

WOMEN AND TRADITIONAL STORIES IN SECOND WAVE FEMINISM

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RIASSUNTO: Questo articolo esamina la riappropriazione delle storie tradizionali – miti, fiabe e epica – da parte delle artiste del femminismo della seconda ondata, con un approfondimento sul lavoro interdisciplinare di Joan Jonas. Le storie popolari sono state spesso criticate dal femminismo per il modo in cui rappresentano le donne e il loro destino. Sebbene vi sia un'immensa varietà all'interno di questi generi, i racconti sono stati spesso percepiti come maschio-centrici; le donne sono assenti o esistono solo al servizio dei protagonisti maschili. È quindi sorprendente trovarli come oggetto di lavoro delle femministe della seconda ondata. Eppure, durante questo periodo di trasformazione, segnato da sperimentazione, attivismo e autorealizzazione, le artiste e le scrittrici femministe hanno attinto a piene mani da queste storie, esplorando le tensioni e le possibilità che offrivano. Le artiste femministe, come Jonas, hanno partecipato al cambiamento radicale all'interno delle arti e alla generazione di nuove forme, in particolare alla proliferazione della performance artistica. Influenzate dal post-strutturalismo, strutture interdisciplinari innovative hanno destabilizzato i significati e illuminato la complessità e l'ambiguità dei racconti. La varietà degli approcci evidenzia la differenza delle posizioni e delle sensibilità all'interno del femminismo della seconda ondata e le molte contraddizioni insite nel movimento, che hanno influenzato in modo significativo sia l'arte che la società contemporanea.

PAROLE CHIAVE: femminismo, seconda ondata, post-strutturalismo, interdisciplinarietà, performance, Joan Jonas, fiabe, miti, storie popolari, archetipo, sesso, genere

ABSTRACT: This article examines the reappropriation of traditional stories – myths, fairy tales, and epics – by second wave feminist artists, with a focus on Joan Jonas's interdisciplinary work. Traditional stories have often been critiqued within feminism because of the way that they portray females and their fate in the plotlines. While there is immense variety within these genres, the sto-

ries are often perceived to be male-centric, where women are absent or only exist in service of the male protagonists' stories. It is surprising then to find them as subject matter in the work of second wave feminists. Yet during this transformative period, marked by experimentation, activism, and self-actualization, feminist artists and writers drew heavily on these stories, exploring the tensions and possibilities they offered. Feminist artists, like Jonas, participated in the radical shift within the arts and the generation of new forms, specifically the proliferation of performance art. Influenced by poststructuralism, innovative interdisciplinary structures destabilized the meanings and illuminated the complexity and ambiguity of the stories. The diversity of approaches highlights the diversity of positions and sensibilities within second wave feminism and the many contradictions embedded in the movement, significantly influencing both contemporary art and contemporary society.

KEY-WORDS: Feminism, second wave, poststructuralism, interdisciplinary, performance, Joan Jonas, fairy tales, myths, traditional stories, archetype, sex, gender

1. INTRODUCTION

The retelling of traditional stories – comprising epics and myths, sagas and legends, and fairy, folk, and wonder tales – presents a conundrum for feminists. As cultural touchpoints, the narratives often mirror the disparate consequences of being female. The characters and the plots and motifs that drive the stories underscore the same constraints, threats, and omissions that women encounter in the world, albeit in sometimes exaggerated and supernatural forms. Gendered violence such as rape, femicide, and incest appear with regularity. And yet, these stories have so fully permeated the culture that their weight and significance in the collective consciousness makes them difficult for female writers and artists to ignore. In responding to the provocation for this issue, I look at a historical moment: the second wave of feminism, lasting from approximately the mid-1960s through the early 1980s.¹ During this period, there was a coalescing of energy and activity aimed at reorganizing society to create different conditions for women (though not all visions were

¹ The wave model is useful in that it conveys a sense of surges of activity and the collective concerns that generated enough energy to create a surge. The wave model allows us to look at patterns and the relationship of the

the same). The movement consisted in political activity but also in cultural production, in the form of scholarship and the arts. Interestingly, the magnetism of traditional stories drew the attention of feminist artists and writers, as well as scholars. I examine the impulses and strategies employed and what they reveal about this far-from-monolithic movement.

Throughout this article, I weave in the work of various artists and writers, with a specific emphasis on artist Joan Jonas. Since the late 1960s, Jonas has been an influential explorer of new media and innovative approaches to narrative and representation. During the era of the second wave, Jonas not only engaged fully with the zeitgeist but helped shape it. While I include some other examples, this article focuses on the American experience – not because it was the only site of second-wave production, but because New York (where Jonas grew up) and California were considered centers of the art world in the second half of the twentieth century. These places were sites of intense feminist cultural production, including happenings, performance art, and various interdisciplinary and hybrid forms. Women were instrumental in creating these new forms of storytelling.

It is impossible to imagine postmodernism without second wave feminism (or the reverse). Feminism happened in tandem with poststructuralism during a period in which the theories of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes disrupted notions of the text in ways that were particularly appealing to feminist theorists and artists. In fact, I don't distinguish here between writing, visual arts, and performance, since there was an intentional interdisciplinary blurring. Today, traditional stories are written down. However, they emerged from and still are disseminated via oral and performative means – even through song. In the visual arts texts are created without the use of language or in hybrid forms. Coinciding with this, Mario Klarer argues that «orality was one issue that feminist literary esthetics re-enlisted as a means to challenge patriarchal literary discourse».¹ Challenging the primacy of text and privileging other forms of communication (the visual, the performative, and the oral) were tactics embraced (in theory) by the intellectual second wave.

particular feminisms to the societal and even the technological contexts in which they emerge. For example, the internet and social media shape the feminism of the moment (e.g. #MeToo).

¹ KLARER 1995: 129-142.

Postmodernist strategies for engaging with traditional stories included the transgressing, undoing, dislocating, and recontextualizing of a text. A folktale could be layered onto a news story or entwined with memoir.² Even the appropriation and incorporation of quotidian objects (as I later discuss), contemporary songs, or references to popular culture created a dislocation to the traditional stories, which themselves added a symbolic weight to contemporary cultural products and events. Finding ways that the stories mirrored other cultural narratives such as the news, family histories, and religious parables, gave them new contexts.

References to traditional stories are particularly prevalent within the art and literature of the second wave of feminism, which extended from 1960 through the early 1980s. This period, which constituted a sort of collective awakening for women, provides an opportunity to examine the varied ways that these archetypal narratives were reappropriated and infused with the manifold liberatory impulses of that era. In some inquiries, it would be important to tease out and distinguish the various genres of traditional stories, such as myth versus folktale. Often, what distinguishes them might include the presence of supernatural beings or an origin story. Here, it seems unnecessary and even counterproductive to do so, since the second wave often engaged with multiple forms. The traditional categorization and frameworks used to draw distinctions rely, to an extent, on Western literary tradition and many stories defy the categorical boundaries. One example, from which Jonas drew was the Icelandic *Laxdaela Saga* (1989), which is described as both a myth and a folktale.

At first glance, it would seem that the traditional stories could only serve to reinforce female tropes and societal constructs (e.g. beauty as a symbol of goodness, female servitude and obedience, virginity as a good, and the exchange of women for social, economic, and political gain). Broadly, they seem to lack the equivalent models of heroism offered to men. Nevertheless, many women artists and writers have chosen to work with these same tales – reshaping them, parodying them, and even mining them for the richness they may have buried within.

² Because traditional stories are often first encountered in pop culture versions, artists might draw on these versions of these tales alongside or in place of more literary ones.

2. A MULTIFARIOUS MOVEMENT

The period referred to as the «second wave» was a coalescence of energy and activity. Interdisciplinary artist Joan Jonas, who came of age during this era, recalls the quality of the collective energy and also suggests inadvertently why storytelling came to feature prominently in her work:

The feminist movement exploded. Anger was a positive driving force. New technology gave women a new way of expression. [...] This was a time of women talking, becoming more open, sharing how they were represented, revealing their position. My work developed against this background; I became involved in the roles women play.³

This was not only an era of activism, but also of intense intellectual and cultural production – the ripples of which have shaped the current political and cultural landscape. The feminist art created at this time changed the very conceptualization of art in many ways, not least of which was the way that the body was foregrounded. Many feminist artists at this time, like Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, and Eleanor Antin, used their own bodies as both the site and the medium of artmaking. In *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones describes one of the appeals of performance and body art for feminists: it could «exacerbate, perform, and/or negotiate the dislocating effects of the social and private experience».⁴ There was immense variety, however; Jonas describes her body's role in her work as her vehicle.⁵

It is important to bear in mind that the second wave was not a monolithic movement, and this is echoed in its contrasting engagements with traditional stories. There were both divergent conceptualizations of progress and strategies proposed. But also, there were radically different sensibilities and notions around the body. There were conflicting beliefs about everything from motherhood to pornography. The second wave, in some ways found itself in a more complex (and sometimes contradictory) position with regard to the articulation of sex and gender than had the previous eras. While the first

³ JONAS N.D.

⁴ JONES 1998.

⁵ JONAS - TILLMAN 2024.

wave sought, for the most part, to minimize the body's significance, the second wave dwelled heavily on and in the body. One need only look to Carolee Schneeman's performances, including *Interior Scroll* (1975), or Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). The writings of Kathy Acker and Anne Sexton bring in the body explicitly. In her book *Transformations*, Sexton incorporates the mundane and the modern with the fairy tale (while drawing heavily on her struggles with mental illness and her efforts to come to terms with childhood abuse). She relocates the fairy tale archetypes in another emotional landscape: with another disposition. Sexton also writes to communicate intimate experiences of the female body, referencing masturbation and menstruation—something that was previously not done. A sometimes encrypted feminist critique of power runs through the poems. Scholar Kiss Boglárka argues:

What establishes a connection between the surgeon of [Sexton's poem] «The Abortion» and the figure of Rumpelstiltskin is the fact that in both Grimm's fairy tale and Sexton's poem a child is the basis of economic exchange. This way, the poem also suggests that the process of terminating a pregnancy is not a purely personal, intimate decision, but it is entrenched in a web of financial interactions and interests.⁶

The second wave generally differentiated between sex and gender, with the latter being cast as a social construct that varied across time and culture. Upholding the consistency of this belief was much more challenging in practice than in theory.⁷ While some feminists sought to pry gender from sex, others argued that there were innate female qualities that should be elevated for the betterment of society, such as Carol Gilligan's theory of the «Ethics of Care». And, while some wanted to minimize notions of sexual difference, the imagery and many of the core causes (abortion, childcare, health and self-knowledge, and sexual liberation) tied directly to the female body. So while Shulamith Firestone sought a technological liberation from reproductive roles in the book *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Mary Kelly foregrounded it as a site of artistic production in *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79).

⁶ BOGLÁRKA 2018: 359.

⁷ The influential work of the French poststructuralist feminists, including Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, put forth a materialist and even 'maternalist' feminism.

There were ideological battles about how and whether to engage with men. Lesbians, also by no means a monolithic group, fought for visibility in the larger movement. Meanwhile some other feminists sought to distance themselves from the trope of the lesbian, worrying it would create more resistance to their efforts. Profound differences, such as those of social class and educational background, created strong fault lines. Even one of the primary slogans from this era: «The Personal Is Political», was fraught. For some, the political needed to guard against the personal and, for others, the personal was simply the personal: reconceiving of the self and the myriad new possibilities afforded by societal changes, such as going back to college, pursuing sexual gratification, or filing for divorce. Thus, it is amid this complexity that traditional stories found an immense variety of expressions.

It is hard to draw strict chronological boundaries regarding what to include in the «second wave». While the second wave of feminism is a time-bound movement, cultural expressions tend to seep out both sides. «Which works of which artists?», since careers comprise decades and many artists influential in this era (like Jonas) are still productive. Likewise, the enmeshment of lineages of women (teachers and students, mentors, role models, and even older siblings) makes it difficult to enforce exact dates onto the cultural production. The bodies of work created by younger artists in the subsequent decades were often influenced by sensibilities developed during this time.

Nevertheless, by the early 1980s the ethos was changing. One could argue that the central themes of the movement had started to burn themselves out, to dissolve, and/or to morph into what eventually became the third wave in the 1990s. Women achieved many of the sought-after legislative and cultural changes. The movement became institutionalized in the form of women's studies departments in universities, which solidified it and a body of knowledge but also transformed the nature of the movement. Conflict within the movement, fragmentation, and the emergence of new feminist ideologies created pressures from the inside. There was a strong rejection of the second wave by many of the next generation of feminists who, at times, seemed to define their feminism as a repudiation of the second wave. This was compounded by a 1980s backlash by conservatives who had «traditional values», something that was extensively chronicled by Susan Faludi *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991).

3. THE SECOND WAVE, THE FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE, AND TRADITIONAL STORIES

Why would traditional stories be so central in the new storytelling of this era? One possibility is that, in the loosely-collective effort to identify and protest against the roots of women's oppression, second wave feminists felt obliged to contend with these cultural tales. As theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in their 1979 book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, fairy tales state «culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts because they reduce a complicated process of socialization to its essential paradigm».⁸ Women could hardly ignore these components of canonical and popular culture, which they themselves had inherited and integrated throughout their lives. Also, one cannot dismiss the stories themselves, which are truly compelling – even when they are most shocking and confounding. Crafted over centuries and even millennia, they offer rich and complex content that taps into core human archetypal motifs, such as motherhood, paternity, jealousy, violation, and vengeance.

Writer Marina Warner notes that in fairytales we find significant and plentiful female characters – protagonists (however fraught the plotlines) – and even suggests that women might be drawn to «malignant» female characters because they are more interesting. Greek myths are «full of women, full of different scenarios around women».⁹ The epics also provided household name celebrity-level characters that feminists could relocate, applying a mytho-poetic sensibility to current events, revealing power relationships, and adding the gravitas of a larger symbolic weight. For example, in Jonas's piece *Lines in the Sand* (2002), about Helen of Troy, by «juxtaposing images, texts and gestures, the artist questions and contradicts the official history and collective memory».¹⁰ Jonas explains:

I often refer to mythology and have become interested in a particular time and place and how to bring it into the present. [...] I set the piece in Las Vegas where Luxor the casino sto-

⁸ GILBERT - GUBAR 2020: 36.

⁹ WARNER 2018.

¹⁰ JONAS 2024a.

od for a contemporary copy. I did not attempt to play Helen but to translate the situation, referring in a poetic way to present conflict.¹¹

We also see this in the early, autobiographical performance art of puppeteer Theodora Skipitares, a contemporary of Jonas who was also active in the performance art scene in New York. Skipitares drew on her Greek-American family heritage to intertwine the personal with the mythic and epic. Melding a heavy interest in materiality, embodied by handmade costumes and sets, with the technology of new media, she projected scenes onto her body. Peppering her pieces with references to traditional stories, she returned strongly to the Greek epics in response to the Iraq war in the 2000s. This is an example of how women often elevated the role and the perspective of female characters (as witnesses, for example), allowing a story to be retold from a different perspective.

Traditional stories lend themselves to politics, intimacy, and also the sort of fantasy involved in world making. With their supernatural elements and slippage between animals and personhood, fairy tales and myths contain transformative possibilities for women: superhuman powers, shape-shifting, and imaginative escape. Rewards earned could defy the laws of nature: a handless maiden could grow new hands, as in the fairy tale of that name. Women artists have often drawn upon the imagined possibility of transformation into and communion with animals and the power of the female chimera to both celebrate and escape the materiality of the female body. In Jonas's work, a white dog (her dog) appears as a stand-in for many things and as a way of portaging content.

Interestingly, in traditional stories, the possibility of shape-shifting does not extend to changing sex (being changed into a tree or given a stinking donkey skin as a disguise are offered as escapes from rape: becoming a man is not). Hence these genres permit many forms of crossover – but not that one. Perhaps this is because destiny in these tales is so tied to sex, and thus these categories must be kept set in stone. Hence, not only do these stories include gender, but myths, epics, and fairytales seem frequently to center sex and gender as archetypal aspects of the story. The explicitly gendered narratives lend themselves to both contemplation and interrogation of how societies organize around

¹¹ JONAS N.D.

gender which, in these stories, even permeates notions of morality and justice – a built-in provocation for feminists.

Despite the embrace of tales and epics by many, there was also critique of these traditional stories and their patterns. Literature and art were scrutinized for their gender biases, and men's outsize roles in storytelling or in gathering and editing oral stories, affecting the shape of culture, was also called out. In 1970, writer, theorist, and visual artist Kate Millett published *Sexual Politics*, a landmark analysis of sexism in literature and art that she described as «notes toward a theory of patriarchy». ¹² By documenting the subjugation of women in canonical works, Millet sought to demonstrate that «sex is a status category with political implications». ¹³ Her work continues to have a profound impact. Years later, theorist Sue-Ellen Case echoed Millett, urging feminist readers of traditional stories and scripts to «uncover [texts'] gendered bias», insisting that they must «read against the text». ¹⁴

4. OLD NARRATIVES, NEW FORMS

The women's movement brought a specific narrative turn, one that included new speculative work, the revision and reclamation of older works, and an emphasis on autobiography and memoir. What was deemed appropriate content changed radically; literature and art was frequently confessional, personal, and graphic, emerging from the same atmosphere as (and probably influenced by) the practice of «consciousness raising». The groups had the goal of creating greater unity among women through an understanding of shared conditions, encouraging them to explore their experiences. In these groups, where domestic violence and other forms of abuse were shared, women practiced a form of storytelling that likely at times mirrored the violence and tragedies in Greek myths and the cunning survivalism of the protagonists in fairy tales. One must wonder if, by casting their lives

¹² MILLET 1970.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ CASE 1988: 5; 15.

against the backdrop of an enduring and larger than life story, women could draw upon a sense of heroine-ism that they felt they needed to overcome their circumstances.

The prevalence of violence in traditional narratives is explored by scholar Maria Tatar in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (1987), who came of age during the second wave and, like other women, was influenced by Angela Carter's appropriation of the genre in the collection of stories in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Tatar points out that even in the intentionally curated and milder versions of these stories, people are surprised by the «graphic descriptions of murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest that fill the pages of these bedtime stories for children». ¹⁵ Tatar takes on the most violent aspects of the traditional stories while also connecting them to popular culture and politics. She interrogates the enduring fascination with sexual violence against women, which she points out goes as far back as the Greek myths, rife with stories of rape. She also analyzes the women's strategies, in particular as they pursue justice. Critiquing while also finding seeds of empowerment in the graphic description of the rape of Philomela by her brother-in-law and her subsequent silencing when he cuts out her tongue, Tatar says:

Ovid gives us several lines about the tongue quivering on the ground and the stump in Philomela's mouth. She is voiceless. [...] She cannot tell her story and what does she do? She uses her craft, her ingenuity. She weaves the story into a tapestry [...] she manages to find a way to tell her story, to pass it on. It's just an early example of the #metoo movement in this powerful way women have been using stories: they've been using story as this extrajudicial tool. [...] They did not have access to the official legal system so [...] they found ways to secure justice and not just for themselves but for others as well. ¹⁶

Here we clearly see the radical potential when looked at from an angle other than victimhood. The material and embodied experience of the woman and the potential to appropriate a traditional craft to subvert injustice.

Interestingly, women often seemed drawn to some of the bloodiest and most harrowing stories. Jonas's reworkings of *The Juniper Tree*, described below, represents one

¹⁵ She also traces changes in the tales, which often suited the tastes of male collectors and editors like the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault (TATAR 1987: 3).

¹⁶ TATAR 2022.

of the most gruesome fairy tales and one of her most enduring projects. These violent stories resonated at a time when the first rape crisis centers and domestic violence shelters were being created by second wave feminists. Performative protests like the «Take Back the Night» marches (first held in 1978) harnessed a feeling of power before the specter of violence against women. Perhaps some artists or writers saw a symbolic opportunity in these stories to confront the deep fears that kept women from manifesting their potential. Whether symbolic or real, the enduring threat of femicide is a motif found in many traditional tales, like *BlueBeard* and *Scheherazade*. It is from *BlueBeard* that Angela Carter took the name for her fairy tale-inspired short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Carter, a self-described feminist, championed a sort of artistic disobedience to the expectations of the movement: she looked to Sigmund Freud and even the Marquis de Sade and her stories are infused with violence and eroticism – something other feminists might condemn as complicit.

Narratives were often characterized by intertextuality, unreliability, and self-reflexivity. Objects frequently came into play. Second wave artists reappropriated those habitually in their orbits as women and girls. Within the burgeoning body of feminist performance, a language emerged of domestic settings, quotidian objects (intimately associated with female roles), and mismatched affect. Work being made at this moment was often somber and earnest, but humor and irony – and even detachment – were also powerful tools. This incongruity seemed designed to provoke affective states in viewers. An example is Martha Rosler's 1975 *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, where viewers experience (through demeanor but also jarring sound) «Rosler's sometimes aggressive behaviour as she demonstrates the function of each object, [as] a lexicon of domestic utensils is transformed into one that foregrounds anger and frustration».¹⁷

Even gendered girlhood toys were fair game, like Miriam Schapiro's *Dollhouse* (1972). In a sense, the appropriation of fairy tales was also in keeping with the reappropriation of girlhood: Faith Wilding, who created elaborate environments using crochet and macrame, drew on mythology and the fairies in books she loved as a girl. This was a fine line. Marina Warner, who has written extensively on fairy tales, myths, archetypes and

¹⁷ ROSLER 2024.

art, mentions her difficulty in coming to terms with her desire to study fairy tales and even the discouraging impact that poet Anne Sexton had when she published her 1971 poetry collection of retellings of Grimms' fairy tales, which placed them in the contemporary moment but also presented them in a way that was patriarchal and somewhat reductionist. Sexton, says Warner, was «[blazing] with scorn of fairytale promises in her 1971 volume *Transformations*».¹⁸ Sexton found these stories less enchanting than did Warner, but saw them as generative, nonetheless.

Women seemed especially drawn to objects and activities associated with traditional crafts and labor. Time was content. Fairy tales, folktales, epics, and such are full of powerful metaphorical and material objects, like looms and weavings that connected to the body and to women's history across time periods and cultures. The metaphor, gesture, and time involved in weaving emphasized the real expenditure of time – an aspect of performance and durational art.

The materiality of the body is often very visible and very material in traditional stories, where there might be the mention of bones and blood and objects that could be experienced by the body: stones or fire, for example. These building blocks of the human experience, beckon to writers and artists with their symbolic and phenomenological presence.

Myth was integral to the poetry of second wave writers Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Muriel Rukeyser, Denise Levertov, and others. Rachel Blau DuPlessis described the entanglement of womanhood with personhood and the personal with the societal in the mythmaking, poetry, and politics of these women:

Essentially, the poets construct critiques of culture and ideology, from a radical and often feminist point of view. [...] They use their poems to analyze women's assumptions and patterns of action, revealing the cultural norms that uphold the traditional consciousness of women... Their myths have an unusual dimension, for criticism becomes the heart of the myth. Their myths are critical of prior mythic thought; they are historically specific rather than eternal; they replace archetypes by prototypes. The poets have learned from the critique of women's consciousness and from its extension, the discussion of the individual

¹⁸ WARNER 2014: 137.

in history, to honor the experiences of individual and social change that belie cyclic interpretations of history and archetypal readings of their own lives.¹⁹

Myth could also involve reclaiming maligned figures. Hélène Cixous, for example, selects Medusa in her 1976 essay, *The Laugh of Medusa*:

They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on. For the phallogocentric sublation is with us, and it's militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration [...]. You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.²⁰

Distinct from the myth is the prehistoric goddess – a pretextual and pre-narrative goddess recognized by her often-exaggerated female anatomy. A potent motif in feminist art (as well as in academic inquiry and even spiritual practice), she was an emblem of fertility, sexuality, and power. In her book *Overlay: Contemporary Art and The Art of Prehistory*, second wave art historian and critic Lucy Lippard covers the myriad ways that women incorporated goddess imagery into their work, with examples from Judy Chicago, Ana Mendieta, and Carolee Schneemann, among many others:

Schneemann's courageous stands in trying to present a "primitive" unselfconsciousness about the body, poorly rewarded by the "high art" world, function like that of the maid-figure Baubo in the Demeter myth; she allayed the goddess' sorrows through obscene jokes and dances and, as Nor Hall put it, 'by lifting her skirts, lifted her spirits.'

Judy Chicago's Dinner Party (1973-1979) – monumental table on a raised tile floor, dedicated to the buried history of women in Western civilization – arose from her conviction that 'myth has to be challenged before economics or sociology will change,' that women's deep, 'cultural hunger' for affirmative symbols is a key to the process of feminizing society. This gigantic, cooperatively executed work, which took her and hundreds of others six

¹⁹ DUPLESSI 1975: 200.

²⁰ CIXOUS 1976: 885.

years to make, begins with a series of oversized ceramic plates, devoted to the prehistoric goddesses.²¹

Some of the goddesses, like Baubo, slipped more easily between mythology and prehistory. Not only are they likely to have older roots but their iconography didn't require story. Interestingly, some pieces – in particular Chicago's – create new forms of text – rooted in the preverbal world of objects, materials, and symbols. While the female sexual and, ultimately, reproductive body were central to this visual discourse, it did not resonate with all. Firestone declared birth to be barbaric and sought alternative means of reproduction in her 1970 *The Dialectic of Sex*.

Interestingly, as the 80s ushered in a greater emphasis on the self and spiritual and personal development replaced some of the collective organizing and action. The popularity of Wicca and other goddess-centric religions, that emerged in the second wave, expanded in the 80s and 90s but became loosened from the political agenda from which they were reborn, revealing quiet yet significant changes. The self-help movement and the New Age religions came into fuller bloom and were ultimately more compatible with growing conservatism and consumerism. Traditional stories, unsurprisingly, remained of interest but perhaps with heroines with a less combative form. Alternatively, the battle became more internalized. Books meant to generate self-knowledge and growth, like *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* by psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés, demonstrate the enduring and shape-shifting potential of the traditional story for women.

5. JOAN JONAS

The exhibition «Joan Jonas: Good Night Good Morning», held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2024, staged more than fifty years of the artist's conceptual art, video, performance, and installation. In the late 1960s, Jonas began what would become a lifelong «pioneering exploration of gender and identity through a combination of myth,

²¹ LIPPARD 1983: 93.

choreography and new media».²² From the beginning, her work was a unique form of interdisciplinary, as well as intertextual storytelling. The presence of the epic, the folktale, the fairy tale, and the myth permeate the exhibition. Among others, Jonas references *The Juniper Tree*, *The Frog Prince*, *The Boy Who Went Out to Learn Fear*, Helen of Troy, and Narcissus and Echo. These archetypal tales, with their «childlike elements, ritual, magic, and so forth», form frameworks within which Jonas works out ideas about complex contemporary themes, such as perception, the commodification of women's images, and the multiple forms of gaze.²³ Sometimes fragmented or only evoked, the stories add grounding and structure to the multifaceted pieces. Jonas's work has captivated critics and historians as well as the public. Critic Sally Banes says that Jonas seems to use the stories as «backgrounds against which to create images and events».²⁴ Pamela Lee describes the complexity of Jonas's practice and the challenge of trying to summarize her work:

The world is revised, always to begin again. [...] There's the feminist reading of Jonas's work and the mediated body to account for. There are the labyrinthine fairy tales collected and rehearsed, and the peculiar ethnographies, as well as art histories, animating her investigations.²⁵

Jonas had started out less than a decade earlier with more abstract and conceptual work, employing mirrors and video (and combinations) to create visually immersive experimental pieces that, among other things, applied a directed gaze to women's faces and bodies. The mirror, the video close-ups of her and other women's faces, the screen and the frame, the mask, and the projections, echo the preoccupations too complex to be succinctly articulated. She was able to use video to fragment, disrupt, and distort.

In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), masks are added, and character emerges. Nicholas Birns writes that «the distinct contribution of Joan Jonas to postmodern performance has been the introduction of a defined narrative and a complicated relationship with anterior source material into tableaux, without yielding to conventional

²² JONAS - COOKE - MORAN 2006.

²³ JONAS - CRIMP - ROSS 1983: 79.

²⁴ BANES 1998: 83.

²⁵ LEE 2015.

storytelling».²⁶ Her first engagements with the fairy tale between 1976 and 1980, coincided with text entering her work and, with it, narrative sequence and the question of storytelling.²⁷ The arrangement of action in space offered productive challenges and offered Jonas a way to work with and against storytelling in more narrative pieces. Fairy tales embedded her feminist concerns in fragmented and layered narrative and an expanding visual field. Jonas explains: «With the fairy tale, I was once again looking to see what roles women play and how they are represented».²⁸

There was, during this time, a tension in the broader field of performance between the rejection and embrace of the theatrical, with happenings and performance and body art at the center. The new forms pioneered during this era proved to be tools to subvert the content, heightening ambiguity through juxtaposition. Short vignettes built of fragments, required the audience to piece together the story's sequence and its meaning, as they actively participated in constructing a narrative which showed itself to not be fixed. Overall this was a period in which artists seemed to not trust their own earnestness. Theatricality might be presented as tongue-in-cheek pastiche, or have its earnestness purposely destabilized by the inclusion of misfit ready-mades; Jonas did some of this. Not unlike Anne Sexton and others of the era, she balanced the stories' sense of gravity and history against the quotidian and contemporary, which she brought in through a mix of music, including more pop and country. The costumes had a provisional feel. They were paired with a curation of objects, which were more than props. In the case of masks and mannikins, their status as object, costume, or character was blurred. The aura of intentional selection and their gestural use elevated the objects and imbued them with sacred and theatrical potential (while their sourcing tethered them to the store down the street, the kitchen, or the closet). Objects in fairy tales and myths often represent the exchange of goods or transformation via goods. They might even be tied to the exchange of women – a theme seen in many traditional tales. Objects can stand in for or connect people. They mark actions and events. They mediate ritual. They also suggest new forms of ritual,

²⁶ BIRNS 2007: 74.

²⁷ JONAS - CRIMP - ROSS 1983: 79.

²⁸ JONAS 2003: 127.

like in Rosler's «Semiotics», which bombastically appropriated and even anointed the objects of the kitchen through a deadpan ceremony.

For many female artists in the 1960s and 1970s, reinvestment in storytelling was a response to and a rejection of the supremacy of minimalism, as well as abstract expressionism. Feminist artists tended to reject the quest for disciplinary purity, incorporating the ethos of Fluxus, craft, decorative arts, and other movements. Judith Baca, for example, intentionally abandoned her minimalist painting to create large community murals, epic in size and full of content. Women were reclaiming what might have been dismissed as a fussy, feminine aesthetic. For example, Miriam Shapiro and Melissa Meyer's coining of the term «femmage». Yet Jonas's narratives are not ornamented, and aspects of their minimalist quality (visible in her early work) remained as narrative and costuming entered. Even Jonas's deadpan delivery has a minimalist quality. Warner writes about her resistance to messaging and reassurance:

She deepens the strangeness of fairytales when she breaks into them and exposes their elements [...]. She cuts, intercuts and reverses the plot flow of *The Frog Prince* and *The Boy Who Set Out to Discover Fear*, then recites them in an affectless monotone. This treatment effectively strips them of consolation.²⁹

Like solid shapes, her minimalist ethos balances out what could become cluttered in the cacophonous mix of the quotidian and utopian/dystopian. It is also seen in the punctuation of abstracted forms, such as cones, which are both formal and representative. (For Jonas, these can visually metaphorize voice). She refers to the act of « putting one object next to another [as] making a visual poem».³⁰ It is a balancing act to create a poem with sufficient economy for the crafted wonder of the punctum to be felt – if not fully understood.

The Juniper Tree is a piece that comprised a large installation in the exhibition «Good Night». It was developed in the mid-1990s from cumulative iterations of the fairy tale, which Jonas had realized as a solo performance and two versions with additional actors; the first, for children, was performed in 1976.

²⁹ WARNER 2003: 89.

³⁰ *Exhibition* N.D.

It is one of her earliest installations and the first to be explicitly based on a narrative. [...] Props, relics, paintings and drawings are included in the installation, as well as garments and constructions used in the last version of the performance. The paintings on red and white silk were made during each of the performances and added one by one to the backdrop. In an audio soundtrack Jonas recites the story of *The Juniper Tree* alongside musical contributions and songs performed by the American choreographer Simone Forti.³¹

The Juniper Tree – a particularly gruesome fairy tale involving filicide and cannibalism – was recommended to Jonas by a friend as a story about a dysfunctional family. Chillingly known by another title: *My Mother Slew Me; My Father Ate Me*, Jonas says: «It is an exploration of the self. The story becomes the mirror of my projections. I look for how the stories reflect basic human psychology and behavior, while laying bare the hidden taboos».³² In keeping with Tatar's observation that women often choose malicious characters, *The Juniper Tree* features a female aggressor and male victim. It also features a good mother and a stepsister, who is ultimately the protagonist, attempting to act on the side of morality. Thus, rather than an ideologically confrontational approach, she drew out the ambiguity and narrative complexity while leaving the viewer truly wondering how seriously to take the story. The plot, in which a stepmother kills her stepson, is summarized in the song of a bird that ultimately kills the stepmother as punishment for her crime:

My mother, she killed me.
My father, he ate me.
My sister Marlene
Gathered up my bones,
Put them in a silken scarf,
Buried them under the juniper tree.³³

While it is less well-known, it is recognized as one of the most powerful of all fairy tales. Maria Tatar says:

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² JONAS 2003: 127.

³³ TATAR 1987: 213.

Its widespread dissemination across the map of European folklore... suggests that there must be something especially attractive or at least compelling about the story.... *The Juniper Tree* begins with a stirring tableau of death in child-birth, moves to a distressing depiction of child abuse culminating in murder by decapitation, and ends with what is probably the most savage scene of revenge staged in any fairy tale.³⁴

In her solo version, Jonas plays all the female roles, constructing the real and artificial mothers through her performance and the text, but also their use of – and interaction with – quotidian objects, locating this activity somewhere between the sacred and the tongue-in-cheek. «There was a continuous voice telling the story and I worked against it. I don't illustrate the stories, but I represent and react to them – find ways to make my own language in relation to the story».³⁵ Gender shows up in complex ways in this story and Jonas seems to deny the audience simple narratives. Central to Jonas's engagement with the Grimms' story is the notion of human complexity – with 'human' meaning 'female', not as an afterthought, but as the default. In *The Juniper Tree*, a boy is the victim of violence, while the only other male is a passive father who unquestioningly eats a meal made of his son's body. The two exist within a female constellation: the two mothers (one good and biologically linked; one evil and related only by marriage) and a daughter who carries the moral conscience and the urgency of justice. Even the bird – the merciless mediator of justice – is coded female in the performance. It is not insignificant that Jonas invests in the psychology of the two mothers. She extends their presence and brings fuller life to the characters. Jonas adds a plastic Gypsy mask and high heels, playing on cultural tropes, when she transforms into the stepmother, whose «appearance is rather witchy».³⁶ Banes describes a scene with the wicked stepmother: «You are thrilled by the sudden sparks of magic when the concentrated moment ignites – when Jonas saunters down the ramp dressed as a burlesque queen, to rock music that seems strange and powerful».³⁷

A malevolent female can be interesting to explore (her consumptive anxiety over being discovered and punished), but Jonas does the same with the good mother, exten-

³⁴ Ivi: 212.

³⁵ *Exhibition* N.D.

³⁶ JONAS N.D.: 86.

³⁷ BANES 1998: 83.

ding her character through the long waiting period of pregnancy. If the performance text and descriptions (as documented by Jonas and Crimp) are accurate, then the mother's longing for the child and the waiting are explored in extended potential, taking up at least a quarter of the performance. Jonas delves into the emotional volatility of the act of waiting – so much a part of women's destiny in traditional tales. Jonas also pairs this task of waiting with the many commands and rules that female characters encounter in fairy tales and life. (It struck me that pregnancy is a time of many rules, as a woman is both the physical vessel of the event of birth and an emotional participant).

Still, Jonas does not dwell in pathos; rather, she disrupts it with the zany. The following is the description of a part of Jonas's action as the good, waiting mother in the solo version. The piece features the recorded tale and sounds generated by actions and objects:

Suddenly happy, she stuffs the dripping red fruit into her mouth. Skipping over to her house, she pushes aside the red curtain, revealing a «necklace» of 2-inch wooden balls hanging on a string curving from corner to corner of the house. Lying on her back, holding the wooden balls with her feet, she makes the whole house sway like a cradle while she loudly counts from one to nine. Getting up, she goes over to the back wall and paints half a red valentine heart on the white silk cloth. She looks towards the sound of a dog. She stumbles forward, tripping under the house and dropping a box of pins that scatter loudly. After gathering them she returns to the wall to paint the other half of the valentine. She goes to the mirror and dances, monkey-like, with her own image, smiling at the reflection of the spectators.³⁸

Dale Worsley describes *The Juniper Tree* as «a narrative of epic domestic relationships and complex images of transformation in her intuitively arranged imagistic method». He says:

Jonas's treatment of this tale is full of personal ritual. At one point, she holds a box of human bones, unrevealed to the audience. And throughout a large portion of the piece, she uses the persona of the evil woman in the story to create a kind of witchcraft. At times, Jonas's involvement in this fairy tale with images from personal and universal myth produces merely curious associations, at other times, moments of highly symbolic significance.³⁹

³⁸ JONAS - CRIMP - ROSS 1983: 83-84.

³⁹ WORSLEY 1979: 45.

6. CONCLUSION

The second wave profoundly shaped the American political and cultural landscape, transforming how women engage with cultural narratives, and, in particular, traditional stories such as myths, folktales, and fairy tales. A period of great cultural impact, it also influenced feminist engagement in the following decades. During a period marked by experimentation, activism, and a quest for self-actualization, feminist artists and writers – many straddling the dissolving disciplinary boundaries – found that despite (or because of) the gendered nature of these stories, they offered profound and significant opportunities for artistic investigation. The approaches taken, like the artists and writers themselves, were diverse and even oppositional. The complexity of the stories was heightened by the lenses of new forms of postmodern narrative. Some artists and writers critiqued the stories and analyzed their sexist structures. Some invited their audience to re-experience them through another lens. Some rewrote them to create new narratives. Some delved into their darkness. Despite some patterns, there are many exceptions, which reveals how complex this period was and how manifold women's political and personal drives and beliefs were.

The era of the 1960s through the early 1980s was one of artistic innovation and changes in notions of what was art, driven substantially by feminist art. New technology allowed for new time-based and immersive art forms that distinguished themselves from traditional theater. New forms emerged, which included living theater, paratheater, happenings, and body art. Art was intertwined with increased theatrical activism, exemplified by events like the Take Back the Night marches, and the connection between ritual and performance.

Artist Joan Jonas's work, and that of others in this era, emerges within this complex coalescence of feminist sensibilities. An important figure in the feminist art movement (and art in general), she drew upon traditional stories to develop layered interdisciplinary and intertextual work that immersed and confounded viewers. With roots in an era known for its militancy, Jonas's work is neither didactic nor ideological: there are no easy lessons to be learned and no simple messages to take away. Experiencing the work leaves viewers in a perplexed state of fascination. Warner describes Jonas's performances as «locating a mood, a state of being that eludes the grasp of consciousness and falls ins-

tead with soft footfalls into the unconscious». And yet, she was invested in an extended inquiry about gender and femaleness.

For many feminists, the dilemma of the traditional story facilitated a richly tangled perplexity that made for enduring investigations. By reworking and reimagining these stories, artists and writers introduced new ways to interpret, question, and even subvert the gendered norms embedded within these tales. This era's approach was not only a critique of patriarchal structures but also an embrace of complex, multifaceted portrayals of femininity and human experience. The legacy of this movement is visible in the way feminist perspectives have expanded the boundaries of art, literature, and performance. In this work, traditional stories are not relics of the past but dynamic tools for ongoing societal, personal, and aesthetic inquiry.

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