



the birth of venus

poem



Life



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Muriel Rukeyser's "The Birth of Venus" (Gubar and Gilbert, 1996, p. 1695) and Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" (p. 1960) are both poems which use mythical images relating to the sea, while Ursula Le Guin's "She Unnames Them" (p. 1943) is a short story which uses mythical images relating to the earth.

This paper examines how the three authors share a common thread in their intention to depict patriarchal constructions of gender but use different aspects of an imagined physical environment to show three non-patriarchal responses to this sexist culture.

The title of the Rukeyser poem is borrowed from the title of a famous painting "Birth of Venus" by Botticelli, which shows the near-naked goddess standing on a shell and being transported by the waves on to the shore. This picture in turn is based on ancient Greek mythology and Rukeyser stresses the journey that the goddess has made from being created in a tempestuous and bloody sexual act by the "father-god", by which she means Zeus, to being re-created in a "lovely surf" by the male artist "as he saw her" by which she means Botticelli.

Rukeyser sees the goddess as moving from one patriarchal extreme (the accursed and terrible goddess of love) to another (the rose and saving image) of human love. The poem shows a changed awareness of feminine power over human history, but it stops short of making comments on what could or should be done with this knowledge. Adrienne Rich also depicts a journey, but this one goes from the surface deep down into the sea. The main figure in the poem takes slow and difficult steps into an alien world where he and she and you and I are no longer relevant distinctions.

The undersea world is a gender free zone, and it rejects not only the patriarchal technology that operates by power and force, but also the very distinction between categorizations of male and female. It is likely that Rich would be appreciative of Rukeyser's insights, but much more insistent on doing something about them and moving on to find ways of freeing human beings from restrictive gender roles which are nothing more than mythical or artistic creations.

Ursula Le Guin's story takes the archetypal myth of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and explores an alternative ending where Eve rejects and undermines the patriarchal world order set first by God and then by Adam. The story focuses on the art of naming as the key to control over the beasts, just as Rukeyser identifies the act of storytelling or painting as a way of controlling women.

Le Guin's this story undermines the whole notion of hierarchy and classification. It is more radical even than Rich's world view, because it transcends all notions of the individual as a gendered or even as a human being. Le Guin renames trees as "dark branched tall dancers" and the moon as "winter shining" which stresses what the entities do, and how they appear at that specific moment, rather than what some patriarchal authority defines them to be for all time.

In conclusion, then, it is clear that all three authors share some common starting points in revisiting the patriarchal view of gender, where men are superior and women inferior, but they would probably have many points of disagreement and discussion about how to respond to this, whether by just describing it, insisting on the fluid nature of gender identity or imagining a

whole new egalitarian world where individuals escape all categorization, taking nothing for granted and approaching every element in the world as something new.

Works Cited

1. Gubar, S. and Gilbert, S. M. (eds) (1996) *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.