Symbols of Femininity in John Fowles's *A Maggot*

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Résumé: *A Maggot, le dernier roman de John Fowles, nous propose une des représentations les plus fascinantes de la féminité de toute son oeuvre. A côté de Rebecca, le personnage féminin principal de ce roman qui est une de plus complexes héroïnes de Fowles, une autre figure féminine impressionnante est La Dame en Argint (The Lady in Silver) qui est représentée comme une trinité féminine personnifiant la Sagesse de l'Univers ou Magna Mater. Beaucoup d'autres symbols de la feminité (comme la description du paysage en termes féminins ou l'utilisation métaphorique des fleurs) se trouvent au long du roman et invitent le lecteur a décoder leur sens pour gagner son droit d'accès au mystérieux 'espace' féminin imaginé par Fowles.*

Mots-clés: *féminité, le Moi, anima, Magna Mater, paysage feminisé, le symbolisme des flowers, mandala*

In all his fiction, Fowles seems to promote femininity as an essentially creative and civilizing force. A number of times he expresses his admiration and acquiescence to what he calls 'the womanly way of seeing life'. In his 1976 interview with James Campbell Fowles says: 'I feel that the universe is female in some deep way' (Fowles in Vipond 1999: 42). That this is true it can only be proved by looking at one of his most fascinating representations of femininity in his novels. Perhaps there is only need to think of Rebecca the feminine protagonist in *A Maggot* or to the fact that in the same novel the wisdom of the universe is embodied by a protective figure portrayed as a powerful numinous female triad (The Lady in Silver). In his last novel *A Maggot*, besides these representations of femininity, Fowles uses other symbolic images of womanhood, such as feminized landscape, flowers as metaphors which are associated with the main characters, particularly Rebecca and The Lady in Silver, and the mandala figure of the Dolling's Cave.

The novel based on the mythical pattern of the hero's quest for self places at its centre Rebecca, a complex feminine figure whose role in Mr. Bartholomew's journey to Devon points to her archetypal status of 'goddess' and anima. The three main characters, Mr. Bartholomew, Rebecca and Dick Thurlow, prove in the end to be the facets of one and the same personality, special emphasis being laid on the feminine protagonist who fulfils a crucial task in the events. Following Jung who sees the subject as made up of the conscious, the shadow, the anima/animus and the self, Fowles presents the hero's struggle to reconcile these inner forces in order to achieve cosmic integration and transform from Man to Anthropos, a superior being. In order to do so, Mr. Bartholomew needs Rebecca who stands for his anima potentialities, for the feminine elements within the Self. Rebecca is portrayed in the novel as a 'human oxymoron' and she embodies both the prostitute and the virgin. Being this time factually a famous whore from London, Rebecca will undergo a radical transformation after the events that she witnesses in the Dolling's Cave. In the beginning of the journey she is presented as the 'maid Louise' but soon she proves to be an utterly different person whose name is not Louise. As in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles chooses to set his novel in a remote historical time from ours, the eighteenth century, but the writer addresses the subject of identity from a twentieth century perspective. The idea that identity is shifting and unstable, a relative not absolute notion like all other human concepts, stands out in the way Fowles delineates Rebecca and all the other four characters taking part in Mr. Bartholomew's journey. The five travellers are presented at first under a certain identity, but the reader will soon find out that neither of these travellers is what he or she seems to be. The pretty maid called 'Louise' proves to be a prostitute known as Fanny or 'The Quaker Maid', but whose 'real' name is Rebecca Hocknell (later, after her marriage, she will become Rebecca Lee). 'Mr. Brown', the merchant who appears to be the uncle of the younger gentleman who rides in front of the group and guides it to its destination, turns out to be an actor whose name is

Francis Lacy as Rebecca will discover later. She and her companions will be told at first that 'Mr. Brown' is the doctor who will 'cure' Mr. Bartholomew. Thus Lacy will play several roles, impersonating at the same time a doctor and a merchant. The bodyguard, Sergeant 'Timothy Farthing', is a minor actor, David Jones. The young gentleman called 'Mr. Bartholomew', Mr. B., Mr. Smith or Philocomoedia is not Mr. Brown's nephew, but the youngest son of an anonymous lord. He is the one who hired the rest of the group, gave them roles in order to accompany him during his journey and whose purposes remain mysterious until the end. From all the five travellers, only the deaf-mute Dick Thurlow is what he seems to be, the inseparable servant of Mr. Bartholomew. Rebecca herself speaks of this puzzling issue of the travellers' identity:

> His Lordship told me that evening previous we should meet them, and they would come with us, Mr. Brown and his man. And told me who he should pretend to be, a City merchant, tho' in truth he was the doctor he had spoke of; yet I must pretend I did not know such a thing, and take him for what he seemed. Which I did, yet so it happened I had seen him before, two months before in a playhouse where I was, tho' I could not mind me his name, notwithstanding his person and voice well enough. And that day as we rode Jones came up, and I knew by some gross hints he made that he likewise suspected I was not what I seemed … (*A Maggot*[1]: 311).

Rebecca's complex identity is made up of the multiplicity of selves she is able to present to others. Her 'histrionic' nature is emphasized by Hannah Claiborne, her 'mistress', who, in her deposition to Henry Ayscough, tells about 'Fanny' (the name 'Madam' Claiborne uses to refer to Rebecca) 'that she had as well been actress as whore' (*A Maggot*: 152) and that she can play 'innocence, prude, modest sister, Miss Fresh-from-the-country, Miss Timid Don't-tempt-me, Miss Simple' (*A Maggot*: 152). Her 'tricks' made Fanny (Rebecca) famous in London where she passed also under the name 'The Quaker Maid'. Despite her debasement, her playing of the *meretricum regina initiarum lenis* (182), as she is described to Ayscough by a certain Lord B---, Rebecca suffers because she considers herself 'a great sinner, my soul harder than flint. Yet it was not dead, quite dead … Most of my sisters in that house were blind, they knew not what they did; yet I was not in their case, I knew I was on the path to Hell' (305). She also suffers because she feels caught up, trapped in that 'house' and in the role she must play in order to obey Claiborne's will and men's will. In fact she wants to escape a false identity, to throw away her masks which others make her wear. She bravely tells Ayscough, not trying to find a justification for her behaviour, but simply revealing her feelings and acknowledging her condition, the condition of an eighteenth century woman, that: '… I pray thee remember we women are brought up to do men's will in this world' (305). This is the reason why she accepts Mr. Bartholomew's proposal to pretend she is the maid Louise and join him in his journey, though she does not know his intentions or his purpose. Rebecca sees in this unexpected event a way out from her prison, a way to renounce to her former life and finally a way to escape a false identity:

> It had become strong upon me that I must change my life, now saw I his Lordship was my prison's key. For when he came out with his scheme to take me away to the West, where I was born, I felt a great flutter in my heart, a new light and hope, and I knew my chance was come to flee where I was (305-306).

Following the events of the Dollings's Cave Rebecca will become a new person, and, as the feminine nature of the place she enters suggests, she will re-born. Her spiritual rebirth, her illumination is determined by her vision of a world she metaphorically renders as June eternal where she encounters a powerful feminine figure she calls first 'the Lady in silver' and then 'Holy Mother Wisdom'. It is this Lady in Silver, described by Rebecca as 'young and fair to see, with full dark hair (351) and dressed in plain silver, that had no pattern to it, nor flowering' (350), who leads Rebecca into the cave. Inside the cave Rebecca sees a sort of

machinery to which she refers as a huge 'maggot', but which in Ayscough's terms 'is no true maggot nor living creature, but something of artifice, a machine or engine' (360). It is from this machinery that the Silver Lady appears in front of Rebecca divided into three female figures:

> Now one appeared in the door, she in silver we had seen before. And in her hand she carried a posy of flowers, white as snow. Smiled she and came brisk down the steps that led from the maggot and stood before us, but there she did turn her face, for of a sudden above her did appear another lady, dressed as her, but more old, her hair grey (360) […] For this second lady did the like come down the silver steps, and no sooner was she upon the cavern's floor, than yet another lady appeared in the doorway, as 'twere in her train, that was old; her hair white, her body more frail (361).
> [Then] Both young and old that stood beside she in the centre, they did turn towards her and made as a step to be the closer. And by some strange feat, I know not how again, were joined as one with her, or seemed to melt thus inside of her (361-362).

In the image of the Silver Lady/Mother Wisdom (or in Jungian terms Magna Mater) who appears at first as a young woman and then as a woman who splinters into three different women and merges again in one, Fowles uses the symbolism of the numinous female triad linked to a mysterious (and dark or profane) fourth – Rebecca (see Onega 1989: 157-158). This joining of the feminine triad is expressed in the passing of the posy of flowers to Rebecca which is a symbol of her newly achieved identity: a new, better, because now illuminated, self. The feminine protective figure, Holy Mother Wisdom who has the power of being ubiquitous, will show Rebecca, as by magic, a wholly different world from that in which Rebecca lives. It is this dream-vision that forces Rebecca to turn inward and see as in a mirror her true self. Deep inside she wishes for harmony, stability, wisdom and moral cleanliness, a set of values according to which she will struggle to live her life after her experience in the cave. In order to do so Rebecca willingly accepts to suffer each day for her dissent. It is this spiritual cleanliness and decent life she longs for that reputable society wants to prevent her from getting since people of her condition do not deserve to live up to such standards. In the eyes of 'respectable' people like the Duke and Henry Ayscough, Rebecca stands for the Other that has to be banished from society because different and not willing to conform to the established rules.

Fowles's vision of the universe as female is completed by a feminine gendering of the landscape. The place where Rebecca prepares herself for the great encounter with the Lady in Silver assumes female characteristics. At a first glance, *A Maggot* offers a gloomy variant of 'the sacred combe'. Rebecca and Mr. B. lead by Dick have to climb to a place situated somewhere high on a mountain. There is only one description of this place in David Jones's deposition before Henry Ayscough. Jones, who secretly followed Rebecca and the two men, is the only witness who sees them climbing. At first Jones is not able to see the path which leads to the place then he realizes it was 'a shepherd's path, to gain the summer grazing upon the mountain above' (212). He calls the place the 'cwm' and describes it to Ayscough.

> Q. Where led this path?
> A. To a desert place, sir, narrow and steep and strewn with stones and great rocks among the trees. It lay on a curve, as a new moon, so, and ever upwards to the mountain. 'Twas melancholy, sir, despite the shining of the sun. I marked no birds that sang, as is their nature at that time, as if all had forsook it, which made me afeared… (212).

The 'cwm' (the Welsh term for 'valley') has nothing of the luxuriant vegetation of the combe and there are no singing birds or insects. It is an isolated, stony place, which inspires sadness and fear (at least to David Jones). It is apparently the exact opposite of the sacred combe, but a careful reading proves that despite the misleading appearances, the 'cwm' presents the features of a symbolic Garden of Eden. First of all, the 'cwm' is located near the summit of a

mountain which means it is, like the Garden of Eden, a sort of an 'axis mundi', an omphalos or the centre of the universe, a place where the celestial energies meet with the terrestrial ones. It is clearly a feminine place since it has the shape of a new moon, and the moon is a symbol of femininity linked with the symbolism of water and fertility. The metal with which the moon is associated is silver, which foretells the apparition of the Lady in Silver. It is not after all an arid place since it has a stream flowing near by which Mr. Bartholomew calls 'Jordan' and where Rebecca bathes before entering the cave. And finally the place has its 'serpent' to which Jones makes reference when he tells Ayscough that 'the cwm's end was twain and forked like a serpent's tongue …' (213). The way is described in *A Maggot*, the 'cwm' stands for birth or re-birth, in fact Rebecca's awakening to a new life.

Other symbolic ways of representing femininity in *A Maggot* are the metaphors of the flowers which become an emblem for Rebecca and for Mother Wisdom (The Lady in Silver). The main symbolic flowers used in the novel are the violets and the June pinks. The violets are present from the very beginning of the novel representing a part of the landscape depicted by Fowles. The landscape described in the novel lacks the green, lavish vegetation of the Undercliff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Mount Parnassus in *The Magus*. Instead of it, a 'bleak landscape' stretches ahead the group of five travellers. The overcast sky is 'grey', the woodlands are 'dark' because 'still more in bud than in leaf' (3). There are very few instances in which the vivid green of vegetation or the purple colour of the violets comes out from the dominant grey and dark shades of the background. Once, the group passes by 'a fast and furious moorland stream and greener vegetation: more violets, wood-sorrel, first ferns, nests of primroses, emerald young rushes and grass' (8). The brief reference to 'more violets' must be linked to a previous one when Rebecca gathers (like Alison in *The Magus*) a bunch of violets. Earlier on, during their journey, Rebecca picks up some flowers she finds near the track they follow.

> Unfastening the top of her cloak, and likewise the kissing-ribbons, she goes beside the track a little ahead and stoops where some sweet-violets are still in flower on a bank. Her companion stares at her crouched back, the small movements of her hands, the left one picking, ruffling the heart-shaped green leaves to reveal the hidden flowers, the right one holding the small sprig of deep mauve heads she has found. […] the girl straightens and comes back towards him, smelling her minuscule posy … (7).

In this fragment Rebecca is obviously linked symbolically with the violet. The main reason is again the violet's connotations of love and death. Rebecca's 'minuscule posy' is a mysterious 'minuscule' sign which foretells her symbolical death and re-birth after the 'maggot' vision in the Dolling's cave. Being a flower that stands for erotic love, the violet is also symbolic of Rebecca's status of 'goddess' of love. This must be the reason why Fowles has Rebecca 'tuck her violets carefully inside the rim of white cloth, just below her nostrils' (8).

For her gesture, Rebecca will be rebuked by Mr. Bartholomew (who alludes in this way to the symbolic use of the violet):

> "… Dost think me so blind I did not catch that look of thine at the ford?"
> "It was but a look, sir."
> "And that tuft of flowers beneath thy nose but violets?"
> "Yes, sir."
> "Thou, lying jade."
> "No, sir."
> "I say yes, sir. I saw thy glance and what it spake: what stench in the nostrils thy damned violets were for."
> "I wore them for themselves, sir. I meant no else." (42)

There is also the other meaning of the violet with which Fowles plays here. As already mentioned above, the violet can also be a symbol of chastity, of virginity. Rebecca's attitude

calls to mind a line from Meredith who makes the violet a symbol of virginity: 'She breathed the violet breath of maidenhood' (*Modern Love*, XL) – which can be said also of Rebecca who arranges the violets under her nostrils. It is evidently ironic to associate violets as a symbol of chastity with one of the most depraved whores in London! But Fowles has it both ways, since the symbol of violets works in two directions. It points ironically to Rebecca's playing of the 'Quaker Maid' to attract her clients and at the same time to her future condition, her new identity. Her new condition will be that of chastity, of moral purity because she will change from a prostitute into a fervent believer, a member of the Shaker community.

But Rebecca's posy of violets and her gestures are also symbolic in a different way. After smelling herself the flowers, she turns to Dick, her deaf and mute companion, and 'gravely holds the purple flowers, with their little flecks of orange and silver, out and up for him to smell as well' (7). Rebecca's attitude becomes a metaphor for the kind of relationship which will develop between her and Dick, but it anticipates also Dick's real death and Mr. Bartholomew's mysterious disappearance. After the group leaves the town of C., Lacy and Jones go separate ways, Mr. Bartholomew vanishes and Dick is found hanged from a tree … with a bunch of violets in his mouth. The symbolism of the flowers speaks for itself. Dick passes from life to legend being referred to as 'the violet man' (66). Besides the Jungian and archetypal significances attributed to Dick (he is Mr. B's Shadow and often alluded to as a 'dog'), Dick is associated with Attis, the Phrygian god of vegetation (see Tarbox 1988: 145). According to the variant of the mythological story discussed by Tarbox, Cybele, Attis's mother, asked him to kill himself, which he did, in a forest, under a tree. In another version of the same story, Attis went hunting and he was killed by a wild boar. Violets grew from his blood as violets sprang from Dick's mouth. This symbolic aspect of vegetation mythology, the cyclic life and death pattern, with life springing from death, is also expressed by Dick's violets 'still bloomed as green as on a bank, because the plant took sustenance from the flesh, finding it soil at heart' (67). The violets in Dick's mouth may be also interpreted as a final message to Rebecca in the silent, secret language by which they used to communicate.

Other flowers assigned symbolically to Rebecca are the June pinks from which is made the posy of flowers that Mother Wisdom gives her. These pinks are described by Rebecca as those 'that grow upon the Cheddar rocks at midsummer' (364). The symbolism of the June pinks, known today as the cheddar pinks, must be interpreted in connection with carnations since they are a species of carnations. Carnations are rich with symbolism, mythology and there is still much debate over the significance of their name. While some scholars suggest that their name derives from the word *corone* (flower garlands) or *coronation* because of its use in Greek ceremonial crowns, other scholars consider that the name is derived from the Latin *carnis* (flesh) referring to the flower's original pinkish-hued colour or *incarnacyon* (incarnation) referring to the incarnation of God(ddess) or God(ddess) made flesh. However very few think today that the name of the genus is *Dianthus* and that this name comes from the Greek words *dios* (god) and *anthos* (flower) which means 'the flower of gods'. The symbolic association of Rebecca with the flower of gods stresses Rebecca's archetypal status and points to her transformation into a superior, celestial being. To this interpretation must be added the quality of the cheddar pinks (in Greek, *Dianthus gratianopolitanus*) of being one of Britain's rarest flowers and its evergreen foliage which (like all other evergreen plants) stands for the soul's immortality.

Another important element of the representation of land as female is Fowles's use of a mandala figure which appears in the novel as the Dolling's cave, the place where Rebecca has her 'third-degree' encounter with the Lady in Silver descending from the 'maggot'. This is also the place from where Mr. Bartholomew is taken away by the enigmatic beings of the white maggot and where Rebecca is shown the extraordinary vision of what she calls 'June

eternal'. Having the shape of an egg and a feminine name (*Doll*-ing), the cave has clearly the characteristic features of a mandala. The meaning of mandala comes from Sanskrit and its main sense is that of 'circle'. Like any mandala figure, the Dolling's cave has a concentric structure and appears as a manifestation of the feminine wisdom energy as the apparition of the Lady in Silver/Mother Wisdom points out. It also offers balancing visual elements like the signs that are marked on one of the maggot's walls and described by Rebecca as a bird, a wheel and a rose. The goal of such a mandalic place is to serve as a site of passage and as a tool in someone's spiritual journey, in this case Mr. Bartholomew's and Rebecca's, as it symbolizes cosmic and psychic order. Reuniting in itself the celestial (represented by the beings in the 'maggot') and the chthonic energies (a cave is always symbolic of the entrance into the underworld) the cave stands for both tomb and womb. It is a place for the renewal of life, with life springing from death, a place where the old Rebecca (together with Mr. Bartholomew) dies and from where a new Rebecca emerges into the world, and this is why the Dolling's cave may be considered also a metaphor of the power of transformation inherent in any mandalic figure.

Fowles was fascinated by the mysteriousness of women and acknowledged the impossibility to fully understand, to fully know them and his fascination is passed to his male protagonists. Aware of his stance as a man and a writer, Fowles keeps a sort of distance from women, equating his endeavour to depict women … with the voyage of a stranger in a distant and unknown land: *Like most male artists, I have a strong female component in my character…This may help us in creating characters of the opposite sex, but of course we're always, finally, no more than sympathetic visitors in a foreign country … not natives*. (Fowles in Vipond, 1999: 61) Thus Fowles implies that despite all his efforts, a man could never fully estimate and express a woman's standpoint, since as a voyager in a foreign country he can only try to familiarize with this foreign space. His attitude seems to reveal a desire not to invade and 'possess' this territory of the feminine Other by adopting an admiring but somehow distant stance.

Notes

[1] All references will be made to the 1986 Totem Books edition of John Fowles's *A Maggot.*

References

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