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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

**'Changing Gender! Research, Theory and Policy
for Gendered Realities of the 21st century'**

**June 2-3, 2005
Panteion University
Athens, Greece**

PAPER PRESENTED BY

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TITLE

Gender in the poetry of Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke

I. Introduction

Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke is one of Greece's most successful contemporary poets. Born in Athens in 1939, Anghelaki-Rooke has always been involved with writing. Her godfather was the famous Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis, who endorsed her first published poem "Loneliness" / "Μοναξιά" in 1956.

With a career that has spanned more than four decades and works that are marked by gender concerns, Anghelaki-Rooke and her poetry provide a rich source for exploring the female artist's relationship to and understanding of gender.

Anghelaki-Rooke's collected works have been published in three volumes: 1963-1977, 1978-1985, and 1986-1996. In each period, there is a dominant theme concerned with gender, which will be explored in the course of this paper. (SLIDE 2)

II. Definitions and historical / social context

(SLIDE 3) It would be useful, especially for the non-greek speaking members of the audience, to give a brief overview of the important developments in Greek society / history during the period under discussion (1963-1996). Women in Greece received the right to vote in all elections in 1952 and voted for the first time in national elections in 1956. The status of women in Greek society vastly improved after the fall of the military coup of 1967-1974. Following the restoration of democracy in Greece, a number of changes were introduced that brought the status of women in Greece more up-to-date: for example, the

dowry system was abolished (early 1980s), divorce by consent was introduced, and women were recruited to the police and armed services for the first time.¹ In the 1980s and early 1990s, we see a drastic increase, in the area of writing, of the number of published works by women writers.

III. Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke

Turning now to Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke and the role of gender in her works. Anghelaki-Rooke states in an article on "Sex Roles in Modern Greek Poetry": "[women poets use their poetry] *to find and define their feminine identity* in terms of their own consciousness and their existence in a man's world."² {my emphasis} In the same article, she also states: "The Greek woman poet has always desperately tried to *combine her creativity with the ideal of the "real woman" as established by men*. The 'real woman' is concerned with only one thing, love, and has only one mission in this world: to attract and keep her man and have children by him."³ {my emphasis} Using these two phrases as a guideline, we can here begin our examination of how the woman poet, on the one hand, defines her feminine identity and, on the other, bridges the oppositions between her reality and the prescribed role of women in a patriarchal society.

One of the first difficulties a woman writer encounters when she sits down to write about women is undoubtedly the numerous stereotypes associated with the female sex – stereotypes that are enforced and perpetuated through literature and history. In Greece, these stereotypes date back to antiquity with women in myth and continue to the present day in the works by male poets, where the women characters appear as sparkling virgins (Sikelianos), symbols of loves or lost loves (Seferis), or, if they are given human traits, are caught inside the angel / whore opposition.⁴

It is these stereotypes and their rewriting that concerns Anghelaki Rooke in the first period.

One of her early poems is about Iphigenia, entitled "Iphigenia's Refusal." (SLIDE 5) Iphigenia, in Euripides's tragedy "Iphigenia at Aulis", is the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra who is sacrificed so that winds will blow and the Greek fleet can set sail for Troy. In a complete reversal of the myth, Anghelaki-Rooke "writes" Iphigenia as the girl who refuses to sacrifice herself and thus prevents the Trojan War. (SLIDE 6) She writes:

"[...] Iphigenia refused,
For love, she said,
For the tender heart,
For peaceful towns,
So we can nurture fruit-trees,
and greet the rains on time,
For shepherd's fields
For the Angels.
She refused."

With this rewriting, not only does Anghelaki-Rooke overturn the role of Iphigenia (from the one who sacrifices herself for the cause of the war to the one who chooses to live and avoid the war), but she also undercuts the "patriarchal" ideology of the importance of war, which Iphigenia, in the myth, supports.

Another poem, "Penelope Says", does not directly overturn a female stereotype; rather, it gives a voice to and expands the personality of a figure in myth that traditionally serves as a symbol of patience and loyalty. (SLIDE 7). Penelope, in myth (more specifically, in Homer's *Odyssey*), is the patient wife of Odysseus who rejects suitors, weaves, and waits for her husband's return over a period of nineteen years. In Anghelaki-

¹ Woodhouse 1991: 315-316.

² Ang[h]elaki-Rooke 1983: 141.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.: 145.

Rooke, Penelope becomes a more rounded, real figure who is tormented by the wait, who feels her life is dominated by absence. (SLIDE 8). The traditional act of woman (weaving) is replaced by the phallic pen (writing), and Penelope partakes in a more masculine activity:

I wasn't weaving, I wasn't knitting
I began some writing and was obliterated
under the weight of the word
because precise expression is thwarted
when the inner self is racked by pain.
And while absence is the theme of my life
-absence from life –
tears come out onto the paper
and the natural pain of the body
which is deprived. [...]"

And, one final example of this re-writing of female literary stereotypes comes from the Christian Bible. In the poem "Magdalene, the great mammal", Anghelaki-Rooke again develops a traditionally marginal figure: (SLIDE 9) Mary Magdalene, as presented in the Bible, was at the crucifixion of Christ, witnessed His burial, was with the Myrrh-bearers, and was first to see Him risen. She is a symbol of penitence, redemption. Anghelaki-Rooke, in her poem, shifts the focus to Mary Magdalene's suffering as a woman: she was in love with Christ and becomes a symbol of female strength and suffering, well aware of the marginal position she will occupy in history. [NEXT SLIDE]:

"[...] Through love I learn
What weight you will forever bear
-god or visitor?-
Holy communion, your body,
I take it and your watered blood
Scratched from so many opposites [...]
Whatever you are, will be for centuries
Whatever I am, stops here
I, a unique trace
For the divine repetitions."

From these three examples, one can argue that stereotypes traditionally associated with the female gender are not necessarily overturned: women prefer peace to war, are tormented by their husband's absence, and preoccupied by matters of the heart. However, Anghelaki-Rooke uses the space of her early poems to develop previously two-dimensional and marginalized female figures, whose traditional role in myth and the Bible was to establish or serve as backdrops to the male characters and ideologies.

IV. Period 2

In the second period, the focus shifts from female characters to the physical female body. Traditionally, the female body has been the "Other" to the male body, has been objectified, or has served as the point of focus for the male gaze. [SLIDE]

In the poems of the second period, the body is used as a means to understand power relations between the sexes. Perhaps a useful point of reference would be a quote by the Greek poet / Nobelaureate George Seferis who stated that the only thing we can call our own is our physical body. Anghelaki-Rooke shows us that as a woman, even the physical body must be claimed as our own – it is not a 'given' that it belongs to us.

The female body and its functions in relation to the male are explored and roles are reversed (SLIDE 13), and the woman now objectifies the male body. In the poem,

"Intrusion" although the woman states "You are a man and you cannot be penetrated", she goes on to penetrate him thereby reversing the roles:

You are a man
And you cannot be penetrated
But I rape all your female holes,
I push you
Towards the inside of yourself
With my finger, my tongue
Simple tools of my inability.[...]
In the body's coconut, floating in its thick milk,
Our roles are reversed [...]"

This reversal places the man in the position of 'other' and gives the woman the power attached to being in the man's position; this is more clearly evident in another poem, "The Plastic Thing" (SLIDE 14):

"It was plastic. That limb, that foreign organ. I wore it and felt nothing. I only pushed. The world was firm and flexible at the same time. When my movement was clever, no reaction. From the tight corridor of the other body, only the tremor of conquered earth returned to me. And I, who sought knowledge! [...] The only difference between the plastic and the real thing is a somewhat greater resistance to time. But the strength, what I call strength, the violence. The violence and the annihilation of the other is the same. The annihilation."

Interestingly, in this poem, the female body becomes two: on the one hand, the narrator enters into the position of the male but on the other, the female remains the "other" who is penetrated and obliterated. The two traditional positions (male/female) are both occupied by the female.

Period 2 explores the relation of the female body to that of the male body, in what could be understood as an attempt to take possession of the female body. Anghelaki-Rooke explores the ways gender stereotypes and positions in society can be understood (or be rooted in) the physical interaction between the male and female bodies. Power of the male stems from the power to intrude / penetrate and thereby possess or obliterate the female.

V. Period 3

The most mature stage of Anghelaki-Rooke's career is the most recent period. [SLIDE 15]. In this period, the poems are hosts to an assured "I" of the poet-narrator who describes scenes of present-day life with the "I" or other women as the central figures. However, a number of these female figures are often tormented or caught in between oppositions, as we will see.

The first collection of this period is entitled "*The Narration of the 'I' (Attempt at Autobiography)*." These poems describe one's various life stages. (SLIDE 16) In "The Scar", Anghelaki-Rooke uses her birth and early childhood to personify the two "poles" of life (reality and an imagined world) by linking these poles to the kitchen in her house and the attic:

Next to the little door was the wc cistern,
That broke out like thunder now and then
Above the imagined habits of my heroes.
From below, rose the warmth of this world,
The kitchen full of smells, familiar noises.
Household voices: what time is it? Did you peel the potatoes?
The kitchen and my paper fantasy,
So, the poles are established that early on?

In the poem "Messolonghi Street", the "I" is trapped between the desire to remain in the safety of her home and the desire to run away, start over as a stranger with a new name. (SLIDE 17)

I wish I could leave, I thought, be a stranger,
start all over again, from the beginning, with a new name.

The female "I" appears to be always caught in between oppositions: between logic and desire, reality and dreams, what is expected / allowed and what one wants; it is these oppositions that shape women's lives.

We see that this existence in between oppositions is a predicament that often leads to dire consequences for the woman. The poem "Aegina II" (SLIDE 18) is a narrative poem set in a village and describes different female "stereotypes" from the old spinster to the newlywed. It focuses on and concludes with one woman, Lily:

Always leaning against the same wall
Lily speaks to the night. She went mad,
When she was a young girl, and her fiancée
Left her one hour before the wedding, because the father
Had promised a larger dowry than the one he gave.
Her beloved married a poor woman that very same day,
out of spite, they said.
Young pupil of sadness,
on my pillow
I told the story of a heart out of its mind
And cried for passions that I had yet to know.

The common theme that runs throughout all the poems of this period is that of opposing forces: women are caught between oppositions and are destroyed by society and the roles expected of them. By depicting these women, Anghelaki-Rooke points the finger of gender problems to society, a society that prescribes roles and limitations.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

From this exploration of gender issues in the poetry of Anghelaki-Rooke, we can state that the roots of gender inequality are multi-faceted and, if we are to refer to their dissolving as a 'battle', is a battle that must be fought on many fronts. There are shadows, or ghosts of the past, in literature and history that perpetuate even today ideologies of the 'proper woman'. These stereotypes must be uncovered and rewritten.

Gender subjugation is also rooted in physicality. From the second period, we see an attempt by the woman to understand the man's power by 'physically' becoming a man. Understanding this and taking possession of the female body is also another way to undercut gender subjugation.

The final point explores the effects of gender inequality on women in society. Gender stereotypes drive women mad. Societal roles are restrictive, binary oppositions are limiting – all these must be deconstructed in order to liberate ourselves from gender limitations.

I will conclude with the poet's own words:

"I don't know what will happen in two hundred years from now, but for now it is difficult and a lot of effort is needed for women, to express what is going on in their gender. For men, things are different – they have the leeway of time behind them. They have solved other problems and they have the luxury to talk about their state, their nation, and their ideas. On the contrary, women despite their significant progress in matters of equality during the past decades, have still a long way to go. In poetry, they have not yet exhausted the theme of their gender..."⁵

⁵ Stathoyannis 2004: 21.

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