Collected Poems*, bears many strains of domestic epic—speaking of the budding poetic development of Plath and her ever-expanding vision of the challenges facing women. Although only a segment of the criticism on Plath's poetry centers upon the early and transitional poems, the work from this period provides a holistic vision of her domestic epic. The early poems in Plath's body of work, infused with a modernist impulse, speak of the uncertainty and despair brought about by post World War shifts in values and norms. The transitional poems, in contrast, move toward the hope of renewal and the birth of

¹ Many scholars of Plath's work categorize her poetry into three chronological groupings: early, transitional, and late poetry in order to assess the technical development of Plath's style, which culminates in *Ariel*. The early period spans from 1956-1959; the transitional from 1959-early 1962; and the late from 1962-1963.

a new world order in which women can articulate their visions of creative expression.

With its emphasis on relationships with fathers, husbands, and children, Plath's work takes on an epic quality in the consistency of poetic motifs. Not surprisingly, Ted Hughes, her former husband and editor of much of her posthumously published works, remarked about how faithfully her separate poems build into one long poem. In his words the, arguing that Plath's poems are "chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear-even if the origins of it and the *dramatis personae* are at the bottom enigmatic" (187).

Applying the domestic epic framework to Plath's work illuminates the origins and *dramatis personae* that Hughes terms "enigmatic." The origins of the domestic epic sprang from the social and political landscape in which she lived, one that encouraged women to identify their individual selves with their roles as wives and mothers, often at the expense of creative outlets of expression. Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* provides a metaphor for the dilemma, as it speaks of the climate of the post World War era of the 1950s that produced a system wherein the ideal employment for women was traditionally considered

"occupation: housewife" ²For women, the domestic situation became a psychological battleground as females worked to negotiate space for themselves that would reconcile the often dueling impulses towards motherhood and marriage as well as creative expression. Notably, the dramatis personae in this domestic context consist of the women battlemaids, the "I" persona in many of her poems in which women struggle to assert their independence in often hostile environments.

Sylvia Plath, born in 1932 to Aurelia Schober, a high school teacher, and Otto Plath, a professor of entomology at Boston University, came of age in the era that seemed to hearken back to the "nineteenth century cult of domesticity," which located true womanhood as that of a female constrained to home and hearth. Plath learned early on from her mother's example that often within the domestic context women's career and creative endeavors become secondary to those of the males. As Schober reveals in the Introduction to *Letters Home*, "if I wanted a peaceful home—and I did, I would simply have to become more submissive, although it was not in my nature" (13). The

² Betty Friedan's landmark *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), which worked to debunk conventional views that women's role in society were limited to that of mothers and wives, contributed to the burgeoning feminist movement of the 1960s.

conflicting messages of repressed female desire and outward docility affected her daughter, who, constantly presented with messages from magazines such as *Mademoiselle* and *Ladies Home Journal*, presumably read about "proper" behavior for white middle class girls, whose main pursuit should be to look pretty, unobtrusive, and ready to catch a man. Not even her literary success led her away from wanting fulfill the traditional role. In 1955 her marriage to Ted Hughes encapsulated the sexual conflict of the decade. She had aspired for a "creative marriage" that would allow her to excel at cooking, cleaning and childrearing, and yet maintain her identity as a poet. In her journal she writes:

I am learning how to compromise the wild dream ideals and the necessary realities without such screaming pain. My seventeen year-old radical self would perhaps be horrified at this; but I am becoming wiser, I hope. I accept the idea of a creative marriage now as I never did before; I believe I could paint, write, and keep a home and husband too. Ambitious, wot? (*Unabridged Journals* 164).

As she reached adulthood and assumed the role of wife and mother, she found that achieving a "creative marriage" was a monumental task. There were no simple fairy tale resolutions to the dueling impulses of mother and wife, on the one hand, and of artist on the other. Despite early hopes, Plath found instead that often her poetic aspirations gave way to the needs of her family and the codes of conduct as apparently dictated by the society and time. Hence, poetry became her way of mediating the sexual conflict; domestic epic became a release valve for negotiating a common ground.

Her strategies are remarkably similar to the formal ones by Brooks. Through the conflation of birth and death images, shifts in narrative voice, encoded names, and the infusion of mythology, Plath works to develop a meticulous poetic epic of women's journey for self-expression and freedom from societal restraints. In the early and transitional poems, Plath begins the epic descent into a psychological hell, examining the paradoxes of women's position. Building upon the poems in *The Colossus* and *Crossing the Waters*, the epic vision reaches zenith proportions in her opus *Ariel* as well as in *Winter Trees*.

Many of Plath's early and transitional poems were written in 1956-61, a time of uncertainty and change as

America adjusted to post World War II life. Overtones of World War II, the Cold War, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars reverberate throughout her poetry. Within much of the early verse, the themes of death and darkness become pervasive. *The Colossus* and *Crossing the Water* thus serve as important benchmarks in Plath's journey toward a revisionist female aesthetics of self and of articulation of feminist protest. Since many of Plath's early and transitional poems appeared during 1956-61, overtones of contemporary wars reverberate throughout her poetry. *The Colossus* and *Crossing the Water* serve as important benchmarks in her journey toward a revisionist female aesthetics of self and of her articulation of feminist protest. In the essay "Context" (1962), she identifies herself as a "political poet":

This issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipresent marriage of big business to the military in America—"Juggernaut, The Warfare State," by Fred J. Cook in a recent *Nation*. Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah, though I

may be sleepless enough before my vision of the
apocalypse. (Wagner 212)

Though Plath does not claim to have the tongue of Jeremiah, the prophet of the Old Testament who predicts the destruction of Israel, she certainly expresses the vision of Cassandra, the daughter of Priam, whose prophesies about the downfall of Troy go unheeded. Jeremiah and Cassandra represent two literary strains of apocalyptic vision. The Jeremiad, in the tradition of the biblical histories of the prophet, became a literary form in which writers expressed their social and political protest, predicting doom and societal collapse. In women's literature, Cassandra became an emblem for women's articulation of their frustration and angst at women's prescribed social roles. Writers such as Florence Nightingale evoked the myth to emphasize the dangers to women's identity and autonomy.

Following in this tradition, Plath integrates her concerns about a military state into her poetic vision. She intuits that for women the costs of this warfare state are many. Confined to the home as mandated symbols of domesticity, women find their individuality and creative freedom threatened. And like the ill-fated Cassandra, they fear that their voices will go unheard. I shall explore how Plath employs a poetics of sound to give voice to her

prophetic, often apocalyptic vision of the female struggle for survival. In this way, she subverts patriarchal authority. Her vision, so tinged with death and darkness, reveals the female anxiety of her post-war age.

Plath begins *The Colossus* with "The Manor Garden," setting the parameters for domestic existence, emphasizing the centrality of the home and nature. Hell ironically becomes the otherwise admirable process of childbirth : "The fountains are dry and the roses are over/Incense of death"(C3)³. Plath uses short, crisp sentences to highlight the urgency of her vision. As Caroline Bernard King Hall notes, "its [the poem's] metaphors are marvelously precise and its knitting of images affords a fine balance among the mother's feelings of love, regret, and dread."(52). Death and birth imagery emphasize the poem's circularity and the speaker's ambivalence about the impending birth. The child's life may well lead to difficulties, as the expected mother observes:

You move through the era of the fishes,
The smug centuries of the pig-
Head, toe and finger

³ All references to Plath's poetry collection will be made to page numbers in the collections, which will be designated as follows: *C* for poems in *The Colossus*; *CW* for those in *Crossing the Water*, and *CP* for those in *Collected Poems*.

Come clear of the shadow. History

Nourishes these broken flutings (C3)

Premonitions of potential dangers take shape as "hard stars," worms that "quit their usual habitations." She imagines all of the potential threats to the child's future, including the force of history that "nourishes these broken flutings." The speaker's tone is one of disillusionment and fragmentation brought about by the modernist era. With war, death, and destruction as constant reminders of the changing times, the speaker ends the poem imagining "a difficult birthing" (C4) for her child.

The "Sow," written in terza rima, in the tradition of Dante's epic *Divine Comedy*, further serves to reflect a descent into the inferno. Critics have disagreed about a reading of the poem. While scholars such as Guttenberg (146), Rosenblatt(61) and Butscher (212) say that sow embodies virulent and evil dimensions of nature (Hargrove 107), I offer a revised reading in which the prize sow, one entrapped and contained as an exotic object represents the dangers of female containment by patriarchal forces. Within a scene reminiscent of Dante's epic, a farmer leads a couple through "a maze of barns to the lintel of the sunk sty door"(C9) to marvel at the vision of a prize sow

"impounded from public stare,/Prize ribbon and pig show"
(C9). Spared the common duties of other sows, the prize
pig is nicely uncommon. Instead the sow "lounged belly-
bedded on that black com-post,/Fat -ruttred eyes/Dream-
filmed." When the couple ruminates about the possible
dreams of the sow, it immediately identifies them as male-
oriented:

What a vision of ancient hoghood must

Thus wholly engross

The great granddam!—our marvel blazoned a knight (C10)
Apparently, the only acceptable dreams would be masculine
ones. Ironically, in fact, a boar that cuts down the
"knight" does so only through a physical strength of
another kind so that only an equal or greater power seems
to defeat power. A female victory by way of the boar
happens in a most unexpected way, thus dismantling the
vestiges of male autonomy and control but not without
paradox. Nevertheless, the victory is a short-lived one,
as the farmer reasserts patriarchal authority by
interrupting reverie with a whistle and a slap of the
barrel. Significantly, the sow responds again with a
subversive counterattack, lifting herself and beginning to
feast

Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint,
Proceeded to swill
The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent.(C11)

The sow which receives its food from the kitchen suggests a female thirst and hunger for expanded boundaries of creative expression. Such needs parallel Plath's life, as she both relished food metaphorically and physically that could provide succor to the soul⁴ (Wagner-Martin *A Literary Life* 96).

Further working to destabilize patriarchal authority, the speaker in the title poem "Colossus" intimates any poetic reconstruction of the father figure would be a futile one. The speaker prostrates herself in front of the colossus, proudly asserting that

I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes (C 20)

Lynda Bundtzen points out, this keen interest originates because the daughter "is looking for an oracle, a father who will be the 'guarantor of all values' and the absolute

⁴ Linda Wagner-Martin, in *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1999) reports that Plath was keenly interested in food and was described as a "'good eater'" with a healthy appetite.

measure of meaning in her life" (23). The speaker, although recognizing that the father is dead, and that she is using the colossus as a substitute for the body, looks to the Colossus to replicate the traditional patriarchal script, configuring male and female roles. Elizabeth Bronfen contends further that "The colossal stony figure she enters into as though it were a womb-tomb is a poetic rendition of the psychic representation of the absent father she has incorporated in the course of mourning" (27-28).

Thus, when the speaker ends with the declaration "My hours are married to shadow. / No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing" (C 21), she moves towards a re-inscription of societal mores and code for female behavior. Ironically, she is empowered in a way that she has never experienced, in that through her amalgamation with the colossus, she has forever reconstructed the patriarchal system by first critiquing it and then joining with it to form something new. Thus her fear of the patriarchal presence, "the scrape of a keel/On the blank stones in the landing" evaporates, as she has, in modernist form, created her own formulation of the colossus, as the old one no longer holds meaning. In the process, she redefines the domestic space in which she

lives by no longer holding to stagnant patriarchal patterns.

In "All the Dead Dears," the speaker turns to her matrilineal line for new formulations of human bonds and links, as the speaker meditates upon a museum exhibit featuring the corpse of a 4th century A.D. woman whose ankle has been gnawed by a shrew and a mouse entombed with her.

The macabre threesome of woman, shrew and mouse present an intimate tableau of women's place in society. Women have appeared in western portraiture as both the mouse and the shrew, that is as either quiet, unobtrusive female behavior, often suggestive of spinsterhood, submissive wifhood, or isolation from human ties, while the shrew is irascible and rebellious regarding the traditional scripts of female docility. But the complementary species are "companions" —thus, representing the dueling impulses between women of docile self-effacement and of overt rebellion. The speaker denies her affinity to the corpse and therefore to women—dually denying her connection to victimization:

This lady here's no kin
Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck
Blood and whistle my marrow clean
To prove it.

Despite her efforts to distance herself from womanhood, she cannot forever deny her link to a female ancestor who has suffered and exposed her Achilles heel. She must accept this connection of the dead and recognize that she will share the same fate eventually:

From the mercury-backed glass

Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother

Reach hag hands to haul me in (30)

Yet, just as the persona is connected to her female ancestors through death, so too are they linked by a shared domesticity. Everyday activities anchor those women who live life to its fullest, as they connect through "weddings,/Childbirths or a family barbecue" (30). Memory serves as a link to keep "all the dead dears" alive and well in the psyche of those who think about them.

The story of Achilles, the greatest of Greek warriors, recounts his inglorious defeat at the hands of the Trojan Paris by an arrow to the heel. Achilles, who had pouted in his tent because Agamemnon had taken away his captive maiden Briseis, and therefore declined to do battle, returned to the conflict with vengeance after his friend Patroclus had been slain by Hector. Plath and Brooks accomplish a female Achilles of a far more revolutionary sort in that this heroine turns the patriarchal tradition

on its head by discarding female scripts of proper behavior and fights to defend home as well as her female comrades in the battle for self-determination.

In particular, the name Shirley ("bright clearing") of "Point Shirley" reinforces the consolation of home as a beacon of hope for the speaker who returns to the seaside homestead to mourn the passing of a grandmother. Just as the legendary and classical Odysseus returns home to a dead mother, so too does the persona of the Plath poem set herself up as a shield bearer who returns to mourn. The sea plays powerfully in both of these narratives, as Odysseus's mother, despairing of her son's return from the Trojan War, meets her end by walking into the sea. The poet closely identifies her grandmother with the sea and fears that her legacy is threatened by the lapping waves.

The return is one of the foremost conventions of classical epic. Odysseus' nine challenges before his return to his native Ithaca after the Trojan war are reminiscent of the twelve labors of the ancient Greek hero Hercules, who was forced to complete the labors to atone for the murder of his family. Plath's more modernized and feminized reconsideration of the mythic source achieves potency by emphasizing the centrality of the domestic in shaping concepts of home and therefore leads to a fierce

determination to defend the home at all costs. The narrator of the poem therefore feels compelled to halt the invasion of the sea and maintain her homeland.

As Hargrove points out,

"The poem is complex in its interweaving of three related themes: first, it is a tribute to the grandmother for her efforts to impose order on chaos, to keep the destructiveness of nature at bay, and to provide an environment of security and warmth, all communicated through carefully chosen domestic details.(Hargrove 217)

The house encapsulates both a sense of love and loss:

In my grandmother's sand yard. She is dead,
Whose laundry snapped and froze here, who
Kept house against
What sluttish, rutted sea could do.

...

Twenty years out

Of her hand, the house still hugs...

(C 25)

Poets keep memory from ever really being endangered. Inch by inch, the sea would eventually consume the point. The speaker sees her grandmother's home slowly being consumed

by the destructive forces of nature. Home becomes a resonating symbol of peace and connection to nature.

"Mushrooms" become a metaphor for women of European ancestry. As they gain power "Overnight, very/Whitely, discreetly/Very quietly" (C37), they assert dominance and control. Despite the deprivation of nurture, they thrive in the face of the odds:

...We

Diet on water,

On crumbs of shadow

(C38)

How do the objects of the other's consumption become the agents of their own consuming?

We shall by morning

Inherit the earth:

Our foot's in door. (C38)

Like the meek, the mushrooms work to "Inherit the earth"—attaining a just reward for all of the time in the shadows. As with the most leading women in the world of Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker, those in Plath advance toward a defining moment of artistic assertion.

The "Disquieting Muses" associate heroic women more with death than with poetic inspiration. In this sense, more than even Brooks, Plath seems to write tragic epic

without spiritual redemption and triumph. Like Anne Allen, the speaker discovers that romantic daydreams distort the quest for selfhood.

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear
Mother, whose witches always, always
Got baked into gingerbread (C58)

The mother's encouragement of traditional womanly arts emphasizes the prominent role the patriarchal hierarchy will have in shaping her daughter's existence.

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours of practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable
I learned, I leaned, I learned elsewhere,
From muses unhired by you, dear

Mother (C59)

The speaker's lack of proficiency in these "womanly arts" reinforces the strain of domestic epic warfare in which she strikes her own path of self definition, as she puts it, "I leaned, I learned, I learned elsewhere"—indicating that she

learned other skills and talents from the "disquieting muses"-who challenge patriarchy.

These muses facilitate the forging of her own unique character and allow the speaker to survive in a patriarchal-centered society. She becomes suited up for the battle at hand-one that moves beyond the idyllic fairy tale world created by her mother. And she comes to realize that the disquieting muses ring a truer reality for women, one that necessitates that they step outside of traditional boundaries and ideas of womanhood to establish their own space (C60). The speaker's battle for autonomy will not be denied.

"Spinster" shows a safety net that allows woman to preserve a sense of self and security while cautioning again a rejection of life that must continue to be so actively explored. With the advent of man comes change and potential chaos. The rank wilderness delimits female space, uncultivated and unrestrained. The girl who chooses to "withdraw neatly" from life to protect herself from male disorder,

She judged petals in disarray,

The whole season, sloven.

How she longed for winter then!-

Scrupulously austere in its order

A treason not to be borne (C67)

With the word "treason" she emphasizes a betrayal to her sense of self—a self that as wife and mother would eclipse her own needs as an individual. Spring appears as "bedlam," an insanity in which life and fecundity threaten to strangle the persona of the poem. Rather than succumbing to this temptation, she withdraws neatly—thus conceding her relinquishment of spring and all that it symbolizes—life, mating, and therefore reproduction. Just as with the "Sisters of Persephone," spinsterhood embodies as an escape from spring and life, hence, a stagnant winter movement.

In Ovid, the story of Persephone tells of the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, the goddess of the earth, who is abducted by Hades, claimed as his bride, and taken to the Underworld. As the distraught mother Demeter searches for her daughter, the earth is left desolate. Zeus intervenes and demands the return of Persephone, but before Hades will release her, he asks her to eat a pomegranate seed, the food of the dead. Because of the consumption of the fruit, Persephone is forced to spend one third of her year in the Underworld. During her absence, winter prevails, but her

return to earth marks the beginning of Spring. Persephone, both the goddess of death and the fertility, becomes the personification of the life and the renewal of Spring. Thus, by not participating in spring the female persona rejects life.

The Spinster, in a similar vein, takes a defensive stance to maintain the safety of her isolation. Her fortified home is so "weaponed" that no man can triumph over the "barricade of barb." In the choice of whether to accept male dominance or to reject love, the Spinster favors the latter, while failing to think her way out of the apparent contradiction that dominance could never really be love anyway and that there must at least be possible theoretically a more imaginative and creative choice. The rejection of dominance, in other words, has become an unnecessary rejection of love and therefore of human meaning. The Spinster ultimately makes the understandable decision to fight to maintain her home front without the threat of male dominance, but she may have inadvertently forfeited too much delight of existence itself.

The same ironic commentary on spinsterhood occurs in "Ella Mason and Her Eleven Cats," another poem in which the seemingly eccentric or "addled" Ella makes a better choice

than do those naïve girls who rush to the altar. It is certainly the second group that relinquishes all autonomy in favor of domestic tradition. She is the "Sphinx-queen" (CP 54) who speaks riddles and who understands the far-reaching ramifications of marriage. Shifts in narrative voice from the third person omniscient viewpoint to that of the plural first person (We) confirm the female complicity in her public ridicule.

The speaker reports surreptitious visits to the home of the social outcast. Much like Brooks's Crazy Sophie from *In the Mecca*, Miss Ella (Germanic derivative: Other) is isolated from the rest of the town because of her unmarried state. It is only after the speaker has grown to adulthood that she can appreciate such iconoclastic behavior:

But now turned kinder with times, we mark Miss Mason
Blinking, green-eyed and solitary

At girls who marry—

(CP 54)

When the speaker grasps at an answer for Miss Ella's unmarried state, a sense of tension erupts in the last lines. Miss Ella's flaw is apparently vanity, as the young women of the town have learned. But those in the town have misread the textual meaning, for there is a significant

distinction between Narcissism and self-love. For narcissism means vanity or love for one's physical body , but self-love which takes on a spiritual rather than physical quality means a concern for one's happiness.

In Plath's transitional poetry, written between 1959-1962, she shows how marriage is a double-edged sword, offering both love and support as well as potential conflict and miscommunication. These poems deal with relationships between men and women are more sanguine and less antagonistic than the later poems of Plath (Hall 47). Despite the tensions caused by gendered scripts of proper roles for men and women, the hope for discourse or communication somehow always remains below the surface in the early and transitional poems. Accordingly, "Conversation Among the Ruins," like Brooks " old-marrieds," reinforces the necessity of communication in marriage. In contrast, gendered disruption surfaces in " Ode to Ted":

From under crunch of my man's boot
Green oat-spouts jut;
he names a lapwing starts rabbits in a rout
legging it most nimble
to sprigged hedge of bramble,
stalks red fox, shrewd stoat. (CP 29)

Hence, the male disrupter stunts the green life of woman.
His Adam-like, original man power shines through his
ability to "name," "rout, and to stalk" in the forest.
The persona Ted creates his space and masters his domain.
All the surrounding animals, fauna and flora bend to his
will and anticipate his pleasure:

Ringdoves roost well within his wood,
Shirr songs to suit which mood
He saunters in; how but most glad.
Could be this adam's woman
When all earth his words do summon
(CP 29)

There is a transition in the last lines of the last stanza
in which attention shifts to the female Eve-like figure—
self described as "this adams's woman"—who as helpmate,
exhorts that "all earth do summons /leaps to laud such
man's blood" (30). Notably, it is the woman who takes a
secondary, vicarious role in supporting the creative
empowerment of the man instead of focusing on herself. But
hers is ironically the poetic power to write his mastery of
nature and form into public memory.

The poems of *Crossing the Water*, written between 1959
and early 1962, serve as transition in Plath's vision of
domestic epic, providing a wellspring moment of joy and an

elasticity of content and form that allow the domestic epic to emerge. Herein the speaker breaks free from the domestic hell that informed *Colossus*. During the decisive transitional stage of her career, Plath became pregnant and subsequently found outlets to celebrate motherhood. It is not at all surprising that the impulse of domestic epic in her poetry flourishes. What seems undeniable is that such domestic duties often interfered with the creative moments to write new poetry. (Hall 67). Yet she did manage to write a number of poems during this period, many of them dealing with pregnancy and motherhood.

"Heavy Women," which celebrates the power and beauty of expectant motherhood, contrasts sharply with the earlier tone in *Colossus's* "Manor Garden." As Marjorie Perloff acknowledges in "On the Road to *Ariel*: The 'Transitional Poetry' of Sylvia Plath," "pregnancy is usually regarded as a temporary suspension of anxiety, for carrying a child gives the poet a sense of being, of having weight, of inhabiting her own body" (96). In "Heavy Women," a sense of self-possession and complacency becomes apparent for an expectant mother

Irrefutable, beautifully smug
As Venus, pedestaled on a half-shell
Shawled in blond hair and the salt

Scrim of a sea breeze (CW 9)

While the women battle calmly to bring new life into the world, they evince smiles, relishing their power of fecundity, blooming in simile like a flower about to bud "tinty petals." Within their bodies they carry the new life. And it is this power of giving life that reincarnates and re-empowers life itself:

They step among the archetypes.

Dusk hoods them in Mary-blue

While far off, the axle of winter

Grinds round, bearing down with the straw,

The star, the wise gray men.(CW 9)

So these women, like the Virgin Mary, the invoke divine the power of divine providence as the bearers of babes who would redefine the world.

Motherhood also comes to the forefront in other poems in the *Crossing the Water* such as "Metaphors" and "Dark House." "Metaphors" uses humor to describe pregnancy "the delicate condition." Herein the female speaker subsumes her position as a woman within a separate identity in favor of emphasizing her role as a "a means, a stage"(CW 43)—a catalyst in producing new life.

"Dark House" draws a nice analogy between the pregnancy and the domestic icon embedded in the phrase "I

must make more maps" (CW 50). They are guides or keys to her identity as a woman with legitimate claims of selfhood. Voracious consumption becomes a metaphor for the hunger for repressed creative outlets that provide self-fulfillment for the female persona. Blaming her stagnant position on a nameless male figure who "lives in an old well,/A stoney hole. He's to blame. /He's a fat sort" (50), she laments the restrictions of her life.

Metaphorically "fat" with freedom and choice, the male potentially has more access to ports of creativity and discovery. The sense of containment takes shape as the womb that has become the prism of how she projects her identity. Finally, a sense of irony surfaces in the poem as the female persona covertly comments when the speaker, so far removed from a real sense of containment and restriction, feels imprisoned in the "dark house" of her socially scripted self as mother and wife.

In "Stillborn," the failed creative energy becomes an analogue to abortive childbirth. The speaker laments:

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.
They grew their toes and fingers well enough,
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
If they missed out on walking about like people
It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.

(CW 20)

The speaker identifies her role of artist so closely with motherhood, that she uses her poetic to declare "mother love," a metonymy for poetry itself. "But they [the children] are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,/And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her" (CW 20).

Children are metaphors of poems because both are the products of female creation. Both emerge from impregnation, whether it be a biological expression or an idea that reaches fruition. Both are expressions of female fecundity and both require nurture and care. Creativity is a form of birth in that it is a process of development, full of labor, love, and sacrifice. And Plath, like Gwendolyn Brooks in "The Mother," reminds us of the power of motherhood as the transmitter of life. This power is nevertheless paradoxical because it expresses while limiting the mother's personal freedom and autonomy.

The "Widow" presents a persistent danger of a wife's having lived only vicariously through her husband. It is as if without the male, the female fails to exist. Death consumes the widow who deteriorates into "the dress she wears, her hat and collar," and the figure of the male patriarch still lingering in her psyche, "the moth face of

her husband, moonwhite and ill" (22). Acutely aware of the stultifying force her dead husband had upon her life, the widow comes to recognize that in order to embrace life she must discard the debilitating image of his memory. Yet the memory lingers like a bird that "Blinded to all but the grey, spiritless room/... looks in on, and must go on looking in" (CW 23). Like Poe's "The Raven," the image of the husband as a bird's beating against the pane emphasizes the haunting effect the force may have on her life. But it is precisely the boundary between the widow and her memory that sustains her own survival.

"Last Words" speaks of hope of renewal and reincarnation (CW 40). The skill of preserving food becomes a metaphor for the speaker's ability to remember and reconnect to life. As emblems of herself to be left behind in the coffin, she thinks of her "cooper cooking pots" and "rouge pots"—symbols of her scripted womanly skills of culinary arts and self beautification through makeup. She ends the poem with an ironic note:

They will roll me up in bandages, they will store my
heart

Under my feet in a neat parcel.

I shall hardly know myself. It will be dark,

And the shine of these small things sweeter than the
face of Ishtar. (CW 40)

Predicting that she will be remembered for the symbols of domesticity as opposed to her individuality, she imagines that her heart will be a forgotten afterthought "under [her] feet in a neat parcel. " Within the poetic construction of death, she holds fast to the hope of a reincarnation into a new life, the "face of Ishtar," Egyptian goddess of fertility and war. It is the divine "Lady of Battle" who places her within the tradition of women in order to fight continually for self-preservation and empowerment. Thus the "last words" trace the psychic history of women who experience epic journeys of self-definition. They emerge battle-tested but whole.

"Two Sisters of Persephone," along with Plath's "The Spinster" and Brooks's "Sadie and Maud," reveals the tensions of women. The two sisters take opposite paths in life, the one logical and mathematical, the other romantically idealistic. The one who remains cloistered within the house misses out on the vitality of life and experience. Her "Dry ticks" mark her measure of time as a mathematical machine; as a "barren enterprise" this unmarried sister has deprived herself of marriage and

therefore love, to the degree that the two are ever really synonymous. As with Persephone in hell, her epic quest seems to die when her fecundity diminishes, "Goes graveward with flesh laid waste" (CW 32). Without either husband or children, she is "Worm-husbanded,"—tied to an image of decay and decomposition as a final epithet to her existence.

But the sister that embraces life, "sitting on the outside," "Bronzed as earth," "decides to "become the sun's bride" (CW 32) and therefore gives birth to "a king." Hence, life begets life. Both Sadie and the sun-seeded mother relish the joy of a life marked nevertheless by female paradox and contradiction.

"Fire" becomes the spark of rebellion against matrimonial bondage and an outlet of repression towards freedom. In "The Shrike," Plath uses the imagery of a large brown or gray bird, just as she does later in "Lady Lazarus," to express the power and agony in a female posture:

When night comes black
Such royal dreams beckon this man
As lift him apart
From his earth-wife's side
To wing, sleep-feathered

The singular air (*CP* 42)

The royal earth man plays to the "earth-wife"—tying the female to mortality as opposed to heavenly potential. Plath mimics the pattern of the preying bird as if it were a female wife left behind while the male mate soars into a wider world.

While she, envious bride,
Cannot follow after, but lies
With her blank brown eyes starved wide,
Twisting curses in the tangled sheet

(*CP* 42)

Presumably, the wife's desire for reaching for greater things is just as potent as his. The "starved eyes" and "mangled sheets" speak of unfulfilled dreams and desires.

Plath, with a sense of gothic romance, interweaves into "The Snowman on the Moor" her flair for imaging domestic conflict: "Stalemated their armies stood, with tottering banner" (*CP* 58). Upset over a heated argument, the woman confessor escapes the house, her ears still "ringing with bruit of insults and dishonors." And she throws down the gauntlet for him to pick up: "'Come find me'—her last taunt" (*CP* 58). The sitting male is left finally to guard "his grim battlement," while the female seeks comfort in nature.

As Annette Koldony points out in *Lay of the Land*, nature is often femininely identified and located as a site of conquest for males, man's relationship with nature duplicating the patriarchal dominance exerted in domestic life. In this matrix, nature is viewed as maternal and nurturing, with emphasis on the cycles of reproduction, while sexual man exists as a conqueror and authorial figure (4). Thus nature becomes feminized while women are locked into a one-dimensional relationship with nature that emphasizes female reproduction and nurturing. In Plath it is the woman who breaks with the traditional depiction of the female as Nature to achieve a liberation of the female psyche. Thus, as Rachel Stein argues, women fight to "shift the ground" or re-inscribe new relationships with nature that potentially empower them (4).

In "The Snowman" women are established as clever and mistresses of word play—punished by the male patriarchy, "sheaved" but not silenced as they triumph through their very ability to tell their stories. Unlike Scheherazade, the narrator of *Arabian Nights*, whose life is spared because of her skill with words and storytelling, the women on the snowman's belt have been killed for their wit and verbal acumen. Rather, they share a fate similar to that of Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose tongue is cut

out to prevent her from telling of the atrocities and rape committed against her by her brother-in-law. Although she is seemingly silenced by his cruel act, Philomela finds a means to subvert male domination—by weaving images of her story with her loom, and thus is able to communicate her story to her sister Procene, and, by extension, pass her story of suffering and the eventual triumph down to future generations of women. With this warning, the woman is able to circumvent the attack of the snowman and mount an unintentional counterattack (59).

The girl whose tale is told has learned the lesson from the ladies who bore witness to the fate of women, those who did not employ subtle tactics of subversion; thus the female uses "brimful of gentle talk/And mild obeying" (59)to maneuver and negotiate successful passage on the domestic quest. Critics such as Nancy Hargrove argue that in the "Snowman on the Moors" "the female persona returns home defeated and submissive" (106). I contend, on the contrary, that the only apparent vanquishing of the female is superficial, a deceptive shield of meekness. Eventually the female, who has inadvertently established her value, has no need for docility except for a complementary strategy of domestic engagement. Thus Plath designs in her poetry a double inversion of power structures in which many

smoke screens actually disguise female empowerment. In her world, the apparent continuance of patriarchy as an established order is only an illusion.

In the transitional poems of 1956-1962, Plath builds the foundation for a domestic epic that incorporates a descent into a metaphorical hell of female containment, in order to deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct the scripted constructions of a female self and selves. She explores, with revealing power and often startling originality, the tension between the life's call of mother and wife and the self - compelled to create poetry. By the end of the period, she incorporates birth imagery to empower her woman warrior, reconfiguring a newly feminized space within society and for the expanded imaginings of self. One almost might be reading the advance in the literary world of Gwendolyn Brooks from the end of *Annie Allen* (1949) to *In the Mecca* (1968), for this is finally the two women's shared vision of liberation. Plath's reaffirmation of womanhood, in other words, emerges full bloom in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*.

CHAPTER 5

BEE-COMING QUEENS: REBIRTH AND REGENERATION IN PLATH'S

LATE POEMS

While *The Colossus* and *Crossing the Water* begin the domestic epic journey to self -autonomy, it is in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* that women fully stage counter-attacks and emerge from the psychological hell of a stagnant, circumscribed domestic sphere. During the course of this domestic epic battle, Plath delineates the confines of patriarchal bonds, emphasizing the pervasive power of male dominated social and political structures in shaping women's lives. She returns again and again to the authorial father figure as a symbol of power that must be subverted for female survival. She also critiques the social bonds of marriage that tie women to their roles as wives and mothers to the exclusion of other creative outlets of expression. Yet, through the course of the later poetry, Plath's female persona secures home space as a figurative Queen Bee who subverts and reverses patriarchal dominance that characterizes much of human society.

Beyond the exciting and contrasting voices within her poetics, I shall inquire into her paradox of fecundity and

childbirth as a way of examining her skillful strategies for presenting subtle shifts within a patriarchal structure of power and eventually even the inversion of the structure itself. It is against this backdrop that she ultimately writes the figurative death and subsequently rebirth of women.

The later period of Sylvia Plath's poetic journey represents a departure from the conventional forms and techniques she espoused in the earlier poems. No longer is the emphasis upon complex, sometimes stilted, diction or strict meter and stanza forms such as the intricate terza rima form. Rather, Plath strips her poetry to the bone, using sparse diction, stark images or death and rebirth, and abrupt shifts in voice to protest the stagnancy of women's position in the 1950s and early 1960s. Her poetry becomes both a public and a private expression of the tumultuous era in which she lived. During this period, Plath gave birth to her son Nicholas in 1962, saw the disintegration of her marriage to Ted Hughes, and tragically committed suicide in February 1963. From a larger social context, war continued to be a reality for American life, as aftershocks of World War II, the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, as well as the burgeoning movement women's and Civil Rights shaped public consciousness.

In this conflict driven era, Plath re-envisioned epic form to both reflect and create a cultural history that narrated the plight of women within an oftentimes confining patriarchal society. She successfully inverts epic tradition and makes the domestic sphere, which had traditionally been considered the private domain, public and global in importance. Thus, women become heroines in the epic quest, as they battle to reconcile their tripartite roles as mothers, wives, and creative beings who want careers and opportunities for poetic expression. Plath's later poems fit into the epic tradition as they depict the experiences of female persona whose fates often represent the larger destiny of women and humankind as a whole. Plath reveals the dilemmas and frustrations experienced by many women of the era, particularly white, middle class women. Yet her epic vision is sometimes problematic because the specific journey and destination of her epic warfare are sometimes unclear. Perhaps because opportunities for exploration of the potential that life offers have been circumscribed, the real destination is a freedom that allows women opportunity to explore what they want. What is clear is that the battle for freedom is one of paramount importance.

Significantly, the theme of motherhood reappears throughout Plath's poetry as a marker of domestic tension. The meditations of motherhood culminate in the poetic play *Three Women* (1962), "a kind of triple dramatic monologue, offering in time sequence the experiences of three women before, during, and after miscarriage or childbirth" (Hall 105). The play, which examines the role of motherhood in defining or shaping a woman's identity and her position within the domestic landscape, provides an important segue in the framework of domestic epic in that, as Ted Hughes asserts, the poem acts as "a bridge between the *Colossus* and *Ariel*, both in the change of style from the first half to the last and in that it was written to be read aloud" (Hager 102). The verse drama, set in a maternity ward, centers on three diverse women: a married housewife, a married secretary, and an unmarried young woman. Although told from the first person point of view throughout, the "I" persona is constantly changing. The shifts in voice in the verse are important as they reveal distinctions and variations in the life experiences of women and present three different battlemates of domesticity for review. *Three Women*, written as a BBC radio broadcast, also follows epic tradition as it is a verse poem written specifically to be read aloud. Orality is an important part of epic

traditions as epics were originally interwoven into oral histories as a means of transmitting cultural values and traditions. Plath applies this maxim to domestic epic as she utilizes the radio broadcast to disseminate information about women's choices about motherhood and its role in shaping female identity.

As Nicola Shaughnessy points out, "Staging three voices which further divide and multiply the more one reads or listens, *Three Women* reshapes the raw material of maternal experience as an (at least) triple-tongued discourse, ranging between Self, Other and somewhere in between, evading the autobiographical binary of truth versus fiction while remaining true to that experience" (249). Thus, through employing three distinct perspectives, Plath works to add dimension and multiple perspectives of motherhood, moving beyond her personal experience to explore the multiplicity of experiences and attitudes of women about childbearing. Plath employs epic convention through the use of these three voices that resonate with issues and concerns that are of universal interest to women. She consciously chooses not to name the three women, instead dubbing them as "Voices," in order to emphasize that these women are the voices of many who comprise part of her listening audience. The myriad of

stances though which these women take on motherhood, careers, and selfhood reflect their varied positions.

The First Voice, a character in the poem, closely connects her identity with motherhood and sees herself as a catalyst for nature in the reproduction process. Of her impending labor, she declares "I am ready," (CP 176) with a pride and complacency reminiscent of "Heavy Women." With the birth of her child, she subsumes all of her personal desires and pins her hopes and dreams on her son. As she looks at her son in her hospital room, she utters:

Can nothingness be so prodigal?

Here is my son.

His wide eye is that general, flat blue.

He is turning to me like a little, blind, bright
plant.

One cry. It is the hook I hang on.

And I am a river of milk.

I am a warm hill (CP 183)

As this quotation clearly reveals, the woman of the First Voice defines herself through her role as mother and projects her identity into that of her child. Her only hope is for the best for him and that he will "love me as I love him" (186). Plath reveals the interdependent relationship between mother and child as a sign of the epic

dilemma of identity formation of women. While women define their identities, in part, through the prism of motherhood, they must not subsume their identity as a separate, autonomous self.

In contrast, the Second Voice defines herself through her ability, or rather inability, to bear children. Multiple miscarriages have made her feel "restless and useless" (184). Expressing her despondency at losing a child, she bitterly asserts:

This is a disease I carry home, this is a death.

Again, this is a death. Is it the air,

The particles of destruction I suck up? Am I a pulse

That wanes and wanes, facing the cold angel? (CP 177)

The prospect of childbirth has become one fraught with frustration and despair. Death casts a constant shadow over her life and dims her prospects of happiness. While the Second Voice, a married woman working as a secretary, has managed to achieve a balance between her role as wife and professional, she feels inadequate because she is unable to have children. She uses death to define domestic space that lacks fecundity and life. The epic challenge, just as it is for the First Voice, is to reclaim a self that is independent of children.

The Third Voice, a young and unmarried female, experiences an unplanned pregnancy. Having expressed a bitterness about the ramifications of pregnancy and children, she has contemplated an abortion: "I should have murdered this, that murdered me" (180). Motherhood represents desire, but motherhood is also deadening and limiting. This is a paradox of her existence. Similar to Brooks's "the mother," the Third Voice sees having children as a sacrifice of selfhood, ironically echoing the dilemma of the other two voices:

I am so vulnerable suddenly

I am a wound walking out of the hospital

I am a wound they are letting go.

I leave my heath behind. I leave someone

Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like
bandages: I go (184)

Childbirth and impending motherhood have caused the Third Voice to feel injured and constricted, like a wounded animal in a cage, ready to strike out at a society that would restrict her opportunities for career and creativity. It is for those reasons that she decides to give the child up for adoption. Unlike the First and Second Voices, the Third Voice consciously rejects motherhood as a means of self-definition. As a single woman, she is removed from

patriarchal bonds that inextricably tie women to their roles as wives and mothers. Thus, it is this character that looks toward the future unencumbered by patriarchal-scripted conventions of women's behavior. She has the freedom to make conscious choices about her future with a level of autonomy denied the other voices.

Three Women ends with a sense of longing and regret as Plath has the Second Voice provide a final insight about motherhood and identity. The occurrence is significant because it is the Second Voice who cannot bear children and must discover another avenue of self-definition. Upon returning home from the hospital, the Second Voice finds little solace in returning to the domestic duties of her life. She spends her time mending a silk slip and stitching lace, common domestic chores. But she has trouble defining herself outside of the role of unfulfilled motherhood. Discomfited and de-centered by her numerous miscarriages, she admits "I find myself again. I am no shadow/Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife" (CP 187). Ironically, in this matrix, the woman identifies the husband as a replacement for the children she is unable to have.

All around her the city is bustling with vitality and fecundity, yet she feels disconnected from life, as "The

city waits and aches. The little grasses/Crack through stone, and they are green with life" (187). Symbolically, although the Second Voice tries to isolate herself from life and the opportunities for growth, she cannot escape the process. Just as the grasses seep in between the cracks in the stone, so too will new life erode her barriers of isolation and provide an outlet for involvement and growth. In her own words, "I recover" (187), thus opening the floodgates of the future. In the end, she finds that she will have to continue the battle for selfhood and life without admitting defeat. Yet the victory is limited because the bonds of patriarchy still tie her to the authorial figure of her husband.

The tripartite female voices in *Three Women* form a sort of counterpoint, accompanying each other's voices and providing multiple perspectives on motherhood and self-identity. While traditionally these issues had been relegated to the private domestic sphere, Plath works, through the radio verse play, to bring them to center stage. She infuses her domestic epic with a didactic quality designed to spur her audience to re-examine concepts of women's stances of motherhood and selfhood. *Three Women* thus serves as a bridge to *Ariel* by beginning a dialogue about issues central to her later poetry.

Plath's defining epic vision in *Ariel* opens with "Morning Song," with the imagery pointing to the centrality of motherhood in defining domestic space. Following epic tradition, the poem begins in *medias res*, in the middle of the action, as a mother is awakened by her child's cry. Like Brooks's "birth in a narrow room," "Morning Song" begins with an awakening of consciousness to :

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry

Took its place among the elements. (1)

The miracle of new life seems beyond the ken of the speaker as she marvels at the new child, an intrinsic part of nature that the mother asserts that she cannot take credit for it: "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand." Her response to motherhood is complex and multi-layered. Marjorie Perloff argues that "the poem turns the *aubade* convention inside out: the speaker's dawn is not one of love or joy but one of dimly felt anxiety -motherhood both frightens and fascinates her" (117). She contends further that the poem employs a type of animism in which people become associated with things, and this phenomena is highlighted through the mother's

dissociation from the child. But in her estimate, " the persistent second person address, the close bond established between the "I" and the "you," implicate the mother in the child's drama. If her infant is merely a mechanical thing, the poem suggests, it is ultimately because she is one also" (117). I would argue that rather than disconnect herself from the child in a negative way, the mother does not take credit for the new life because the miracle of giving life is such that she feels as if she has played an infinitesimal role in comparison to that of the miracle of nature.

The mother's acute awareness of the child's activities reinforces her connection to the child. It is as if the child becomes the wheel upon which the speaker's life revolves. As she listens to her child's "moth-breath," the cry activates her: "I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral/In my Victorian nightgown"(1). The adjectives "cow-heavy" and "floral" situate the speaker within the domestic realm, with the description "cow-heavy" emphasizing the maternal nourishment, and "floral," connecting flowers to femininity . The allusion to "Victorian" refers to the strict codes of conduct reminiscent of an era that greatly stifled women's roles in society, relegating them to the roles of wife and mother. "Victorian nightgown" becomes an

emblem of the suppressed desires of growth and freedom that women hid beneath prim layers of compliance and submission. Situating this poem within epic tradition, I argue that "Morning Song" serves as an invocation for the epic chronicle of *Ariel*. The poem therefore sets the stage for exploration into uncharted waters of anguish, despair, and hope that characterize the female persona's position.

"Sheep in Fog" emphasizes the sense of lack of identity the speaker feels, without a compass as to the future direction of her life: "People or stars Regard me sadly, I disappoint them" (3). With a hint of foreboding, the speaker moves into an abyss akin to crossing the Styx, the mythological river leading to the underworld. The train, the color of "rust," acts a ferry through the psychological hell: "They threaten/ To let me through a heaven/Starless and fatherless, a dark water"(3). Going towards the physical and psychological unknown disorients the speaker, who locates this unknown territory as "dark water" in which reality and truth are murky, mutable states. This "dark water" thus becomes an emblem for the domestic epic quest.

"The Applicant" deals with irony infused in the woman's objectified position within the domestic sphere. Reminiscent of Betty Friedan's coined phrase "occupation:

housewife" (41), marriage and motherhood take on the title of employment for women within a constricted domestic realm. Through "The Applicant" Plath depicts a microcosm of the attitudes towards marriage and gender relations in the 1950s, and thus provides a cultural marker much in line with epic convention. Plath reads the stifling artificiality marriage and the objectification of women as eerie markers of the time. Pamela Annas's reading of the poem provides a thoughtful analysis of the connection between the domestic sphere and a capitalist working environment:

That job seeking is the central metaphor in "The Applicant" suggests a close connection between the capitalist economic system, the patriarchal family structure, and the general depersonalization of human relations. Somehow all interaction between people, and especially that between men and women, given the history of the use of women as items of barter, seems here to be conditioned by the ideology of a bureaucratized market place. (131)

I extend this argument to say that Plath employs irony and repetition to assess the stagnancy and bureaucratization of the marriage process. This overlay of capitalistic systems results in a sense of irony infused in the poem, while

repetition effectively serves to emphasize the stagnancy of the marriage process. Interestingly, the poem begins with a role reversal in which the female speaker interviews a man for the position of husband:

First, are you our sort of a person?

Do you wear

A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,

A brace or a hook,

Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch (5)

In this matrix, the woman has the power of appraising the male, much in the same way as women have been traditionally judged. With physical characteristics coming to the forefront as the primary prism through which men are judged, the ending punch of whether men have "rubber breasts" or a rubber crotch adds to a staged counterattack against patriarchal systems of power. With this ironic twist, women are empowered as critical gazers who can invest or divest meaning through valuations, much as men do; thus they become just as connected to the objectification process as men. As Annas contends, "...Plath sees herself and her imaged *personae* as not merely caught in-victims of-this situation, but in some sense culpable as well. In "The Applicant," the poet speaks directly to the reader, addressed as "you" throughout. We too are

implicated, for we too are potential "applicants"(131).
Thus, we are all drawn into this complex system of
depersonalization.

In the second stanza, there is a shift in power marked
by women's depersonalization into the pronoun: "Will you
marry it?"(5), hence de-centering the context and
distancing the speaker from the accused gender. The
speaker applies next a public relations style pitch to
finagle a commitment of marriage from the male, thereby
legitimizing the female manipulator:

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's poultice.
You have eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.(5)
Her last question of "Will you marry it, marry it, marry
it" takes on a note of frenzy, emphasizing the centrality
of marriage in defining women. Plath, with the vein of

domestic epic warfare in the background, undercuts the sanctity and paramount importance of marriage as a legitimizing agent. Through strategies of sardonic attack, she exposes the unfair prism through which women are viewed.

"Lady Lazarus," Plath's continued attack on the patriarchy, evokes war and Holocaust image to structure women's place and the conflicts and challenges she faces. The title itself, "Lady Lazarus," renders the female ironically as the self-resurrected head of the household. In contrast, the name "Lazarus" calls to mind two biblical precedents. First there is the Lazarus resurrected by Jesus Christ from death. A second biblical precedent is the one of the beggar Lazarus at the gate of the impervious rich man who refuses to give aid to him⁵. While Lazarus reaps heavenly rewards after his arduous life, the rich man must atone for his sins in hell, as he has ignored the needs of the poor. In this reading, the poem simmers with some overtures of revenge for wrongs, of redemption and of triumph over adversity. As Caroline Barnard King Hall notes, "Beneath the defiant cadences of the poem, then, is both a plea for help and a damning indictment of the

⁵ Caroline King Barnard Hall discusses possible precedents for the title "Lady Lazarus" in her book *Sylvia Plath, Revised* that illuminate multiple readings of the text (109).

unwilling helper" (109). Thus, women stand as Lazarus figures, soliciting support and succor in their attempts maintain autonomous creative identities while holding a charge against a patriarchal system the stymies women's ability to sustain such freedom. "Lady Lazarus" thus predicts a new world order in which they will share the spoils of life that have been denied them.

"Lady Lazarus" expresses the interwoven themes of death and rebirth. The integral, circular nature of life appears as, "I have done it again / One year in every ten / I manage it" (A 6). Suicide attempts become orchestrated events geared towards focusing attention upon the plight of women. War and Holocaust imagery come to the forefront with references to "a Nazi lampshade" and "Jew linen"(6) linking the speaker to a cultural history of terrible victimization. The speaker seeks to empower herself through control of the cycle: "Peel of the napkin/O my enemy/Do I terrify?"(A 6). Just as the resurrected Lazarus casts off the grave clothes to reenter life, so, too, does the speaker in order to simulate the cycle once more: "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well" (A 6). This cycle, though an empowering one, "feels like hell" (8). A parallel between physical and psychological death readily appears:

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.

It's easy enough to do it and stay put.

It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day

To the same place, the same face, the same brute (A 8)
Moreover, she demands atonement for her suffering: "And
there is a charge, a very large charge/For a word or a
touch/Or a bit of blood" (A 8) Evoking a sense of social
consciousness to evil, she identifies her antagonists-her
doctor or members of the patriarchy who try to cure-her as
"Herr Enemy." Her identity and life signify the
patriarchy that works to stifle and contain them; thus she
demands that the patriarchy admit its role in both her
destruction and her resurrection. Calling to mind the gas
chambers that decimated human life, following a failed
suicide attempt, she declares to the imagined "Herr Doktor"
and "Herr Enemy":

Ash, ash-

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there-

A cake of soap

A wedding ring,

A gold filling.(A 9)

These items, "cake of soap," "a wedding ring," and "a gold filling," so domestic in origin, become personal attributions of her as female defined by the markers of domestic life. With the last stanzas of the poem, she ends with a reincarnation:

Herr God Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And eat men like air.(A 9)

Both God and Lucifer are constructed as figures that must "Beware" of Lady Lazarus, thus implying that rather than being dependent upon religious or socially scripted roles of behavior, the female speaker will be autonomous, even challenging the oppositional figures of God and Lucifer. Like the mythological phoenix, women emerge strong and triumphant—now able to combat men and patriarchy. In fact, with the closing description "eat men like air" that the speaker attacks patriarchy defiantly, like an agent of vengeance.

"Fever 103 °" continues along the same vein as "Lady Lazarus in seeking rebirth and redemption after psychological hell. The poet asks as to the meaning of purity, "What does it mean?" Even Hell cannot bestow the meaning of purity, as evidenced by the impotent guard dog Cerberus "Who wheezes at the gate/Incapable /Of licking clean" (61). The speaker declares defiantly, "Does not my heat astound you. And my light" (62). No longer bounded by earthly restriction, she speculates:

I think I am going up,

I think I may rise—

The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene

Virgin (A 63)

Patriarchal confines no longer bind her, and she attains a purity of self not marred by outside scripted roles.

Earthly associations are severed as she is taken within the sphere of heaven, and she triumphantly declares "(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—/To paradise" (63). The patriarchal- scripted domestic roles of mother, wife, and daughter are stripped clear and she is no longer weighted by them, but rather has reached a paradise of self-empowerment and existential freedom that fulfills the

domestic epic quest, through discarding socially scripted roles of selves.

In contrast, as the female speaker of "Tulips" contemplates the difficulties of locating a self in the face of psychological flux. The tulips in her hospital room become emblems of the quandary that the "I" persona faces. As Marjorie Perloff points out, "the anguish of the "I" is inextricably bounded up with the personality with which she endows a bunch of flowers" (118) . The woman goes on to distance herself from the defining world: "Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage" (10). She then tries to use the objects around her to stabilize her identity through that of her family: "My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;/Their smiles catch onto my skin, like little smiling hooks" (10). Familial relationships are debilitating-like weights that anchor the speaker. She laments:

I watched my tea-set, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

I am a nun, I have never been so pure (A 11)
No longer defining herself through her symbols of domesticity or family, she feels reborn as a nun who is pure because she, the speaker, no longer has earthly connections with children and family. Triumph for the

speaker is total disconnection without female
identification with flowers or hands. Her desire is "To
lie with my hands turned up and utterly empty"(A 11).
Hands, often tied to daily domestic tasks, such as cleaning
, cooking, and sewing, become liberated in emptiness:

How free it is, you have no idea how free—
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets,
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like Communion tablet.(A
11)

Ironically, the image of the communion tablet, a symbol of
regeneration and the promise of resurrection, is used to
encapsulate the release of death. Thus, the communion
tablet becomes an inverted symbol, transposed so that death
becomes the means for rebirth and new existential life.

Tulips are reborn and come to signify new life—the
"redness" of the tulips, showing that the life impetus
proves too much for the speaker who cries:

Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh
me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their
colour,

A dozen red lead sinker round my neck.(A 11)

Domestic epic becomes defacement, "And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself" (A 11). The tulips remind the persona of the pull of life, becoming an albatross weighing her down to mortality. They also draw her back into the vortex of existence— "The vivid tulips eat my oxygen." Again we have an inverted metaphor. As tulips consume carbon monoxide and produce oxygen, they lend physical life to the speaker. Then flowers prolong her life and push death further away.

The poem "Ariel" facilitates creative self-expression and communion with nature, encapsulating the culture-making impetus of the volume itself. As Caroline King Bernard Hall asserts, "the title poem of the volume *Ariel* is a compendium of the poetry; in it we find the sense of present oppression and despair, the belief in release from that oppression, and the notion of unrelentingly, uncontrollably speeding ahead through an antipathetic landscape toward a goal at once destructive and ecstatic, an end and a beginning" (111). Alvarez, who recognizes this fusion and "substancelessness" in Plath's poetry, argues that fusion of forces leads to a culmination or unleashing of force and violence. He contends that most of her late poem are "about the unleashing of power, about tapping the

roots of her own inner violence "(62). While Alvarez does not see this unleashing as original or unique, I contend that the conventions of domestic epic are an effective means to harness such psychological power. The speaker and the horse fuse together as one image in order to stage an attack on societal norms:

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees (29)

The reference to "God's lioness" suggests the Hebrew etymology of the word. As Hall points out, "In the Bible it is a designation given by Isaiah to the city of Jerusalem, a city that is presently the object of God's wrath and condemned too tribulation but which is promised deliverance in the apocalypse"(114). Thus, Ariel also stands as a beleaguered entity, blighted by powerful forces that threaten its existence, and yet promised a reprieve and safe haven after its epoch of tribulation.

The vigorous ride on the horses serves as a catalyst for animist reaction that results in an amalgamation of rider, horse, and nature—a transformation that she exults in, exclaiming "How one we grow"(29). Like a mythological Diana, the speaker gleans strength for her natural surroundings, becoming a potent instrument:

And I

Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning (30)

In last lines, there is unification of self and a marker of a new day. As Ariel and the rider move toward what Hall terms the "climactic Eye," they reach for heaven and achieve a release of tension and pressure that have accumulated during the course of the poem. This vision is one of apocalypse (Hall 117-118). Yet, the epic world order is problematized by the polarities of race—as Plath accords privilege to the "I" persona as a "White/Godiva," using mythology to situate the white female as the royal object of all male desire. In contrast, she refers to the colonized Ariel of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, as one whose name resonates with domesticity, as fairy-slave, as "Nigger-eye" and "Black." Perhaps the poet writes these epithets as links in solidarity among the oppressed, but the historical rupture between races is too jagged and worn to presume that a liberal arrogance can bridge it. Her glib

observation is only ironically a misunderstood atrocity of history. Her polarizing domestic space reasserts master/slave binaries and threaten the new world order anticipated at the poem's end.

"Lesbos" chronicles domestic epic warfare through its two female voices serving as counterpoints. Though Margaret Dickie argues that many readers may perhaps experience a detachment from "Lesbos" because it begins with "the announcement of an emotion unattached to a person" (171), I would argue that Plath uses this detachment to show the speaker's hostility towards the stifling environment of the kitchen. The "hiss of the potatoes" strikes like a snake—quickly and venomously, serving as the bite of the kitchen that infects women. Her lament that the kitchen is "all Hollywood, windowless" is double-edged in that it symbolizes the kitchen as a restrictive sphere without light. Thus domesticity becomes a script that women seek to subvert and overthrow. The speaker, so acutely aware that the battle of domestic epic is one that is passed down through the matrilineal line, recognizes the frustration her daughter will encounter: "And my child—look at her, face down on the floor" (33). The mother, caught in a hell of "stink of fat and baby crap. / The smog of cooking, the smog of hell" (34),

understands the monumental task. Such a circumscribed sphere, "windowless" and devoid of opportunity for creativity, spurs women to rebel and attack, even if it is against each other. The visitor lashes out at the young girl in an attempt to separate herself from the confining restrictions. The mother of the girl places the scene within the context of social history.

You say can't stand her,
The bastard's a girl
You who have blown your tubes like a bad radio
Clear of voices and history, the staticky
Noise of the new (33)

Here, the mother indicts the female visitor for a hypocritical stance, as the visitor who "blown her tubes," or completed the tubal ligation process, has distanced herself permanently from having children.

As a respite from the narrow reality of her daughter's projected future life, the speaker images a world in which women have the freedom to develop freely"(34). Encapsulated in this phrase—"We should meet in another life; we should meet in air,/Me and you"—is the hope for a new order, much as that expressed in poem XV at the end of Brooks's *Annie Allen*, for here, too, the speaker calls for people of

races, genders, and social classes to "Rise./.Let us combine" (*Blacks* 140).

Significantly, the visitor in "Lesbos" assumes the role of speaker in the next stanza, describing her own domestic hell and the reality of despair:

Now I am silent, hate

Up to my neck

Thick, thick.

I do not speak.

I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,

I am packing the babies(35)

The domestic realm weighs heavily upon the visitor, instilling a deep hate for domestic markers such as "hard potatoes" and "babies" that come to represent stagnancy and entrapment. The shift in perspective serves to reveal a counter-narrative of the domestic realm. As Dickie points out, "The 'hate/Up to my neck' aims righteously at the woman visited who herself hates every aspect of domesticity. And it is clear, the visitor is also submerged in the hatred inside that household" (173).

Moreover, the narrative strategies of this poem are designed to explain this reaction and the rejection of this hated and hateful woman" (173). Shifting the "I" personae from mother to visitor also provides a panoramic vision of

different responses of women within their individual epic journeys. The visitor, bitter with the containment symbolized by the domestic sphere, castigates her female counterpart as a: "Sad hag. 'Every woman's a whore. I can't communicate'" (35). The lack of communication prevents a coalition that would allow the women to stage unified battles against societal constriction. By locating "every woman [as] a whore," the speaker locks all women, as well as herself, into a fixed rather than fluid battle of the sexes. For a moment, she holds up the false hope of epic return: "I say I may be back/You know what lies are for" (36). Almost immediately she again dashes hope of a common ground among diverse women: "Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet" (36). It will be left for other battlemajds of domesticity to walk through a shared portal of opportunity.

In "Getting There," Plath interweaves elegiac form and epic, the poem's serving as a sustained lament for the figurative death of women in domestic epic warfare. The means of transit to the existential destination is on a train—an emblem for modern society—one increasingly shaped by technological advances and wars.

The terrible brains
Of Kropp, black muzzles

Revolving, the sound

Punching out Absence! like cannon.

It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or
other. (41)

The speaker uses images of war to situate the context of the social climate in which she lives. Kropp evokes thoughts of the death camps that Jews were transported to during World War II and speaks of Plath's anxiety about her German and Austrian heritage and imagined links to the Nazi regime. As she reveals during a BBC interview, her "concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense" (Hall 88). This intensity translates into her preoccupation with war and her protest against victimization.

Russia evokes images of the Cold War and the proliferation of conflicts in such as the Korean War and Vietnam War southeast Asia. In 1962, the year in which the poem was composed, war was ever-present. Such an atmosphere of war and destruction has left the identity of the speaker wounded. The route of epic journey is therefore littered with soldiers who have fallen along the wayside, as symbolized by "The tent of unending cries—/A hospital of dolls (41) who are mortally injured. Reaching the destination is a Herculean task, "The place I am getting

to, why are there these obstacles—" (42). The rhetorical question rings with a critique of a world order that makes self-assertion self such a monumental task for females.

War is the emblem of the domestic condition:

The body of this woman,
Charred skirts and deathmask
Mourned by religious figures, by garlanded children.
And now detonations—
Thunder and guns.(42)

The survivor (Antigone, Trojan women) are those who remain to bury the dead.

The female persona in the poem, much as in the epic tradition of Priam and Antigone, decides to bury and honor the dead, despite the threat to personal safety. In classic Greek tradition, the burial of the dead is an important ritual marking the position and importance of an individual in the society. Traditionally the epic hero is mourned for nine days during which time mourners bring wood for a funeral pyre as a sign of respect and honor. On the tenth day the body is burned, and on the eleventh the bones are wrapped in royal coverings and then placed in an urn. As a part of the burial ritual, funeral oil and earth may also be sprinkled over the body as well. During the

mourning period, the great deeds and triumphs of the slain hero are publicly lauded. "In Getting There," the persona emulates this ritual of mourning,

I shall bury the wounded like pupas,

I shall count and bury the dead.

Let their souls writhe in a dew,

Incense in my track. (42-43)

By burying "the wounded like pupas," the cocoon-like stage of intermediary development before full maturation, the persona witnesses the snuffing out of life and promise of the women. Their souls are forced to "writhe in a dew"--deprived of the opportunities for creativity and expression that are encapsulated in the epic journey of "getting there"--to the final destination of freedom of self-empowerment. In the end, speaker comes to locate "getting there" as a progression towards oblivion, as

The carriages rock, they are cradles

And I, stepping from this skin

Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,

Pure as a baby. (43)

Lethe, the river of hell that brings forgetfulness to those who drink of its water, becomes a panacea for the

restrictions placed upon women. Through this oblivion, the persona reaches a new state of freedom that allows her to shed "old bandages, boredoms, old faces" and emerge "pure as a baby"—recapturing the potential and possibilities of new life. To achieve a figurative paradise of womanhood means the forgetting of one's past hell. And sometimes forgetfulness is paradoxically good.

"Mary's Song" acts as link to maternal identity, unveiling the mother's agony as she foretells the fate of her child—Jesus Christ. Like one of the "Heavy Women" from *Crossing the Water*, the Virgin Mary becomes a pivotal symbol representing maternal power. Though she describes the sacrifice of Christ for the world, it is her story, her own song that she sings. Images of domesticity such as food and implements serve as emblems of sacrifice and murder. "Lamb" becomes a double-edged noun, signifying both the religious reference to sacrificed animals as well as meat that is cooked for human consumption. Imagery of the Holocaust recalls the horror of war and mass murder with a biblical analogue:

The same fire

Melting the tallow heretics,

Ousting the Jews.

Their thick palls float

Over the cicatrix of Poland, burnt-out
Germany.(52)

The geographical references to Poland and Germany provide a historical backdrop of catastrophe and war, culminating in the mass murder of a people placed in "ovens[that] glowed like heavens, incandescent" (52). Both the genocide and the crucifixion changed the course of world history. To Plath, the complementary events of revelation altered the landscape of the world in which we live. The startling juxtaposition sets the mother up as the grieving survivor. The poem ends on a note anticipating destruction of the "golden child"—symbolic of peace and new hope. The reference to the sacrifice of a golden child in the future may also be seen as anticipating future war conflicts in south east Asia. Mary, serving as a type of oracle, speaks of a pessimistic modern world.

"Daddy," advances from a mediation on the father as already commenced in "The Colossus," to the speaker's awareness that the patriarchal figure no longer holds the power of definition over her: "You do not do, you do not do/Anymore" (56), employing an inversion of the marriage

vow to negate filial bond. No longer does she "pray to recover" the father (56) and no longer does she need to admit, "I have always been scared of you...Every woman adores a Fascist / The boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you" (57). She emphasizes that the same should apply to misogynists. The speaker, transferring the authority of the father to the husband, forms a new vow, "And I said I do, I do," (58), gathering her arsenal of defense:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now. (A 58)

Standing as a specter of the father—the husband who assumes power continues to fill the shoes of the proverbial father. But a communal indictment of the vampire father, the figure of demonic Evil, recurs:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through (A 69)

These words evoke a sense of gothic, emphasizing the gloom and melancholy of the speaker's position. "Daddy" becomes a vampire of sorts, representing menace and terror that are ended only by the "stake in your fat black heart." Plath infuses ritualistic evil in the villagers, who "are dancing and stamping" on the father, spurred by a mob mentality that encourages cruelty. Conscious of the author's own German and Austrian heritage, the speaker is particularly sensitive to the horrors perpetuated by the Nazi regime. Thus, "Daddy" serves as a symbol of a potential evil in the modern world. Eradication of such evil must precede the full emergence of women as valuable and significant selves. "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through" expresses a catharsis in which the narrator can finally detach her identity from that of the father and cleanse herself of the evil tradition of male patriarchy.

Whatever the emphasis on patriarchy, The Bee sequence of poems provides a nice change from the volume *Ariel*. Plath's original order of the verses ended with the bee sequence, projecting a culmination of the domestic epic quest. Marjorie Perloff, in "The Two *Ariels*: The (Re) Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon," argues that Ted Hughes presented Plath's poems in a different order from that planned by Plath in order to suppress aggressive poems that

reflect her anger and sense of betrayal regarding his infidelity. Hughes consciously chose to end the volume on a note of despair, in other words, in order to substantiate Plath's presumed instability of mind and emotion (311,314). Perloff says that the poet's original order of *Ariel* actually ends on a note of vindication: "Plath's arrangement emphasizes not death but struggle and revenge, the outrage that follows the recognition that the beloved is also the betrayer" (330). Linda Wagner-Martin asserts that "the book plunged through her[Plath] more anguished and vituperative poems to end the emotionally positive bee sequence...With her arrangement, she was telling a story of her life as artist and married woman, and the dissolution of that life" but ending with "a healthy rebirth" (quoted in Hall 130). In light of this new model of sequential order for *Ariel*, a heightened appreciation of Plath's oeuvre comes to the forefront, one that recognizes Plath's poetic display of the range of feminine agency.

By ending with the bee sequence, Plath works towards encapsulating the domestic epic vision of *Ariel* with a continuity. Just as "Love" begins the volume, "Spring" ends it (Van Dyne 156). Van Dyne argues that the poems have a cathartic effect, contending that "the bee poems look backward to the unfinished emotional business of childhood

and her relationship to her father as much as they optimistically claim a certain future" (156).

Plath uses the bee sequence of poems to assert the primacy of women and to re-envision a social order that supplants patriarchy with matriarchy, though actually a world without sexual dominance would probably be more theoretically equitable, for the inversion of a hierarchy of sexual dominance may only reverse an evil order rather than truly dismantle it. The Queen Bee becomes an emblem of female power as she structures the world in which she lives. In a bee colony, the Queen Bee serves as the mother, perpetuating the species by laying the eggs of the colony. She is the largest bee and the center of the colony, directing the daily activity of the worker bees. She is isolated from the other bees because her domestic role as mother and governor prevents her from leaving the confines of the colony. The Queen Bee, while endowed with great power and position in colony, is also confined. Plath identifies women as similarly limited within domestic space. Domestic epic takes shape as a design to advance beyond the boundaries.

The villagers in "The Bee Meeting" engage in the ritual of the bee hive. The main occupation is hunting the queen—the emblem of female empowerment. The queen has lived

a hard fought life and struggles for survival: "She is very clever./She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it" (65-66) . As Sandra Gilbert claims, through images such as the queen bee, as well as the acetylene virgin, and a murderess of other poems in the *Ariel* volume, Plath works to create a threatening self that could be successful in the domestic sphere as well as the creative arena (210). Her poetic self- defense through reaffirmation became a most effective posture to establish the primacy of her vision. The epic battle is one of attaining the security of home, the beehive. With the passage of time, other battlemajds wait in anticipation of their opportunity to ascend the throne:

While in their fingerjoint cells the new virgins
Dream of a duel they will win inevitably,
A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight,
The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves
her.

The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no
killing.

The old queen does not show herself, is she so
ungrateful? (66)

Van Dyne asserts:

In telling the story of the queen bee, Plath sought to give shape to her experience as a woman and a poet.

Their correspondence to outward events, the psychic dream-work of the poems in which emotions and roles are rearranged, and the poet's conscious choices for the final text of these poems all indicate Plath's violent need to appropriate the queen's story in order to believe in sustaining fiction for her own." (156)

It is through the domestic epic that Plath finally formulates a "sustaining fiction of her own," one that provides her with freedom to re-script her own role in the world in which she lives. As the bees participated in daily life activities and flourished in their female-dominated society, Plath writes a new social order in which women's potency informs the continuation of society.

In "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the female persona as colonizer asserts a total power of life and death over the bees. Here Plath reveals that absolute power corrupts completely. In subtle allusion to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, taking on the role of Prospero, the master of fairy slave Ariel, her speaker asks, "So why should they turn on me? /Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free"(68). Obviously, within the complex power relationships of a patriarchal system, a subjected party

can be stymied if under the control of a capricious, impervious authority figure. Power relations are thus set up as complex.

In "Stings" the husband and wife work as a unit to retrieve honey from the hive. The beehive becomes "teacup," an emblem of domesticity. The queen bee appears battle weary and worn:

...she is old,

Her wings torn shawls, her long body

Rubbed of its plush—

Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful. (69)

Because of her duties of nursing the young, she has lost her regal quality. The speaker immediately identifies with her:

I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,

Honey-drudgers

I am no drudge

Though for years I have eaten dust

And dried plates with my dense hair. (69)

She emphasizes the potentially debilitating effects of the domestic work upon women. As Plath said about her position as a housewife in England: "...if I wanted to keep on being a triple-threat woman; wife, writer & teacher... I can't be a

drudge, the way housewives are forced to be here"(Newman 166). For her, the word "drudge" conjures up thoughts of devaluation and degradation. Although the speaker is engaged in domestic chores, she refuses to be defined by the tasks. The epic quest for survival drives her:

They thought death was worth it, but I

Have a self to recover, a queen.

Is she dead, is she sleeping?

Where has she been,

With her lion-red body, her wings of glass? (A 71)

"Recover" leads to healing and rediscovery. The poems conclude with an apocalyptic vision that the queen bee

...is flying

More terrible than she ever was, red

Scar in the sky, red comet

Over the engine that killed her—

The mausoleum, the wax house" (71)

The house becomes a tomb—the killer that robs and drains the life and energy out of the queen bee and therefore the females trapped in limited roles in the world.

In "The Swarm," the transfer of the bees to another hive becomes a battle royal—comparable to Waterloo. Napoleon sets into relief the dispossessed bees that maintain dignity even in the face of defeat. As in the

case of the Native Americans who walked the Trail of Tears in 1838, the bees are driven by the financial and social needs of the patriarchal controllers. They are thus moved "Into a new mausoleum/An ivory palace, a crotch pine" (A 73). It is a new tomb, a new limiting structure.

"Crotch" hints at the invasive effects of domination, as the noun serves as a phallic symbol. Hence, the queen bee's new "crotch pine" still exists within phallic space. By stinging the movers, they nevertheless extract some revenge for the invasion of their space.

"Wintering" serves as the culmination of the bee sequence. Without males, a new social order can evolve in which the female creative vision becomes the primary one. The domestic sphere, now a space defined by women, is one in which women can employ their creativity and their survival skills. The speaker ends the poem by questioning whether the women bees will be able to survive the long winter:

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
The bees are flying. They taste the spring. (76)

The momentary doubt as to the ability of the female bees to negotiate their surrounding evaporates as the speaker comes to appreciate the continual progression. Through their flight, the bees reaffirm the call of survival. The "spring" at the end beckons both the female bees and women to maintain faith in the regenerative cycle of life. It is this hope for the future that fuels the poetic oeuvre of Plath and galvanizes the next generation of female queens.

With Plath's final epic vision in *Ariel*, the epic return of the bees emblemizes the apex of domestic epic. Females have thus established the primacy of their visions of autonomy and inverted the social hierarchy, centering the new world order solely around females. To invert the hierarchies of gender and aristocracy, however, means inevitably to leave them so firmly in place without any redress of social class and by implication race. Nevertheless, the lasting power of Plath is that her poetic devices of vivid imagery and sparse, yet explosive language heighten consciousness of the need for newly re-scripted, empowered roles for women. Thus, Plath and Brooks's visions for a new social order in which women transcend prescription and limitation coalesce and form the foundations of domestic epic.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Gwendolyn Brooks and Sylvia Plath re-envision the conflation between the epic genre and the domestic sphere and create a new subgenre—the domestic epic. Taking up the gauntlet left by women poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D., who used the epic as a springboard for female creativity, they revised the epic form, a tradition that has been often associated with patriarchal privilege. Although the two poets came from different socio-economic and racial backgrounds, their very similar questions about the domestic space and the impact of the assignment of sexual space, particular as it shapes women's lives, permeate the work of both authors. Especially during a time of shifts in cultural paradigms in post World War II America, a need for new interpretations of female history and textuality arose. Brooks and Plath used their verse to produce poetic narratives that moved domesticity as a concern to the very center of aesthetic and intellectual life.

The decision to pair Brooks and Plath emerged from a desire to explore the way that female poets from different racial and social classes responded to the ultraconservatism of the 1950s and the more revolutionary one of the 1960s, diverse times eventually rife with burgeoning protest against discrimination by race and gender. Throughout the volume I argue that domesticity serves as a useful barometer of these turbulent times, as social emblems in thought and form. But I have almost never allowed this other valuable dimension to obscure the ultimate beauty and power of their literary art. Brooks and Plath, both in their personal lives and poetry, present contrasting pictures of domesticity of black working class and white middle class women. Yet, the seemingly divergent poetics intersect, resulting in a holistic vision about the role of domesticity in shaping individual and American consciousness.

Both Brooks and Plath married aspiring poets. Brooks wed the amateur poet Henry Blakely in 1939, and Plath the future English poet laureate Ted Hughes in 1956. Efforts to reconcile the writing of poetry with the patriarchy of domesticity proved challenging for the women. Brooks reports that she would write while "scrubbing, sweeping, washing, ironing, cooking: dropping the mop, broom, soap,

iron, or carrot grater to write a line, or word" (Kent 64). Plath awakes early in the mornings to write, when she can take respite from daily domestic chores. She warns herself: "if I want to keep on being a triple-threat woman: wife, writer, & teacher, I can't be a drudge, the way housewives are forced to be..." (Ames 166). Brooks and Plath received varying levels of support for their creativity from their husbands. When it became financially infeasible for both of them to pursue poetry full-time, Henry Blakely relinquished his career in favor of Brooks's needs as an artist. When the competing needs of the two poets in the Plath and Hughes household clashed, however, it was Plath who sacrificed her poetic aspirations to support her husband Ted Hughes, often serving as his typist and agent.

Brooks's and Plath's responses to domesticity reflect the varying histories and contexts that have a lasting impact on their lives. To Brooks, a working class African American woman, domesticity could be separated into the two distinct categories of personal work at home and labor in other women's homes. Financial circumstances and limited job opportunities often forced African American women to work as cooks, maids, and nannies elsewhere. Brooks, unlike many black women in her community, did not usually, except in her early years, work outside of the home as a domestic.

Although deemed "strange" because of her lack of outside employment, she felt great pride because of it (Kent 93). Spurred by financial necessity, her few short stints as a domestic worker inspired her with a sense of rage and protest against the discriminatory practices in hiring that helped label black women for such positions. A consequent rage appears in poems such as "Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat," the Hattie Scott vignettes, and "Queen of the Blues."

Plath, a white middle class woman, faced pressures to conform to prescribed definitions of proper women's roles that privileged marriage and motherhood over personal aspirations. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* captures the sense of entrapment, calling the domestic sphere a "comfortable concentration camp," that facilitated women's isolation and repression within the social and political realm. On the surface, she seems to conform to this identity, mastering household tasks and cultivating a mask of submissiveness. Yet, in her poems such as "Lady Lazarus," "Daddy," and "The Applicant" she rages against the constrictions of the domestic realm.

Both Brooks and Plath share a common protest against restrictive definitions of women's roles. They employ the domestic epic to encapsulate a distinctly feminine pattern of metaphoric warfare that destabilizes patriarchal

structures and asserts the primacy of new visions of feminine expression. Brooks and Plath employ poetic strategies such as encoded meanings within names, shifts in narrative voice, infusions of mythologies, and conflations of birth and death imagery to redefine the traditional definitions of domesticity. Such strategies, according to Susan Friedman, are "self-authorizing," in that they encourage women to enter a poetic discourse traditionally considered one of male privilege. Consequently, women insert their voices as legitimate participants in epic dialogue (18).

By proposing the term "domestic epic," I do not undermine the historical authenticity of the traditional form. Rather, each woman in each new area must free herself from a sexual anxiety of influence. Rather than weaken the epic tradition, artistic revisions strengthen and ennoble it, re-humanize it, (Miller, *Humanism*, 1-7) as revisions to epic "depend for their ultimate effect on our awareness of the epic norms they undo and redo" (Friedman 16). Certainly, a symbiosis develops between the traditional source and the individual remaking of it—tradition and individual talent as Eliot would say. As social revisions of the finest order, the two poets become exceedingly skilled in the conventions of traditional epic

that they subvert. Brooks's Miss Sallie, Pepita, and "The Crazy Woman," as well as Plath's "I" personae in "Lady Lazarus" and "Getting There," owe a great debt to classic predecessors and like Penelope, Dido, and Antigone.

I situate the domestic epic within the tradition of the personal epics, such as Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. As with personal epic, domestic epic neither meter nor structure is especially limiting, in part, because Milton loosened the form somewhat by writing *Paradise Lost* in blank verse during the seventeenth century. Brooks and Plath experimented with various stanzaic forms and structures like the ballad, lyric, and sonnet, as well as with various rhyme schemes such as terza rima and rhyme royal early on. When the poets developed their domestic epics *In the Mecca* and *Ariel*, they relied upon free form to express their epic visions, relishing the autonomy and creative possibilities of the form. Domestic epic conflates the subjective "I" traditionally associated with personal epic with a multi-voiced sensibility in order to shape a cultural narrative that speaks simultaneously of the individual and of the communal experience of women. The interplay between subjective and objective voices highlights domestic

tensions as women reconcile the competing demands of their roles as wives, mothers, and artists.

While the lyric form may encapsulate the emotional intensity and subjectivity in some poetry by Brooks and Plath, even the lyric does not integrate the multiplicity of voices that represent women's experiences—both subjective and objective—in the same way that epic does. Eventually, a multi-voiced sensibility makes their private poetry become public, helping transform female roles in the world.

The compulsion to examine domestic epic takes root firmly in diverse texts such Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Building upon the pioneering insights by such critics as Miller, Bernstein, and Friedman, I plan to continue testing the literary properties through which epic becomes a form to express public and private identity.

Domestic epic becomes therefore a refreshing way to inquire into the formal conventions of gendered and cultural selves. I hope to initiate an intertextual and interracial method that would allow for varying degree of difference that would celebrate both similarities and differences in experience. I would also extend this project to incorporate women writers from different historical

periods, races, and economic social classes, such as Ann Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, H.D., Margaret Walker, and Toni Morrison, to name a few, to test the elasticity and reach of the domestic epic form.

As Audre Lorde points out in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in order for women "to maximize their creative energy, differences in experiences must be acknowledged and reclaimed" (631). An acknowledgment of difference, it seems, is a first step toward real understanding of each other. As women of different races and classes, Brooks and Plath challenge false myths of womanhood, for women must explore the full realm of possibility to shape their own destinies. The capstone achievements of Brooks and Plath are multi-faceted heroes (once "heroines") who reclaim the epic selves of women warriors.

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