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The Fury's Revenge: An Ecofeminist Reading of Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*

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ABSTRACT

In this reading of Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, the theme of revenge is explored, as it relates to the protagonist's ecofeminist revolt against what she considers to be a male-dominated society, which disregards human and animal life in its pursuit of power and profit. The novel is investigated through an analysis of plot structure and character analysis, and reveals how Janina Duszejko, an irate elderly lady – a former bridge engineer, now English teacher, Blake translator and hobby astrologer – constantly appears in the thick of things. By the twists and turns of events, be they caused by human will, animal agency or by planetary constellations, Tokarczuk lets mythical figurations appear, such as the Fury and the Wolf, whereby the destructive powers of nature are unleashed. By interpreting the subtle hints planted throughout the narrative, a final solution to the crime mystery is uncovered.

KEYWORDS Olga Tokarczuk; crime novel; revenge theme; character analysis; ecofeminism; Greek mythology; astrology

0. Introduction

It is not often that we encounter the perspective of a cranky old woman in contemporary fiction, but that is precisely what the 2018 Nobel Prize Laureate Olga Tokarczuk presents in her novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (Tokarczuk 2018).¹ Avid readers of crime literature know full well that older, cantankerous women can be a menace to society. And even though Tokarczuk's novel might well be categorized under the crime novel genre, her narrative clearly supersedes the strict framework of most plot-driven crime novels, where the mystery gets solved by analytical means, and usually within a palatable ethical horizon. In Tokarczuk's novel, however, we detect an ethical ambiguity on the part of the author in regards to the

¹All quotes from the novel will be referring to this English translation by Antonia Lloyd-Jones from 2018.

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protagonist's political and moral project. By embracing the perspective of a feminist animal activist, while at the same time – through the use of irony – creating a distance to her main character, the author casts some doubt on the legitimacy of the protagonist's ecofeminist activism. This ambiguity, which is upheld throughout the narrative, might cause ethical unease in some readers. Nevertheless, it is precisely this ecofeminist dimension of the novel that I wish to explore in my reading of Tokarczuk's feisty and irreverent account of Duszejko's unorthodox existence.²

In recent years, ecofeminist criticism has become a vital movement within literary studies as well as in cultural studies, with prominent voices such as Greta Gaard, Stacy Alaimo, Serpil Opperman and Laura Wright, to mention a select few. This relatively new branch of feminist theory builds on the legacy of materialist feminism, postcolonial theory, affect theory and other non-anthropocentric approaches to the study of nature in literary and cultural texts.

In general, ecofeminist theories highlight the ethics involved in human knowledge practices, and insist that these are always part of, and should be accountable to the wider world. Greta Gaard (2010), for instance, welcomes in her article "New Directions in Ecofeminism" what has been named the "environmental turn" in literary studies. She likewise argues in her book, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, that feminist thought only recently has become an integral part of ecocritical practice (Gaard and Murhy 1998). According to Gaard, ecofeminism represents a vital and necessary impulse needed in today's ecocritical practice "by addressing the intimate relations between social, biological, gender, sexual, and environmental justice issues" and in the process, "calls into question the very categories of gendered human and nonhuman bodies" (Gaard, Estok and Opperman 2013, 3).

Another branch of ecofeminism is devoted to the study of animal ethics and the problematics of the human-animal nexus. In this research field, philosopher and law scholar Martha C. Nussbaum has become a vocal advocate for animal rights. In recent publications she has critiqued the way canonical Western philosophy has conceived of humans as purely rational agents, as opposed to animals, who have been deemed lacking in rational capabilities. Nussbaum argues that humans are also animals and that in our comportment towards non-human animals, we need to develop a normative ethics for dealing with the pervasive problem of exploitation of and cruelty towards animals (Nussbaum 2001a). She proposes to use her "capabilities approach"

²In her review of Tokarczuk's 2012 text, *Bear's Moment* (*Moment niedźwiedzia*), (Tokarczuk 2014), Kazi-miera Szczuka emphasizes Tokarczuk's political engagement, which is closely linked to her literary project, and alerts us to thematic similarities between Tokarczuk's prior works and *Bear's Moment*, when she writes: "Its originality lies in the language of Tokarczuk's ideas: Another world is possible. We would just need to think it up first, and then write it. This is Tokarczuk's credo in its most condensed form. This is Tokarczuk's signature across all of her works. [...] [T]here is also ample space here for sharp opposition to the abuse and eating of animals" (Szczuka 2012, 18).

in the study of animal ethics, which can be applied to a wide range of issues, including animals' right to life, physical and emotional health, a safe environment, etc. (Nussbaum 2006). By locating the question of animal welfare in the domain of national and international lawmaking, Nussbaum calls for a regulation of human behavior concerning issues such as farming industry, hunting regulations, aggressive marketing of animal products, assault on animal habitats and other instances of cruelty against animals. She also favors species-specific legislation to ensure the rights for animals to pursue a happy and healthy life.³

In my reading of Tokarczuk's novel, the ecofeminist aspects of the text will be treated in connection with what I identify as its cluster of ecofeminist ideas and values, to which the protagonist devotedly subscribes. This thematic cluster centers on ideas such as human intervention into animal habitats, hunting practices, the human consumption of animals as well as the exploitation, incarceration – and prolonged cruelty – to animals for human profit. Janina Duszejko takes a vocal and committed stand in the ecofeminist struggle against the above practices. In addition, her feminist convictions, based on her lifelong experience as a female bridge engineer, teacher, freelance translator and caretaker of vacation homes, has taught her that gender is closely intertwined with the current ecological and cosmic order, which she claims suffers from a lack of feminine perspective. Thus, it is in the concrete analysis of the plot structure, the character analysis as well as the motifs and themes in the novel that I will deal with this ecofeminist dimension, and not by way of a lengthy theoretical discussion.

In addition to the ecofeminist dimensions of the text, William Blake and his mythic-poetic universe constitutes one of the most important intertextual threads in the novel, where each chapter starts with a citation from Blake's literature and letters. The title of the novel is also taken directly from his poem "Proverbs of Hell," where Blake writes in the second stanza of the first section of the poem: "Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead" (Blake 2011, 66). The British poet has been hailed as an early forerunner of ecological thinking and the animal rights movement. This inspiration from Blake and its significance for the novel as a whole undoubtedly deserves a separate study, apart from the reading at hand,⁴ but it will not be a major focus in the following reading of the novel.

³Martha Nussbaum has in recent years been increasingly engaged in the question of animal rights, and has given a series of public lectures on the topic, which will be published in her forthcoming book entitled *Justice for Animals: A New Approach to Animal Ethics*, which will appear on Simon and Schuster in 2022.

⁴Olga Tokarczuk's extensive use of capital letters in her narrative is clearly inspired by William Blake. This is a literary device (*prosopopeia*) that she uses to give natural phenomena, different species as well as material objects positive qualities, and even souls. It allows her, for example, to give deer, dogs, plants, the Dark, the Light as well as her car, the Samurai, human-like attributes.

2. Reception⁵

To date, there are few, if any, in-depth studies of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* available in English. However, the novel received numerous reviews when the first English translation appeared in 2018, which coincided with the announcement of Tokarczuk's reception of the Nobel Prize. Many reviews emphasize the intertextual link in her novel with William Blake's poetry. Among them, Kamil Ahsan highlights Tokarczuk's use of Blake's "sharp indictment of human encroachment into nature" and that she succeeds in establishing a kinship between the poet's celebration of innocent nature and the protagonist's revolt against the killing of animals (Ahsan 2019). Another reviewer, Sarah Perry, finds the novel hard to categorize, which in her view constitutes one of its strengths: "In effect, it is a murder mystery: [...] it is also a primer on the politics of vegetarianism, a dark feminist comedy, and existential fable and a paean to William Blake" (Perry, 2018).

Rachel Riederer writes in her review that "Janina and her strange plateau exist on the edge of the magical and the real" and that the novel vacillates between being a crime novel and a fairy tale. Tokarczuk manages in what Riederer calls a "gripping eco-mystery" to show how human cruelty to animals will lead us to collective disaster, should a radical paradigm shift not come about soon. The protagonist's redemptive measures may be drastic, Riederer admits, and underscores the unsettling sensation she had while reading the novel, as she was "told a fairy story from the perspective of the witch" (Riederer 2019).

Eva-Kersti Almerud emphasizes in her paper the many ways in which Tokarczuk exceeds boundaries and limits, be they of traditional literary form and styles, geographical borders or moral norms (Almerud 2017). Almerud makes use of a post-humanist approach to untangle the many ways Tokarczuk in her novel blurs the boundaries between human and animal, man and woman, fact and fiction, history and myth, dream and reality, as well as formal boundaries between nations and peoples.

Joanna Trzeciak Huss's review focuses on the main character's "epistemology of anger," which she identifies in the main character's actions and interventions in her fight for animal rights. According to Huss, what Tokarczuk achieves by portraying her main character in this way, is to reveal "the danger of demonizing those on the other side of an ideological debate [...]" and thus "plays into the hands of the critic of animal rights, who mistakenly claims that a necessary correlate of elevating the moral status of animals is to lessen the status of humans" (Huss 2020, 86).

⁵Since I unfortunately do not read Polish, I have had to rely exclusively on reviews in English, Norwegian and Swedish.

While I appreciate and have profited from the insights found in the above reviews, I will primarily engage explicitly with Almerud and Huss' contributions in my reading of Tokarczuk's novel.

3. Structure and narrative perspective

The novel takes place in the borderland between Poland and the Czech Republic in the near past on a windy, godforsaken plateau with seven houses. We follow the protagonist and first-person narrator Janina Duszejko's life through a year, from winter via spring and summer until autumn and winter's return, natural cycles that are simultaneously mirrored in astrological constellations. As readers we become intimate companions to Duszejko experience of the seasonal changes and the natural cycles of life and death, all the while a murder mystery unfolds in the village. The novel starts out in the darkness of night and death in a small (imaginary) village called Plateau in the Klodzko Valley and ends with the protagonist's escape over the border to the Czech Republic, where she is met by sunlight and warmth, and by her lover Boros, with whom she plans to start a new life.

Above the village Plateau there are four vacation homes that are occupied only in the summer season, and which Duszejko oversees and takes care of in the owners' absence, in addition to her job as an English teacher at the local grade school. In the remaining houses there are three all-year inhabitants, who seldom or never communicate: the narrator and protagonist Janina Duszejko, Big Foot and Oddball. The novel opens with Oddball's banging on Duszejko's door in the middle of the night, asking her to accompany him to Big Foot's house, where Oddball has found his neighbor dead and in a terrible state, after having choked on a bone from a deer he was in process of consuming.

In addition to the corpse of Big Foot, there appear in the course of the narrative four other dead bodies, all of whom have suffered a violent death: The Police Commandant, the business man and fox breeder Innerd, the President of the Mushroom Club and Father Rustle. The series of suspicious deaths in the area surrounding Plateau understandably create much anxiety and speculation in the village. Tension gradually builds up in the novel as more corpses appear, and the attempt to solve the murder mysteries constitutes the main plot structure in the novel.

The first-person narrator and amateur astrologer, Janina Duszejko, is constantly situating herself in the thick of things. She repeatedly intervenes in the police investigations with frequent communications, either through personal visits to the police station or through mail correspondence. The police clearly regard her as a nuisance with her wild, speculative theories of who the culprits are. She insists on sharing her murder theories, which range from planetary interference and stellar constellations to the revenge of the animals. The

police completely ignore her and call her repeatedly by the wrong surname “Duszenko” (Tokarczuk 2018, 194). This mispronunciation of her name annoys her immensely, and she constantly has to correct them in regard to her identity.

As for herself, she insists on defining her environment, for instance by refusing to call people by their proper names. Instead, she creates nicknames for everyone, and thus rewrites the world according to her own subjective and affective experience. Those she dislikes get nicknames such as “Big Foot,” “Oddball,” “the Mustachioed,” “the Commandant,” “Black Coat,” “Inner” and “Rustle.” Conversely, people she likes get positive nicknames, such as “Dyzio” or “Dizzy,” an effeminate police bureaucrat and Blake-translator (with whom Duszejko collaborates), and “Good News,” a poor, but intelligent and industrious owner of the village vintage store. The latter two remain Duszejko’s friends and allies throughout the novel, in addition to Boros, the entomology researcher and eventually her lover, who incidentally is the only character in the novel without a nickname.

4. The Fury and the cosmic order

Duszejko does not only give nicknames to others, but also to herself, given that she detests her given first name, Janina, which she finds both “scandalously wrong and unfair” (Tokarczuk 2018, 19). Instead, she considers her real name to be “Emilia, or Joanna. Sometimes I think it’s something like Irmtrud too. Or Bellona. Or Medea” (Tokarczuk 2018, 19).⁶ The fact that the protagonist insists on calling herself by names that are associated with female warriors thought to be fueled by rage and revenge, is something that I choose to emphasize in my reading of the novel. All of the nicknames lead me in the direction of a tragic legacy, dating back to the myths and

⁶In the original Polish version, Tokarczuk writes: “Myślę, że naprawdę mam na imię (1) Emilia albo (2) Joanna. Czasem też sądzę, że jakoś podobnie do Irmtrud. Albo (3) Boży-gniewa. Albo (4) Nawoja.” I am deeply indebted to Professor Knut Andreas Grimstad, University of Oslo, who has helped me decipher this crucial passage in the Polish original text. Based on his input, I suggest the following associations with the alternative names that Janina Duszejko gives herself, referring to the enumerated nicknames marked above:

- (1) Emilia, alluding to Emilia Plater (1806–1831), a revolutionary heroine from the November uprising against the Russian Empire, who is considered a national hero in Latvia and Poland, which were both part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
- (2) Joanna, alluding to Jeanne d’Arc.
- (3) Boży-gniewa: composed of the adjective *boży* (divine) and the noun *gniew* (rage, anger).
- (4) Nawoja: old Polish woman’s name (and the author’s second first name), composed of two parts: *naj-* (> *naj-* “most”) and *woj-* (> *woja* / *wojownica* = female warrior). In addition, Nawoja, Nawojka, is commonly associated with the first female student who at the beginning of the 15th century began to study at the Jagiellonian University in a male disguise.

The English edition of the novel adds the names of two ancient Greek and Roman goddesses, “Bellona” and “Medea,” as translations for nicknames (3) and (4), even though none of the goddesses are mentioned in the original Polish text.

legends of antiquity. In Roman mythology, the Fury (from Latin *furia*, rage) is a goddess of revenge (akin to the Greek heroine Medea), with a close affinity to the Erinyes, female chthonic deities of vengeance. These vengeful spirits of the Earth (Gaia), that we meet in Homer's *Iliad* (Homer 1924, 259–260)⁷ and in Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, (Aeschylus 1984), hunt down and dismember (*sparagmos*) and kill the ones who disrespect the will of the Earth (*moira*).⁸

What unites all of these nicknames, both in the Polish and the English versions of the novel, is an allusion to female warriors, to rage and to revenge, attributes that can all be found in the Greco-Roman figure of the Fury. Incidentally, this is the nickname used for Janina Duszejko in the Norwegian translation (Tokarczuk 2018) of this passage of the novel. I have therefore chosen to use the Fury as the main figure, since it best expresses this aspect of rage and revenge in Duszejko's self-created nickname.

In colloquial language the Fury is often associated with a furious and beligerent woman. Philosophy – which Duszejko has nothing but contempt for – traditionally attributes little value to affects since they allegedly disrupt our ability to think rationally. Not unlike the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2001b), Duszejko greatly values her emotions and affects, but not necessarily coupled with temperance, as in Nussbaum's treatment of emotions. For Duszejko prefers her negative ones, and accordingly, she hails her Anger (with a capital letter) precisely because it enables her to think clearly and to create order in the world: "Sometimes, when a Person feels Anger, everything seems simple and obvious. Anger puts things in order and shows you the world in a nutshell; Anger restores the gift of Clarity of Vision, which is hard to attain in any other state" (Tokarczuk 2018, 30–31).

Duszejko's rage serves in the novel as an important asset in the Fury's endeavor to reinstate Gaia's, the Earth's will and order, which she claims has been lost. From the very beginning of the narrative, we learn that Duszejko considers it her duty to punish those who disrespect and defies this natural, cosmic order, which not only encompasses our planet, but all the planets of the universe, including moons and stars in our galaxy. To her, animals as well as all other living creatures are subject to the same all-encompassing principle of life and death, which is governed by the laws of time and planetary movements (Tokarczuk 2018, 57–58). This cosmic order cannot be grasped from the perspective of an anthropocentric world view, where the human constitutes the *ratio* and the moral norm of all things great and small. In my reading of the novel, I choose to interpret Duszejko's obsessive interest and faith in astrology and its explanatory powers within the

⁷Homer writes in Chapter 19 of the *The Iliad*: "the Erinyes, that under earth take vengeance on men, who-soever hath sworn a false oath" (Homer 1924, 259–60).

⁸Aeschylus wrote the trilogy *The Oresteia*, named after the hero Orestes, who is hunted down and dismembered by the Erinyes.

framework of this ancient mythical legacy. According to her world view, even astrological patterns represent a cosmic order: “The stars and planets establish it, while the sky is the template that sets the patterns of our lives” [...] Nothing is capable of eluding this order” (Tukarczuk 2018, 56).

The Furies are, like the ancient Erinyes, guided by time’s fateful and irreversible movement. Only those who, like herself, have lived through an era of revolutionary optimism, can appreciate the world’s impermanence and its readiness for change. According to Duszejko, this principle reveals itself through *apoptosis*, the organic process that determines everything, from the movement of the planets to the most minute cells.

Reality has grown old and gone senile: after all, it is definitely subject to the same laws as every living organism – it ages. Just like the cells of the body, its tiniest components, the senses, succumb to apoptosis. Apoptosis is natural death, brought about by the tiredness and exhaustion of matter. In Greek this word meant “the dropping of petals.” The world has dropped its petals. (Tokarczuk 2018, 57)

According to Duszejko, the process of apoptosis does not only affect living organisms, but also words and their meanings. Ancient values, especially those that have traditionally been protected by women or the feminine principle, have lost their meaning and have become devalued in our time. This cosmic order constitutes the highest value for Duszejko, since it is the only order that can secure a sustainable future for humanity and the natural world. However, these values have been tainted and disrespected, primarily by men who misuse the powers of the state and of capital, and who are governed by cold, cynical and instrumental rationality.

6. Duszejko’s ecological revolt

Due to this state of affairs, a revolt is both necessary and called for, Duszejko claims. The Fury is invoked to action, not only to revenge old sins, but also to restore a sustainable order. Duszejko’s ecofeminist revolt is therefore above all aimed at the patriarchal power structure – the secular as well as the religious – since it is founded on men’s cynical abuse of power. They prey on the most vulnerable in society, they exploit animals and they pillage the natural world. Duszejko seems to claim that the current state of affairs with its unbalanced distribution of power has created a world that favors death and destruction over sustainable living conditions for humans, animals and plants. In her view, only a revolt can reestablish a lost cosmic order, one that is guided by planetary movements and which will safeguard the natural cycle of life, death and re-generation (Tokarczuk 2018, 56–57).

The reader is gradually initiated into Duszejko’s gendered perspective on the world as a single woman in a male-dominated world. She is fundamentally skeptical towards others – at times outright hostile – an attitude she

also displays in her interaction with her closest neighbors, who both disturb the natural order, albeit in different ways. Oddball makes too much noise with all his machines and his vehicles, whereas Big Foot provokes her with his notorious poaching. When she politely admonishes him, he scuffs at her: “Get lost, you old crone” (Tokarczuk 2018, 7). Duszejko hates his disregard for the living creatures which he hunts and traps. To counteract his destructive behavior, she follows regularly in his bloody tracks in the woods, removing the dead animals that he has caught in his snares, and buries them in her garden.

Hence, her immediate reaction is annoyance when Oddball pounds on her door in the middle of the night, urging her to join him to Big Foot’s house to help him take care of Big Foot’s body before it stiffens. The filthy and contorted body that meets them triggers nothing but disgust in Duszejko.

As I looked at Big Foot’s poor, twisted body I found it hard to believe that only yesterday I’d been afraid of this Person. I disliked him. To say I disliked him might be putting it too mildly. Instead I should say that I found him repulsive, horrible. In fact, I didn’t even regard him as a Human Being. [...] And then it occurred to me that in a way Big Foot’s death might be a good thing. It had freed him from the mess that was his life. And it had freed other creatures from him. Oh yes, suddenly I realized what a good thing death can be, how just and fair, like a disinfectant, or a vacuum cleaner. I admit that’s what I thought, and that’s what I still think now. (Tokarczuk 2018, 6)

Already in the first chapter of the novel, we get the first hint about how, according to Duszejko, death can be “just” and can reinstate a lost order. It is clear that she feels that Big Foot got what he deserved, because of his illegal poaching and because “[h]e treated the forest like his own personal farm – everything there belonged to him. He was the pillaging type” (Tokarczuk 2018, 7–8). Here we note the first indications of Duszejko’s adherence to an ecological ideology, which is grounded in a broader tragic thinking, with cosmic implications. And later we learn that she is a devoted animal lover, a vegetarian and an amateur astrologer, who sees it as her mission in life to safeguard life – be it human beings, animals or plants. She deeply mourns the loss of her “Girls,” her two Dogs that she suspects Big Foot of having caught and killed. Duszejko is convinced that it is the animals that have taken revenge when Big Foot chokes on a bone from the deer that he has killed. In her view, the sin he has committed is atrocious.

He had caught the deer in a snare, killed her, then butchered, roasted, and eaten her body. One Creature had devoured another, in the silence and the stillness of the Night. Nobody had protested, no thunderbolt had struck. And yet Punishment had come upon the devil, though no one’s hand had guided death. (Tokarczuk 2018, 14)

The title of the opening chapter, “Now Pay Attention,”⁹ refers to the corpse of Big Foot, which Oddball and Duszejko barely manage to fit into an old, spotted suit before it stiffened in *rigor mortis*. The only body part that does not cooperate with their efforts to dress the dead man, is an insubordinate index finger.

“Now pay attention” said the finger. “Now pay attention, there’s something you’re not seeing here, the crucial starting point of a process that’s hidden from you, but that’s worthy of the highest attention. Thanks to it we’re all here in this place at this time, in a small cottage on the Plateau, amid the snow and the night – I as a dead body, and you as insignificant, aging human Beings. But this is only the beginning. Only now does it all start to happen.” (Tokarczuk 2018, 12)

Ironically, it is the obstinate, dead index finger of Big Foot which prophetically speaks in this apostrophic address, as a warning to the reader, of what is to come. And it is in the wake of this warning that Duszejko discovers a photograph among Big Foot’s personal belongings that she rummages through, looking for important clues.

I looked at it more closely, and was about to lay it aside. It took me a while to understand what I was looking at. Suddenly total silence fell, and I found myself right in the middle of it. I stared at the picture. My body tensed, I was ready to do battle. My head began to spin, and a dismal wailing rose in my ears, as if from over the horizon an army of thousands was approaching – voices, the clank of iron, the creak of wheels in the distance. Anger makes the mind clear and incisive, able to see more. It sweeps up other emotions and takes control of the body. Without a doubt Anger is the source of all wisdom, for Anger has the power to exceed all limits. (Tokarczuk 2018, 15)

Only at the end of the novel does the reader realize the importance of this photograph for the plot structure, as well as the Fury’s implication in the course of action. We likewise recognize a subtle allusion to the cart in Blake’s poem (Blake 2011, 66) cited in the title of the Tokarczuk’s novel, when she refers to “the creak of wheels in the distance” (Tokarczuk 2018, 15). Upon studying the photo, Duszejko envisages “an army of thousands” and hears the sound of “the clank of iron” and “the creak of wheels.” Tokarczuk here makes a metaphorical allusion to war and its carts, carrying the canons. In the wake of every battle, there are the bones of fallen men, which in time will nourish the soil, upon which the plow will work to provide nurture for future men. The wheel of time and the wheel of war thus come together in these images. The actual motif on the picture that Duszejko studies while having this vision is at this point in the novel hidden from

⁹The literal translation of the Polish title of the opening chapter “A teraz uważajcie!” is “Now (you) beware!,” which is clearly a warning to the reader to pay close attention to the clues given.

the reader, as is the agent behind the events to come, that is, the “driver “of the cart.

Duszejko’s ideological adherence to ecology and animal welfare is a recurring motif in the novel. She experiences deep grief, not only from the loss of her two dogs, but likewise from the death of any animal. To Duszejko, the moral constitution of a country and a people can be measured by their treatment of animals, and she proclaims: “Its Animals show the truth about a country.” [...] “Its attitude toward Animals. If people behave brutally towards Animals, no form of democracy is ever going to help them, in fact nothing will at all” (Tokarczuk 2018, 101). Here, the author establishes a close relationship between the way a nation treats its animals and the moral health of a nation, thus echoing Blake’s famous couplet: “A Dog starv’d at this Master’s Gate / Predicts the ruin of the State” (Blake 1988, 480). In the protagonist’s view, animals are more deserving of our grief than humans, and Duszejko lives their pain as her own.

7. The Fury as menace

But it is above all the many murders of humans – exclusively men – which preoccupy the locals in the months following Big Foot’s death. Duszejko places herself in the thick of things, primarily as an irate and insignificant nuisance for the authorities who, albeit helplessly ineffective, attempt to solve the four murders that happen at short intervals.

Duszejko’s ideological conviction is marked by her gender perspective, which is also reflected in her ecological approach. This thematic dimension of the novel does not only affect humans and male dominated society, but has cosmic implications. According to the protagonist, the feminine – thought as a gendered principle of creation – has been devalued in Polish society, dominated as it is by masculine values. Thus, the intervention of the Fury constitutes an attempt to right this wrong.

Tokarczuk’s humorous and ironic approach to this feminist dimension of the novel is especially prominent in the second chapter, entitled “Testosterone Autism,” where she presents a somewhat irreverent theory about aging men.

With age, many men come down with testosterone autism, the symptoms of which are a gradual decline in social intelligence and capacity for interpersonal communication, as well as a reduced ability to formulate thoughts. The Person beset by this Ailment becomes taciturn and appears to be lost in contemplation. He develops an interest in various Tools and machinery, and he is drawn to Second World War and the biographies of famous people, mainly politicians and villains. His capacity to read novels almost entirely vanishes; testosterone autism disturbs the character’s psychological understanding. (Tokarczuk 2018, 24)

The description of this form of autism is primarily meant to characterize Oddball, her neighbor of few words, but it contains several layers of irony,

which can also be read as a metafictional comment on the part of the author, giving the reader a hint to watch out for Duszejko's intricate and manipulative psychology, as well as her hostile inclination towards men. Duszejko also names all the hunters in the area "Mustachios," who, like Oddball, are incapable of expressing themselves verbally, especially in their confrontation with death. According to Duszejko, upon seeing of the body of Big Foot, all of the Mustachios had the same facial expression of ritual seriousness and grief, and they preferred song to conversation.

Tokarczuk gives in this context a ruthless portrait of the Police Commandant, one of the pillars of society in the village, whom Duszejko has repeatedly sought out to report the crimes of Big Foot. He has no time for her and treats her accordingly as a pestering, old hag. Duszejko is acutely aware of his contempt for her. In this passage, as in many others throughout the novel, Tokarczuk makes use of personified focalization and interior monologue, to better convey the protagonist's subjective thoughts.

I could almost hear his thoughts – to his mind I was definitely a "little old lady," and once my accusatory speech was gathering strength, a "silly old bag," "crazy old crone," or "madwoman." I could sense his disgust as he watched my movements and cast (negative) judgment on my taste. He didn't like my hairstyle, or my clothes, or my lack of subservience. He scrutinized my face with growing dislike. (Tokarczuk 2018, 26)

As for Duszejko, she judges him with equal dislike and prejudice: "I could see he was hot-tempered, that he drank too much and had a weakness for fatty foods. [...] He must have been accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed, and was easily carried away by Anger. A Jovian personality" (Tokarczuk 2018, 26). In her view, the Commandant is part of a male clan of bloodthirsty hunters, who ridicule her protests against the killing of animals. During one of their shooting sprees, Duszejko physically intervenes on the hunting ground, demanding that they stop, to which they laugh and call her "crazy madwoman."

At that point I felt a surge of Anger, genuine, not to say Divine Anger. It flooded me from inside a burning hot-wave. This energy made me feel great, as if it were lifting me off the ground, a mini Big Bang within the universe of my body. There was a fire burning within me, like a neutron star. I sprang forward and pushed the man in the silly hat so hard that he fell unto the snow, completely taken by surprise. And when Mustachio rushed to his aid, I attacked him too, hitting him on the shoulder with all my might. He groaned with pain. I am not a feeble girl. (Tokarczuk 2018, 63–64)

In her confrontations with the Commandant and the Mustachio-hunters, Duszejko the Fury seems to become the incarnation of "Divine Anger," one who does not shy away from physically attacking sturdy, grown men. We will later learn that she is both tall and strong, and that she, in addition to having been

a bridge engineer, was an Olympic athlete in her youth, throwing the sledgehammer. These small tidbits of information about Duszejko's physical constitution hint at her potential to be a menace and a destructive force in her environment.

When Duszejko and her friend Dizzy a short time after Big Foot's death find the Commandant's dead body in a well, his head cracked open and covered in blood, she exclaims: "[I]t's Animals taking revenge on people." [...] Animals are strong and wise. We don't realize how clever they are" (Tokarczuk 2018, 75–76). There are animal tracks surrounding the crime scene, traces of small deer hoofs all around the well. Duszejko and Dizzy are both brought in for questioning at the police station, where they are treated as suspects. Duszejko repeats her theory to the police, insisting that it is the revenge of the animals that has taken place. The police, as usual, totally ignore her. They are both eventually released, due to a lack of evidence. Later investigation reveals that the Commandant died of a violent blow to his head, inflicted by a blunt object.

In the wake of the murder of the Commandant, powerful men from the village die in rapid succession. The first to perish after the Commandant is Innerd, the businessman and fox farmer, who gets caught in a snare and trapped upside-down, before he – just like the Commandant – received a fatal blow to the head. Innerd was involved in shady business deals, and was allegedly connected to the mafia. Duszejko has nothing but contempt for him, because of his abuse of animals, his mistreatment of women and his rogue capitalist activities.

The next man who dies is Father Rustle, who acquires his nickname because Duszejko reacts to the way he moves: "[...] his dry, bony body, covered in baggy, dark skin, rustled slightly" (Tokarczuk 2018, 234). Duszejko despises Father Rustle, who worships Saint Hubert, the guardian angel of hunters. Rustle scolds her for burying animal remains in her garden, arguing that: "It is wrong to treat animals as if they were people. It's a sin – this sort of graveyard is the result of human pride. God gave animals a lower rank, in the service of man" (Tokarczuk 2018, 236). After challenging the priest in an inflamed speech in church on Saint Hubert's Day, Duszejko loses her job as an English teacher. Shortly thereafter, Father Rustle dies in a fire in the presbytery.

The Anger that Duszejko experiences during Father Rustle's sermon, serves as a warning to the reader of incidents to come. Overwhelmed by this negative affect, she seizes the word and accuses the priest and all the hunters of being murderers. Immediately following her fit, when Anger has subsided, we get a glimpse into Duszejko's thoughts while she is looking out the window.

I watched two Magpies that were frolicking on the lawn outside the presbytery, as if trying to entertain me. As if saying, don't be upset, time is on our side, the

job must be done, there's no alternative ... Curiously they examined a shiny chewing-gum wrapper, then one of them picked it up in her beak and flew away. I followed her with my gaze. They must have had a nest on the presbytery roof. Magpies. Fire-raisers. (Tokarczuk 2018, 244)

Tokarczuk seems to relish in exploring Duszejko's volatile temperament, and in so doing, she simultaneously launches a feminist critique of the current gender regime, whereby women are being valued primarily for their positive attributes such as gentleness, docility, subservience or compliance. In her portrayal of Duszejko, in contrast, Tokarczuk delves into the negative emotions that women also may possess, such as hostility, aggression, anger and vengeance. It is above all by tapping into these negative affects that Duszejko finds the motivation, courage as well as the physical power to carry out her ecofeminist revolt in the fight against those she considers to be dangerous, namely men who hunt innocent animals, and who destroy the natural world and all its living creatures.

The last victim is the President of the Mushroom Club. In the wake of their annual autumn carnival, he fell asleep outside, drunk as a skunk. According to Duszejko, he was an abusive husband, and like all the other victims, he apparently had Saturn in an animal sign when he died. To Duszejko, this is decisive information, of which she informs the police. And, according to Duszejko's astrological calculations, the President allegedly also had an animal sign in Taurus, which to her clearly signifies a violent death caused by asphyxiation, inflicted by animals. In a conversation with the writer, Gray Lady, Duszejko gives a detailed description of his gruesome demise: "He was covered in those Insects, they'd gone into his mouth, his lungs, his stomach, his ears. The woman said he was crawling with Beetles. I didn't see it, but I can perfectly well imagine it. *Cucujus haematodes* everywhere" (Tokarczuk 2018, 210).

At this point in the narrative, towards the end of the novel, the reader seriously starts to suspect that Duszejko might actually be the culprit of all the horrific crimes committed. The beetles, *cucujus haematodes*, originate in the entomologist and Duszejko's lover Boros' research samples, which she might have stolen while he stayed at her house. She might also have learned from Boros different methods of bodily decay, since he had previously worked with taphonomy while being employed with the police.

8. *Lupus* – the lurking wolf

Duszejko's irate attitude to the world is to a large extent caused by her Ailments, which manifest themselves throughout the novel in a cluster of diffuse symptoms: muscle and joint pains, skin rashes, vertigo, and sensitivity to light, mood swings and uncontrollable tear ducts, which causes her to constantly cry. She claims that her frequent crying is a favorable ailment to her,

since tears both rinse and clear her eyesight, which ultimately enables her to see more clearly than most people, who for the most part have dry eyes.

In order to deal with her Ailments, she frequently seeks out the dermatologist Ali. Even though the novel never presents a clear diagnosis for Duszejko, there are several hints along the way that indicate that the illness from which she suffers is *lupus erythematosus*,¹⁰ a chronic and systemic illness of the connective tissue that causes inflammatory attacks on different organs. *Lupus* is the Latin word for wolf, and is a fitting name for this lurking illness. It can be dormant for a long time, only to suddenly and unpredictably flare up and attack different parts of the body. Duszejko gives the following description of her Ailments.

My Ailments appear treacherously; I never know when they're coming. And then something happens in my body, my bones begin to ache. It's an unpleasant ache, sickening – that's the word I'd use. [...] But after these pains in my bones come pains in my stomach, intestine, liver, everything we have inside, without cease. Glucose is capable of soothing it for a while, so I always carry a bottle of it in my pocket. I never know when an Attack will occur, or when I will feel worse. Sometimes it's as if I'm composed of nothing but symptoms of illness. I am a phantom built out of pain. (Tokarczuk 2018, 65)

The wolf motif is not exclusively connected to Duszejko's Ailments, but appears in different contexts throughout the novel. For instance, she refers to herself as a wolf when she roams around on her expeditions in the area or when she watches over the summer houses:

I was widening my estates, like a solitary She-Wolf. I was thankful to leave behind the views of the houses and the road. I would go into the forest – I could wander around it endlessly. Here things were quieter, the forest was like a vast, deep, welcoming refuge in which one could hide. It lulled my mind. (Tokarczuk 2018, 148–49)

In this quote, we learn that Duszejko often lurks around in the woods, and through her meanderings, she becomes quite familiar with the area. Her lover Boros is also connected to the wolf motif, given that he carries a charm with a wolf tooth around his neck.

The wolf motif is further developed in a carnivalesque manner in the context of the mushroom picker's annual festivities. Duszejko comes disguised as a wolf to the carnival, wearing a wolf mask and "a furry jumpsuit with paws made out of stuffed gloves [...]"; the costume enables her "to look out at the world from inside the jaws of a Wolf" (Tokarczuk 2018, 193). Together with Oddball, who for the occasion is dressed up as Little Red Riding Hood, she enters the ball. The hilarious couple is described in the following way.

¹⁰*Erythematosus* is the name for the red lesions on the skin, caused by the illness.

I felt pretty hot and uncomfortable in my costume, my tail trailed on the ground and I had to be careful not to tread on it. [...] He was wearing black lace-up boots, white stockings and a sweet flowery dress with a little apron. On his head, tied under his chin with a bow, was a little red hood. (Tokarczuk 2018, 197)

Dressed up as Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, the couple has great success at the ball, where they enjoy themselves dancing with the rest of the crowd. In Tokarczuk's elaboration of the event, she writes that "the merry mushroom pickers had changed into a bacchanal" (Tokarczuk 2018, 199). The fact that the crowd is transformed into a "dionysian horde"¹¹ gives us a clue of what is going to happen in the course of this Bacchic night.

In Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche 1967), the Bacchic rite constitutes the greatest form of will to life, expressed through ecstasy, where the Dionysian horde in its most creative moment dissimulates into Nature. At the same time, a destructive force is also unleashed, through which all separations between identities and entities are dissolved, as the crowd is transformed into Erinyes, or spirits of vengeance. It is possible to interpret the ecstatic dance at the costume ball as a transformative moment, whereby Duszejko's identity is dissolved and the natural force of the wolf emerges. In this way, the lurking wolf succeeds in attacking the dead drunk President at a vulnerable moment. The revenge of the Fury on the last victim thus happens through an act of dismemberment (*sparagmos*), not by the use of violent force this time, but instead through the destructive, Dionysian force of Duszejko becoming a wolf.¹² By letting the insects invade the pheromone-scented mouth of the inebriated President, his body is dissolved from within – by natural means.

9. Solving the crime mystery and the flight of the Fury

The crime mystery in Tokarczuk's narrative finds its resolution towards the end of the novel, when the actual method used to kill the President of the mushroom pickers' society is revealed. From this moment onwards, it is evident that the person who is the guilty of committing all the horrendous murders, is Duszejko herself. This ecofeminist rebellion, which constitutes the protagonist's attempt at reinstating what she considers to be the

¹¹The expression "Dionysian horde" ("dionysisk horde") is used in the Norwegian translation of the novel (Tokarczuk 2019, 212).

¹²In the first section of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes: "If we add to this terror the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature, at this collapse of *principium individuationis*, we steal a glimpse into the nature of the Dionysian, which is brought home to us by the analogy of intoxication" (Nietzsche 1967, 36). It is thus possible to claim that both the protagonist's and the President's bodies undergo a process of dissolution, due to Dionysian intoxication. In the President's case, the invasion of his body by insects in effect causes a collapse of *principium individuationis*. He thus ceases to be an individual, and returns instead to undifferentiated Nature (in the Nietzschean sense).

natural order of things, is in her view guided by and empowered by Nature, the law of Time and the movements of the Planets. After having completed the novel, the attentive reader discovers – in hindsight – all the subtle hints and warning signs that Tokarczuk has spiced up the narrative with all along, which all point in the direction of Duszejko's involvement in the crimes. As readers we are finally presented with an account – in gruesome detail – of how each murder was executed.

As it turns out, the murder weapon used by Duszejko to kill both the Commandant and Innerd, was created by natural means by making use of one of the main elements of the earth, namely water. Cunningly, Duszejko hung a plastic bag of water on a branch during a cold night, causing the water to freeze overnight into a hard ball. She subsequently used the frozen bag like a sledgehammer to inflict a fatal blow to their heads. The murder weapon disappeared naturally when the ice ball thawed; the bag was then burnt and could accordingly not be traced. Furthermore, birds were instrumental in getting rid of the annoying Father Rustle, as well as any evidence, since the magpies set fire on the presbytery, carrying the ignited chewing-gum wrap in their beaks up to their nest on the presbytery's roof.¹³ And *cucujus haematodes*, Boros' beetles, caused the body of the President of the mushroom pickers' society to disintegrate from within, and thus be delivered back to Nature. In short, Duszejko succeeded in her revenge predominantly because she had – in her ecofeminist revolt – intimate knowledge of, and thus knew how to exploit, nature's own destructive potential.

The answer to why precisely these four men were the ones to be targeted and killed is revealed to the reader in the last chapter of the novel. We are at this point reminded of what Duszejko discovers when looking at the photograph that she finds while she and Oddball rummage through Big Foot's private things in the opening chapter of the book. The photograph shows hunters posing behind a row of dead animals, among them her two "girls," Duszejko's two darling Dogs that Big Foot had killed: "In the middle was the Commandant, and beside him the President. On the other side stood Innerd, dressed like a commando, and next to him Father Rustle in his clerical collar" (Tokarczuk 2018, 254). The Anger that erupted in her body at the sight of the photograph, called the Fury into action, and it was Anger that affected her decision to take vengeance on these particular men.

10. Tokarczuk's ambiguous and daring stance

It may be somewhat puzzling to some readers that Tokarczuk, in her approach to the protagonist, refrains from expressly condemning her violent actions.

¹³We find similar accounts in the saga literature, where magpies are used by the Vikings to set fire on towns and thus help them in their attacks.

By embracing Duszejko's subjective perspective throughout major parts of the narrative, and at the end, allowing her to escape from being prosecuted for her criminal actions, may cause readers to be ethically provoked. As for myself, I find Tokarczuk's ambiguous position outright refreshing, as she avoids the pitfalls of a facile condemnation or support of the ecological movement and its fighting strategies. The author succeeds in constructing an ingenious plot and follows in many ways the strict formula of the crime novel. But at the same time, she opens up for a profound reflection on some of the most pressing existential questions concerning our future survival on this planet. She asks: What constitutes a morally sound and environmentally sustainable society? And how can such a society be materialized?

As my reading has shown, Olga Tokarczuk offers thought-provoking and bold answers to these questions, primarily by creating an unorthodox – and not altogether trustworthy and palpable – female character who is set in a remote and hostile environment controlled by men. In the protagonist's view, these men pose a real threat to fellow humans, to animals and to the natural world. And in her ecofeminist revolt, which is fueled by tapping into her negative affects, Duszejko becomes a powerful force of nature. As the Fury and the Wolf – prosoposieic figurations that make her capable of mobilizing the destructive powers of Nature, Duszejko wages war against these masculine power figures in order to rectify the crimes that they have committed against the natural world.

By exploring these vital questions from the perspective of an elderly, cantankerous woman who loves animals and believes in astrology, Tokarczuk may risk not being taken seriously, given that women like Janina Duszejko are generally ignored and ridiculed in today's society. But in my view, it is precisely by presenting the world from Duszejko's perspective that Tokarczuk succeeds in revealing the callousness of the world that Duszejko is forced to contend with, one in which the accumulation of wealth, the exercise of brute force, the killing of animals, disregard for and abuse of nature as well as of women, are valued over a caring concern for our fellow creatures and the sustainability of our planet.

By lending the perspective to Duszejko the Fury – a fierce old woman transformed into a Wolf – the author evidently wants the world at large to pay heed to her feminine perspective. Despite her ludicrous beliefs, her unpalpable demeanor and her criminal actions, Duszejko is portrayed as a powerful female character who has many redeeming qualities, and who presents convincing arguments in her ecological struggle for a sustainable environment and animal welfare. Thereby, the author unveils the ethical dilemma: On the one hand the protagonist is a despicable character who is a menace to society, but at the same time, Tokarczuk subtly suggests that a force like Duszejko may be needed if we want to avoid the dire consequences of the current ecological crisis. In the struggle against ruthless

patriarchal power and rogue capitalism, with the destruction of Nature that follow in their wake, radical change has to take place. Hence, radical measures must be taken, and it seems that only a female Fury – tapping into the destructive forces of Nature – is up for the task.

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