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Myths, Revisited: The Ageing Woman in Sara Maitland's Feminist Retellings

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In this article, I investigate the representation of ageing women in Sara Maitland's short story collection *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother* (2003). Rejecting the cultural imperative that would push women to the side-lines after hitting menopause, Maitland's mythical revisions place them and their lives in the limelight. To this end, I draw on cultural gerontology to analyse the techniques Maitland employs to reimagine characters from foundational myths of the western tradition, such as Helen of Troy and Deborah the Prophetess, as agentic, ageing protagonists. Ultimately, I show that through her sustained challenging of conventional scripts on gender and age, Maitland offers a complex, often contradictory collection that destabilises univocal narratives of desexualisation and decline in post-menopausal women.

Keywords: Retellings; myth; cultural gerontology; ageing studies; feminist literature; short story

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Mitos, revisados: La mujer envejecida en las reinterpretaciones feministas de Sara Maitland

En este artículo investigo la representación de las mujeres mayores en la colección de relatos breves *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother* (2003), de Sara Maitland. Tras rechazar el imperativo cultural que desplazaba a las mujeres a un segundo plano al entrar en la menopausia, las revisiones míticas de Maitland las sitúan a ellas y a sus vidas en el centro de atención. Con tal fin, me apoyo en la gerontología cultural para analizar las técnicas que Maitland utiliza para reescribir personajes a partir de mitos fundacionales de la tradición occidental, tales como Helena de Troya o Débora la Profetisa, reimaginándolas como protagonistas envejecidas e

independientes. En última instancia, demuestro que, a través de un desafío sostenido a los guiones convencionales sobre la edad y el género, Maitland ofrece una colección compleja, a menudo contradictoria, que desestabiliza las narrativas unívocas de desexualización y declive en las mujeres postmenopáusicas.

Palabras clave: Reinterpretaciones; mito; gerontología cultural; estudios sobre el envejecimiento; literatura feminista; relato breve

1. Introduction

Sara Maitland (London, 1950-) has lamented the fact that our "myth muscles are atrophying" (Maitland 1983, 62). This is a source of worry for her both as a writer and as a devout Christian, since with atrophy "goes our access to allegory, metaphor, and sacrament" (62). To counter this, her works offer the vigorous exercise of that very myth muscle, in that she often revises classical myths, along with other texts such as fairy tales and biblical episodes. All these texts are equally mythical in Alicia Ostriker's understanding, since they "exist or appear to exist objectively in the public sphere" and belong to a "higher culture that is handed 'down' through the ages" (Ostriker 1982, 72). Thus, a lineage of feminist writers, emerging in the 1970s and exemplified by the likes of Angela Carter, Anne Sexton and Margaret Atwood, sought to deconstruct powerful myths in a revisionist process that challenged their patriarchal underpinnings. As Susan Sellers writes, they scrutinised myth from a feminist perspective "to loosen its negative strangleholds" and "sew new variations into its weave" (2001, 7). Maitland fits easily within this genealogy, as her complex female characters take centre stage, crafting a multifaceted feminist worldview that challenges the conventional scripts at the loaded intersections of gender, sexuality and age.

Maitland identifies as a novelist, and has published several novels throughout her life, such as *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978) and *Three Times Table* (1991). However, it is in her short story collections that she reveals the full extent of her creative prowess. Indeed, she has expressed her preference for writing short stories, which she sees as possessing an "experimental […] open nature" (Maitland 2014, ch.1), and thus lend themselves to the exploration of complex topics without requiring unified moral or ideological positioning. They are "little narratives," *petit récits*, to use Jean-François Lyotard's terminology (1984, 34-60). Although not originally intended for this use, the concept of little narratives easily lends itself to literary studies, since short stories are quite literally that—little narratives. Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition* to analyse the state of knowledge in the postmodern world, which he characterised as having lost faith in totalising perspectives and "truths," preferring instead the fragmented little narratives of individual experience. Maitland's short stories, and many postmodern short stories in a broader sense, are little narratives twice over: they are small in scope and size, but they also offer a myriad of versions and (re)visions

that help destabilise universal, monolithic conceptions about truth, human nature and experience. Authoritative texts like classical myths, fairy tales and sacred documents can thus be regarded as the opposite of little narratives, that is, as grand narratives that perpetuate and legitimise certain perspectives on culture, history and society. In other words, grand narratives perpetuate grand narratives, or myths perpetuate myths. Most relevant to this article, authoritative, mythical texts preserve and transmit gender stereotypes that are construed as natural (Ostriker 1982, 73). Maitland's short stories thus perform a double mythical revisionism as they deconstruct myths about gender by rewriting some of the foundational myths of the western tradition.

In order to explore Maitland's proposal for revised myths, this article is divided into three main sections: first, it discusses the theoretical framework of this piece, focusing on cultural gerontology and the context of the creation of Maitland's collection; second, it analyses the representations of sexuality in ageing women in the tales "Helen of Troy's Aerobics Class" and "Loving Oedipus;" and third, it examines the promise of liberation after menopause that is embedded in the short stories "How I Became a Plumber" and "Deborah the Prophetess."

2. Reading Sara Maitland Through Cultural Gerontology

One of the myths challenged in Maitland's retellings, which has yet to be critically examined, is the cultural construction of the ageing woman as frail and desexualised. Here I use the term "ageing," rather than the more commonly used "older" or "mature," following the example of cultural gerontologists like Cathy McGlynn, since it draws attention to the fact that ageing is a "life-long process" that affects people differently and at different stages, rather than being a unified experience (McGlynn *et al.* 2017, 2). Cultural gerontology, its concepts and frameworks, is a particularly apt lens through which to read Maitland's retellings, given that it is a multidisciplinary field of study that emerged at the end of the twentieth century out of a desire to present a richer account of ageing, and sought to counter the traditional narratives of "frailty and burden" that are usually associated with old age (Twigg and Martin 2015a, 353). Among other things, cultural gerontology studies the way in which negative ageing narratives, although they affect everyone, unjustly target women. As Susan Sontag put it in a 1972 article, "there is a double standard of aging that denounces women with special severity. Society is much more permissive about aging in men" (1972, 31).

Sontag, and, even earlier, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, addressed the intersection of age and gender, but this was an otherwise largely unstudied area in feminist studies until the 1990s with the rise of cultural gerontology and texts like Germaine Greer's *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* (1992). Greer's foundational text questions some of the most deeply entrenched notions about ageing women, particularly those that equate the end of reproductive life with powerlessness. Greer flipped the usual script by reimagining the post-menopausal stage as a liberating

period for women, who are suddenly and for the first time beyond the sexual interest of men. As Greer sees it: "To be unwanted is also to be free" (1992, 4). However, this position reinforces the idea that menopause halts not only reproductive capacity, but also sexuality, or at least sexual appeal. Thus, it reinscribes the figure of what Lind Sandberg terms the "asexual oldie," product of a long-standing tradition that "dissociates sexuality and later life" (2015, 219). Other cultural gerontologists like Imelda Whelehan have sought to dispel the naturalised association of asexuality and old age, especially in ageing women, who, as she puts it, "are assumed to disappear into a dismal neutered future" (2009, 182). Kathleen Woodward, writing about visual culture, has also discussed the disappearing ageing woman, who is, paradoxically, both hyper-visible, in that she is seen as faulty, as a "needy consumer" that needs to buy products to slow down the natural process of ageing and as invisible, in that she is deemed sexually and culturally insignificant, well past any relevance (2006, 183). In a society that prizes youth and beauty in women above all else, the post-menopausal experiences of ageing women seem to remain largely invisible, imperceivable, unuttered and unutterable.

Contravening this disappearing cultural imperative, in Maitland's collection *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother* (2003) the lives of ageing women are not only explored, given space and prominently featured, but the subjectivity of ageing women is in fact the thematic thread that ties the collection together. In this sense, the collection contains elements of the tradition of the *Reifungsroman*, or novel of ripening. This is a term coined by Barbara Frey Waxman to describe a type of novel which highlights the experiences of an ageing heroine, who "grapples with aging's problems while also finding in old age opportunities for true *Reifung*, or ripening, of intellect and spirit" (1993, 28). While, as Susan Watkins notes, "the conventional age narrative (and one that is often used by male authors) is one of decline accompanied by nostalgia for past glories," the *Reifungsroman* redresses the process of ageing as one of growth and flourishing (2013, 224).[1] Although not a novel, *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother* contains fifteen short stories that invariably centre post-menopausal protagonists, adding up to a multi-layered, polyhedric depiction of ageing women that, to a greater or lesser extent, challenge hegemonic narratives of desexualisation and decline.

Informed by her own experience at the onset of her menopause in the nineties, the collection suggests a spirit of *Reifung*, even (in hindsight) to Maitland herself, who in her autobiographical *The Book of Silence* writes: "When I look back at those stories now I cannot help but sense that something new and happy was going on for me over these years" (2008, 16). While *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother* is a work of fiction, often verging on the fantastical, it undoubtedly draws from the deep well of Maitland's personal experience. Despite this, or maybe because of it, Maitland had trouble getting

[1] Some examples of novels in the *Reifungsroman* tradition are Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* (1999) and Clare Boylan's *Beloved Stranger* (2000).

it published. By her own admission, it was a particularly difficult collection to sell (Maitland 2008, 27), which speaks to the cultural unutterability of ageing women's experiences. Even the publishing house that finally released the collection, independent press Maia, drew the line at Maitland's original subtitle, "Role models for the menopausal woman" (27). Presumably, stating the underlying theme so explicitly was seen as a commercial liability, even at the turn of the new millennium. Maitland did, however, manage to include an epigraph by author Dorothy L. Sayers that announces in no uncertain terms the *Reifung* character of the collection: "Time and trouble will tame an advanced young woman, but an advanced old woman is uncontrollable by any earthly force" (n.p.).

Nonetheless, and despite what it might seem from the description thus far, the collection does not offer simple empowering narratives for ageing women. Faithful to Maitland's own preference for complex, experimental *petit récits*, *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother* showcases a range of competing narratives: for instance, it depicts Helen of Troy as a woman desperately clinging to her fading youth, but it also retells the Old Testament's tale of Deborah the Prophetess as a triumph only attainable by post-menopausal women. The four stories analysed below, representative of the different themes and tensions in the collection, dip into the mythical depths of the originals and come back out in changed, personal, contradictory new forms. In this sense, Maitland avoids a mere turning of the tables, or substituting the traditional discourse for a revised one that is just as univocal, instead openly doubting the need for, or indeed the validity of totalising accounts of ageing and gender.

3. Sexuality and Ageing Women

Tiina Vares writes that, until the 1990s, the oppositional relationship between ageing bodies and sexuality was broadly accepted (2009, 153). Attempts at defying this association were seen as transgressive and were often employed in popular culture for comedic relief, playing on notions of seniors as not sexually desirable, sexually active, or even sexually capable (Vares 2009, 153). Particularly for women, as Sontag points out, ageing was synonymous with a "humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification" (1972, 32). However, things have changed in the twenty-first century: not only are less restrictive, kinder understandings of human sexuality commonplace, but representations of sexually active ageing women have become increasingly visible in the last two decades through the cultural pervasiveness of the "cougar," a woman who pursues a younger man (Gwynne 2014, 47). For instance, popular TV shows such as *Cougar Town* (2009-2015) and *Grace and Frankie* (2016-2022), and films like *The Door in the Floor* (2004) all feature older women having relationships with younger men. These types of relationships also feature prominently in Maitland's *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother*, published in 2003 but written throughout the 1990s, which makes it a particularly prescient collection.

Older woman-younger man relationships are not devoid of negative connotations, however. In popular culture, they are usually portrayed as temporary flings that rarely culminate in genuine commitment based on love and respect, and the "cougars" themselves are often depicted as egotistical, desperate, obsessed with recapturing their youth and, sometimes, as the term suggests, as animalistic, dangerous and predatory (Kaklamanidou 2012, 83). The cougar phenomenon thus exemplifies two contemporary, competing ideologies about women's sexuality, namely that women's sexual desire carrying on into their third or even fourth age is healthy and natural, and that an ageing woman who is sexually desirous somewhat threatens the correct social order of things. Hegemonic, heteropatriarchal sexual scripts demand male dominance, and age difference is a form of power imbalance in a relationship, thus making older woman-younger man relationships socially unacceptable, or at least less acceptable than the older man-younger woman dynamic. Justin Lehmiller and Christopher Agnew, in a sociological study on age-gap relationships, found that while heterosexual relationships where the man is older are culturally sanctioned, society does not look kindly upon older woman-younger man relationships, and indeed "the women involved are often judged in an especially harsh manner" (2011, 40). This is the cultural background against which Maitland rewrites the stories of Helen of Troy in "Helen of Troy's Aerobics Class," and of Jocasta in "Loving Oedipus." Maitland reimagines both classical characters as ageing women who pursue younger men, albeit under vastly different circumstances, motivated by a desire to retain the illusion of youth in Helen's case and, sticking rather closer to the classical text, by an incontrollable incestuous desire in Jocasta's story.

"Helen of Troy's Aerobics Class" is a humorous short story set in an anachronistic Troy, in the tower where Helen teaches her class, which is attended by Trojan women. The tower stands well above the city, and from there they can see the distant figures of soldiers. The class is described in warlike terms, so it mirrors the battleground below: Helen is the Commander working her women through drills, the primal rhythm set by a eunuch playing a drum that "forces them all through the long repetitions" (Maitland 2003, 133). It becomes readily apparent that what these women are battling with is the passage of time, rather than an earthlier adversary such as their husbands or their fathers would face. Helen, daughter of Zeus, whose face, echoing Christopher Marlowe, once "launched a thousand ships" (133), feels its weight even more keenly. As the best-looking woman in the world, beauty places her in a relative position of power, but it also makes her uniquely vulnerable, on the cusp of losing it all as a sixty-year-old woman.

Homer's epics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* (eighth century B.C.) introduce the figure of Helen of Troy as a complex character that is positioned as both the cause and the justification of war, as scapegoat and as poetic Muse. In subsequent ancient works, on the other hand, she is a significantly flatter character, which, according to Ruby Blondell, has led to a contemporary perception of Helen as "at best, no more than a passive victim of Greek patriarchy and at worst, fickle, self-centred, and irresponsible"

(2013, x-xi). However, in recent years Helen has awakened renewed scholarly interest. Blondell relates this to a shift in feminist thought, since for second wave feminists "Helen's destructive power, vested in her feminine beauty, is less congenial [...] than the manly physical violence of heroines like Medea or Clytemnestra" (2013, xi), who could be held up as defiant fighters against male mistreatment. Contrarily, "third wave" feminism calls for a revisiting of the problematic power of female beauty and the "exercise of agency even under patriarchal constraints" (Blondell 2013, xi).

In Maitland's revision, Helen is stereotypically self-centred, obsessed with beauty and her fading youth, and antagonistic towards other women who would threaten her position, like her daughter Hermione, who scares Helen "at the thought of a young and lovely version of herself, free, unblemished, ready" (Maitland 2003, 138). Nonetheless, sticking to the tongue-in-cheek tone of the story, she justifies this attitude as being born of "duty, not vanity" (137), since her beauty must remain untouched and superior so that the world retains its delicate balance, so that the men outside remember what they are fighting for, and, especially, so that Helen herself can preserve her sense of self. Maitland's Helen stands in contrast to Ovid's, who in *Metamorphoses* fails to preserve her youthful beauty and laments the loss of her role and significance: "when she sees herself in the glass, wrinkled with age, [...] asks herself why she was twice carried off" (1955, 340-41). Maitland's Helen manages to challenge the limitations of a patriarchal value system to some extent by defying the expiry date on her worth as a woman through strict exercise and intensive beauty routines.

In this way, Helen seems to be following the directives outlined in Valerie Gibson's "cougar Bible," *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men* (2001), which includes detailed instructions on how an ageing woman should take care of herself, under headings such as *Staying Fit and Toned*, *Maintaining a Healthy Diet*, and *Dressing to Kill* (Gibson 2001, 21-24). Ultimately, all this effort is geared towards obtaining a man's sexual attention, particularly a younger man's, more difficult to get and thus more validating. Indeed, Helen attaches her continuing sense of worth and purpose to Paris's love and desire for her: "Because in the mirror of his dark eyes she could see herself as the most beautiful woman in the world—the one worth Troy destroyed and the Aegean coast turned into a mausoleum for the heroes of Greece who will never more go home" (Maitland 2003, 136). Maitland's Helen reinforces negative stereotypes about cougars in the sense that she is using her relationship with a younger man to quell her own anxieties about ageing and to reaffirm her place in her world, not out of honest love for Paris. He is, in her mind, all the men that have ever loved her combined, "all her admirers, lovers, suitors reborn" (144). He is not so much an individual who is loved but a role that needs filling, either by many or by one extraordinary man, such as Paris. Paris is so fitting, at least in part, because he is the perfect complement to Helen's personification of beauty, as the idea of romantic love personified, years later still "that glorious teenager, crumpled with passion, with love, with devil-daring" (138). However, nothing lasts forever, even in the world of gods-ordained fate, and Helen

notes: "When Troy falls, and Troy would fall, she will need Paris to be either beautiful or dead; but he was becoming both plump and cowardly" (138). With this, Helen is implying that Paris's usefulness is coming to an end, and that she will need someone else to fill his position. Thus, this story inverts the ubiquitous depiction of (beautiful, younger) women as disposable trophies for (older, more powerful) men, a theme that is tackled in its more traditional iteration in "Why I Became a Plumber," analysed below. This inversion is not wholly uncritical, though, as Helen is not presented as a virtuous heroine, but rather as a cunning and calculating woman who hides her keen self-awareness beneath the veneer of capriciousness. Furthermore, Maitland's story works to demystify Helen, whose beauty is not only given by the gods, but "very hard work for her" (146), and who is afforded a kind of human flawed complexity, not altogether sympathetic, that is often absent in her depiction as the ultimate projection of male desire. In this way, Maitland is paying due respect to Helen's intricacy as originally depicted by Homer, and, echoing Ostriker, she returns an updated myth changed "by female knowledge of female experience" that challenges "the foundations of collective male fantasy" (1982, 73).

While Helen has historically been regarded with ambivalence, Jocasta, mother and wife to Oedipus, has mostly been seen as an unfortunate woman who unwittingly commits incest and kills herself upon learning the truth. The two characters can be understood as diametrical opposites, with Helen as the destructive temptress and Jocasta as the doomed victim, but Maitland closes the gap between the two in her collection. There are several classical texts on the fate of Oedipus—Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429 B.C.) being the best-known—where Oedipus and Jocasta have children and live happily until the tragic revelation of Oedipus's true parentage. Maitland's revision, "Loving Oedipus," follows this version, but in her story, Jocasta knows the truth, and she still marries and has children with Oedipus: "Of course I knew. They say a mother always knows" (Maitland 2003, 164). This contrasts with the classic version in which, as Mark Morford *et al.* explain, "Jocasta cannot face the consequences of self-knowledge and thus must seek solace for her guilt and her misery in death" (2014, 431). The small but significant difference of having Jocasta know from the beginning does not change the tragic outcome, in the same way that Helen being self-aware and astute does not substantially impact her position. For all the differences between these retellings, both gods and men still govern women's destinies. However, knowledge and awareness imbue them both with a degree of comparative agency. Maitland's retellings, then, prioritise the exploration of female agency in strictly patriarchal and restrictive contexts over depicting female characters as broadly sympathetic.

Indeed, Maitland's Jocasta is irredeemably selfish, her desires unapologetically taboo: "My child come home. My son. My beloved. Both, and I was wild with the forbidden desire" (Maitland, 2003, 164). Her feelings are enhanced by an explosive combination of "tenderness and guilt" (164), having blurred ideas of maternal devotion and romantic and erotic attachment in ways that are socially transgressive. Beyond the

incestuous aspect, cultural beliefs about "good" motherhood place a host of expectations on women, particularly with respect to selflessness and sexual disinterest (Montemurro and Siefken 2012, 368), which Jocasta defies by putting her own sexual urges before the wellbeing of her child, ultimately dooming them both. Interestingly, cougars and their younger partners might seek to re-enact some type of sexualised mother-son dynamic (Kaklamanidou 2012, 81), which contributes to the perception of such relationships as taboo. In "Loving Oedipus," however, these sorts of liaisons are presented as natural, even as particularly desirable: "I […] murmured those things that a woman murmurs to her child and to her lover […] they fit well together, young men and older women" (Maitland 2003, 166-67). Of course, matters go beyond the realm of sexual fantasy or role-playing in "Loving Oedipus," and Jocasta explicitly reiterates her desire to have Oedipus back in her womb: "I wanted him deeper […] pushing against my cervix as he had pushed the other way, pushing in and in where he had once pushed out" (167). Jocasta's actions can be interpreted in light of the trauma she experienced after losing her baby, as a twisted coping mechanism by which she reclaims that same child through a corruption, or a monstrous inversion, of the act of birth-giving.

This story, then, like "Helen of Troy's Aerobics Class," offers a re-evaluation of the classical character. Jocasta breaches the limits of morality so she can have her child inherit a throne that is rightfully his, both through birth and through his marriage to her, but also to work through her trauma and/or to satisfy her sexual urges. She is thus far from the saintly, dedicated mother archetype, but she is not simply an evil witch either, falling instead somewhere between the two extremes. In that sense, Maitland's Jocasta anticipates the "aberrant mother" identified in TV shows from the mid-2000s and 2010s by Suzanna Danuta Walters and Laura Harrison: a deviant "anti-mom," positioned far from traditional ideas of ideal motherhood (2014, 38-39). Jocasta, then, is like these dissident TV mothers—not exactly a heroine, mostly selfish, and, though tragedy looms close, not morally condemned by the narrative.

In short, neither story offers straightforward reversals of expectations: they are not a celebration of cougars, nor a rehabilitation of Helen or a condemnation of Jocasta. Rather, they work together to place these characters under the spotlight of classical myth, which originally side-lined them, granting them full narrative autonomy while also throwing their deepest shadows into high relief. Maitland's writing thus allows for ageing female protagonists, even those who might not be unequivocally admirable, to have voice, agency and, going against the grain of popular culture, to exist within their story as emphatically sexual subjects.

4. Life After Menopause

If youth, beauty and sexuality, as well as the promise of fertility that underpins all three, are celebrated as "the ultimate female weapons of contemporary society" (Kaklamanidou 2012, 84), it follows that ageing women are seen as powerless and disposable. They are

not youthful and possibly not fertile, and are thus constructed as neither beautiful nor sexual. As Whelehan and Gwynne describe it, ageing women are "on the 'scrap heap' once their hormone levels start to shift" (2014, 5). Adulthood in women is marked as a temporary period of fertile plenitude that ends abruptly once menopause hits, leading to a period of meaningless existence and, ultimately, death. The conception of "useful" adult life as being intrinsically linked to fertility for women has a long history, and the end of the nineteenth century saw the identification of menopause as a condition requiring treatment, a pathologizing that continued into the twentieth century, and, to a lesser extent, persists now (King 2013, 134). Even though nowadays menopause in the west is experienced by women still arguably in their prime, hegemonic discourses of decline and infirmity endure, inextricably tied to the cultural prizing of fertility and the essentialist association of womanhood with childbearing. Indeed, Jeannette King writes that menopause has traditionally been regarded as "a climactic event in a woman's life, after which she […] ceases to be a woman, having lost the ability to bear children that defined her sex" (2013, 8). Although current understandings offer more nuanced views on menopause and women both, there are still powerful misconceptions that link menopause with an inevitable loss in femininity, or even femaleness.

However, as Erin Harrington writes, menopausal women, or their "barren" bodies, do not necessarily stand as the opposite of those who are fecund, "but instead have different capacities and the ability to make desirous connections and interesting assemblages in ways that are perhaps denied to actively reproductive bodies" (2018, 226). As such, in the west, post-menopausal women are culturally positioned in an ambiguous place: as both past their "useful" years, and yet as entering a mysterious stage of unwritten rules, free from the highly regulated standards that govern (fertile) womanhood. Maitland exploits this ambiguity in *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother*. In her short stories "Why I Became a Plumber" and "Of Deborah and Jael," in which she respectively engages with the fairy-tale tradition and the Old Testament, she depicts post-menopausal women as able to reinvent themselves, forming unconventional attachments and accessing a degree of power that was unattainable in their youth.

"Why I Became a Plumber" is the first short story in the collection, and it serves to establish a spirit of *Reifung*, perhaps more explicitly than any of the other stories. It focuses on an unnamed ageing woman whose husband leaves her right before the onset of her menopause. Tellingly, he leaves her for another woman who she describes as "quite like me, only fifteen years younger" (Maitland 2003, 12). The text mockingly criticises the stereotype of women as interchangeable trophies for men, valuable only as long as they are young and beautiful, while also de-romanticising the idea of marriage for women by equating it to being "employed" by a husband: "after twenty-five years on the job of wife I had been rendered redundant" (11). In this way, the story deconstructs the idealised, aspirational version of marriage that abounds in the fairy-tale genre, rendering it instead mundane and transactional. The protagonist even receives a double "severance" of sorts. First, her husband gives her a garden as a gift for their silver

wedding anniversary. The garden is old, neglected, but still retains some of its former beauty, and it will come to symbolise the woman and her journey through decaying fertility and spiritual regrowth. Secondly, he has sex with her one last time. She gets pregnant as a result, but she soon miscarries, which serves as the precipitating event in the narrative: "It was a few weeks after this that I began to hear the singing […]. I thought that perhaps my dead baby was calling for me. There was within the pure and lovely sound an unbearable sadness, a yearning, that called for me for love. The baby, I believed, wanted me as much as I wanted it" (13-14).

The singing voice turns out to belong, not to her unborn baby, but to a very small mermaid who was trapped in her house's piping system. This is where the dialogue between retelling and traditional fairy tale, which for Vanessa Joosen is typically open (2011, 17), becomes most evident. The mermaid is described as "very small" (Maitland 2003, 15), which is a direct reference to the tale by Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid." In the original tale, the adjective "little" suggests a young or childlike character, but in "How I Became a Plumber" she is a mermaid who is literally so small that she fits in the palm of a hand, which is both a twist on the original title as well as subtle criticism of Andersen's infantilising of his mermaid. The relationship with the original is not as overt as in other retellings in the collection, but there are several points of contact between original and retelling that are worth teasing out. In Andersen's narrative, the mermaid saves the prince from drowning after a shipwreck. In Maitland's tale, in contrast, it is the protagonist who places the little mermaid in the sink to revive her with water after she faints of fright. The mermaid attracts the woman with her sweet singing voice, in an echo of the siren figure who would attract sailors to their death, and from which the figure of the mermaid evolved. The revision thus intersects with both Andersen's tale and the classical myth of the siren. However, Maitland's mermaid does not attract the protagonist in order to kill her. She does not get her tongue cut out so she can get legs to walk the human world, thus losing her ability to talk, as is the case in Andersen's tale. Instead, she uses her singing to lift the protagonist's spirits: "To comfort me she sang—and to her singing I wept all the tears from the long years away" (20). They establish a friendly rapport, and the protagonist is rejuvenated through their conversations, which she expresses through naturalistic images that suggest a period of spiritual, if not physical, flourishing: "[T]alking to her I became open and fluent as a green highland burn" (20). In this way, this version directly challenges Andersen's tale, since not only does Maitland avoid the self-mutilation plot, but she recasts the silenced little mermaid as a character whose voice is used for therapeutic purposes.

Not only that: the mermaid, again contravening Andersen's tale, is well-versed in human matters and instructs the protagonist on how to deal with the plumbing, thus unlocking within the protagonist a host of possibilities that challenge patriarchal scripts: "I had come to recognise just how many women get and stay married because they are afraid of the plumber. I decided that that winter I would go on a

car maintenance course and then I would not be afraid of anybody" (20). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the protagonist develops feelings for the mermaid, the agent of her liberation. These feelings, however, remain ambiguous, although like in "Loving Oedipus," at times the narrative seems to collapse the distance between motherly and romantic love. On the one hand, the mermaid is clearly positioned as a substitute for the protagonist's lost baby. She appears from where the unborn child disappeared into, with the connection becoming more explicit when the protagonist buys the mermaid a fishbowl and immediately reveals another baby-related trauma: "it was exactly the same as the crib in the Intensive Care Unit where my long-ago baby had died" (19). On the other hand, the protagonist's descriptions of the mermaid carry possessive and sensual undertones, with the protagonist referring to her as "my mermaid" (21), often describing her extreme loveliness, and her "tiny but wonderfully full breasts" (16). The protagonist even repurposes one of the emeralds from her engagement ring to design a tiny necklace for the mermaid, effectively transferring the symbols of her old love onto her new one. Maitland thus weaves a strangely homoerotic tale that not only challenges traditional and heterocentric scripts, but also offers alternative modes of desire and attachment that cross species lines.[2]

The ambiguity of the tale extends to its magical realism. It is never revealed whether the mermaid is real or a figment of the protagonist's imagination. Menopause has been, at several points in history, thought to induce various mental health issues, from "involutional melancholia" (Sievert 2006, 17) to "moral insanity" (Ussher 2006, 120), and the protagonist herself wonders whether she is mad at several points: "'I'm going crazy.' Then I thought, 'So what. This is fun'" (Maitland 2003, 17). She could easily be read as experiencing some sort of transient madness due to trauma, but this possibility is embraced as an acceptable price to pay for happiness, for renewal, for a "greener spring than I had ever known" (19). The event of loss (in the form of menopause, divorce, miscarriage, even insanity) is thus reimagined as the gateway to emancipation. In the end, the mermaid returns to the sea of her own volition, once again challenging Andersen's tale, in which she sacrifices herself for the prince. This is not seen as an unhappy ending, since the protagonist is left with a degree of self-knowledge, self-appreciation and independence that was inaccessible to her before.

In this way, tales like "Why I Became a Plumber" and, even more explicitly, "Of Deborah and Jael," present menopause as adumbrating a new freedom, unattainable to younger, fertile women. Deborah in the latter story is an Old Testament Prophetess and Judge of Israel, whose duty is to "instil the stories" in the minds of her people "by rhythm and repetition" (102). The title of Maitland's story refers to the original biblical episode, "The Song of Deborah," in which the eponymous protagonist recounts the Israelites' victory over the Canaanites and, particularly, the victory of Jael, who kills the general

[2] The homoeroticism of the retelling might not be altogether coincidental since the little mermaid has long been regarded as a homoerotic character that represents Andersen's own conflicted (bi)sexuality. See Wullschlager (2001, 167).

Sisera in his sleep by driving a tent peg into his temple. Maitland describes the differences in the reception of this song of war and empowerment in the excerpt below:

> Although it was a song of victory, a hymn of triumph [...], the men never came to love and use it. Although it was a song of the wheeling stars and the powers of the earth, although it beat to the drum of their daily labour and celebrated the courage of a woman, the wives and mothers were shy of it, nervous at being caught out with that tune on their lips. But [...] the virgins, and the older women sang it often as they worked (102).

Above, Maitland distinguishes three distinct groups that are separated by their inclination to sing Deborah's song about Jael. First, there are the men. The song is about victory in war, and about God, two potent patriarchal symbols. However, the men never grow to like it since the victory belongs to a woman who violently kills the enemy within the domestic sphere of a tent, rather than on the battlefield. This transgression thus complicates the binaries of public/domestic, male/female, violence/safety, and in doing so it instils fear in both men and the second group, namely wives and mothers. This suggests that the song, which in some ways threatens the status quo, is unnerving to those who are most closely attached to the normative ordering of society. In opposition there is the third group, composed of virgins and old women who are too young or too old to care about who hears their singing. They are the children and the post-menopausal women who exist outside the repressive interlude in which they are ruled by their fertility and their relationships with men.

Deborah herself is an ageing woman, who is older, further ahead than the protagonist of "Why I Became a Plumber" and who has fully unlocked the power of her life stage: "It does not matter to her that she is an ugly woman. She had wept about it in her youth and grieved it silently through her adult life. Now [...] she is dry and finished as a woman, she knows too that it does not matter. She is free of that grief. Her words are strong and beautiful instead" (107). This suggests that the end of her fertile life also means the end of the limitations that come with being a woman, of the worries about being sexually desirable, echoing Greer in *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* (1991). Another story in the collection, "Choosing Paradise," a retelling of the story of Eve which explores similar themes, is even more explicitly aligned with Greer's work: "The bleeding has stopped. The curse is lifted" (Maitland 2003, 154). Returning to Deborah, she knows she is "finished as a woman," but not in the sense that she has stopped being one, rather in the sense that she currently exists outside of the restrictive delimitations of fertile womanhood. However, while she might be "dry" in a basic, physical sense, her words transcend her body and are lush, as green as the most beautiful garden.

Indeed, although there is no overt causality between being "free of that grief" and her words being "strong and beautiful" (107) a recurrent theme in the collection is that existing beyond fertile womanhood unlocks power over words. In opposition to the women that felt afraid of singing the song about Jael, or the women who need their

husbands to call the plumber for them, there is Deborah, who wins battles with her mighty words, and the woman in "Why I Became a Plumber," who explains confidently to the plumber that she knows her way around a toilet system. Ageing women in popular culture are often used as shortcuts for isolation, vulnerability and decay, which is unequivocally challenged in Maitland's collection. Instead, in her stories, ageing women find themselves and other women in similar situations once they cross the line of fertility, creating a sorority of outcasts, one that is to be feared rather than pitied. Moreover, just like Maitland herself, they have power over words, and therefore they hold power over the discursive creation of their reality.

5. Concluding Remarks

Carter famously declared herself to be in the "demythologising business" (1997, 38), an assertion that, as Sellers points out, might obscure "the new fictionalising that occurs in her work" (2001, 120). Feminist myth revisionism indeed entails a twofold process of deconstruction and reconstruction, involving the disassembling of cultural symbols and narratives to expose their role in perpetuating a patriarchal societal order, but also the creation of more inclusive versions of traditional stories. Maitland's work, although often overlooked by critics, represents a unique contribution to this tradition. In the spirit of *Reifungsroman* novels, the stories analysed in this article show her imaginative recasting of the post-menopausal stage, which is so often represented as the end of a woman's life, as announcing a new period full of possibilities. In this way, her ageing female characters, plucked straight from the mythical foundations of the western world and still dripping with accrued meaning, are free to live their sexuality past the sanctioned point—or not—, to be ruthless, self-serving and slaves to fate, or radically tender and unstoppable—sometimes all at the same time. Thus, these stories weave a contradictory, yet updated tapestry of female identity and experience without fully severing the threads connecting them to a formidable cultural heritage. Ultimately, Maitland refuses to allow her writing to "slot tidily into its place" (Maitland 2014, Ch. 1), presenting a wide-ranging roadmap for the reappropriation of powerful myths, an intricate ideological challenge to dominant representations of age and gender and, recovering the unspoken subtitle of the collection, an alternative set of role models for menopausal women.

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