

# TECHNOSCIENCE VS. *TEKNON*-SCIENCE: THE TRAGEDY OF THE FEMALE SCIENTIST IN CYNTHIA OZICK'S *PUTTERMESSER AND XANTHIPPE*

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to explore from a technofeminist standpoint this failure to enunciate a 'feminine' technoscientific praxis in the *Puttermesser and Xanthippe* episode of Cynthia Ozick's 1997 'serial' novel *The Puttermesser Papers*. In particular, there is a tragic failure to integrate procreative ethos and creative technoscience: when the latter is placed in the service of the former, the curse of Frankenstein rears its ugly head, and catastrophe ensues. The female scientist, a Jewish polymath like Ruth Puttermesser who creates a female golem to save New York, in releasing procreativity from the necessity of heterosexual reproduction, unwittingly unleashes a plague of 'hyperfemininity' that threatens to destroy culture. Thus, the break from the biological restraints of procreation and the establishment of a utopian *femarche* (female rule) are deconstructed, parodied, and retrospectively opposed as destructive, while the figure of the female savant / scientist emerges as a tragic one, torn between the need to nurture, and the catastrophic consequences of that need.

**Key words:** Cynthia Ozick, technoscience, technofeminism, *Puttermesser and Xanthippe*, childbirth metaphor, female scientist as procreator, golem

'In contrast to the phallic analogy that implicitly excludes women from creativity,' by associating the pen and paintbrush with the phallus, writes Susan Stanford Friedman (1991: 371), 'the childbirth metaphor validates women's artistic effort by unifying their mental and physical labor into (pro)-creativity'. Nevertheless, it is a metaphor fraught with cultural tensions, since 'for both material and ideological reasons, maternity and creativity have appeared to be mutually exclusive to women writers,' due to 'the familiar dualism of mind and body, a key component of Western patriarchal ideology,' encoded in the 'difference highlighted by the post-industrial designation of the public sphere as man's domain and the private sphere as woman's place' (Friedman, S. S., 1991: 373). As a result, such metaphors have not always

served as an empowering trope for women, as there are ‘birth metaphors encoding a fear of combining creation and procreation. Given that the underside of fear is often desire, such metaphors contain a matrix of forbidden wish and guilt for trespass (e.g. *Frankenstein*)’ (Friedman, S. S., 1991: 384).

In Friedman’s many examples of both negative and positive uses of the birth metaphor, however, not once does she entertain the category of the birth metaphor implicating a female agent in a non-biological context of artificial birth. Could this be because, in terms of traditional patriarchy, the relation of women to technoscience is even more problematic than to fiction? On the one hand, the phallic charge of the screwdriver in the popular imaginary out-mans that of any given stylus. As Paul Theroux has astutely observed in his well-known article *The Male Myth*, in America ‘being a writer was incompatible with being a man,’ as ‘there was a fear that writing was not a manly profession – indeed, not a profession at all’ (Theroux, 1983: 6.116). On the other hand, ‘hard’ science (note the gender connotations of the stock epithet!) has always been an intensely masculinized concept. For Brian Attebery, ‘the master narrative of science has always been told in sexual terms. It represents knowledge, innovation, and even perception as masculine, while nature, the passive object of exploration, is described as feminine’ (Attebery, 2000: 134). Following Evelyn Fox Keller’s research, Lisette Szwydky and Michell Pribbernow note that ‘the language of Enlightenment science in eighteenth and nineteenth-century literary sources depicts a masculinised scientific method’ – in several cases, even cast in terms of rape – ‘penetrating and making visible the feminine, hidden secrets of nature’ (Szwydky and Pribbernow, 2018: 306). ‘Consequently, gender-swapped narratives in which female scientists conquering the natural world with which they are discursively aligned were unlikely, unless the scientists were in some way “bad women”’ (Szwydky and Pribbernow, 2018: 306). Hence the *ad nauseam* casting of women in the roles of dangerously seductive cyborg / cloned / fembot Pandoras as foils to their technology-mastering male creators; or alternatively as sexualized virtual secretaries (see Annanova, Cortana, Siri, and Alexa); or as the freakish or geekish – read: ‘unfeminine’ – hackers, like Lisbeth Salander in Stieg Larsson’s 2005 *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

In this context, it would stand to reason that nowhere would this tension be more evinced than in cases where the technoscientific endeavor concerns women scientists duplicating women’s ‘natural’ realm of procreativity, since, according to Chantal Zabus, ‘Historically, women were characterized for their pelvic “power” and men were said to possess the brain power’ (Zabus, 2010, cited by Bovri, 2011: 40). So far fiction and popular culture have depicted male-driven procreativity as unnatural, ‘deeply gendered transgression against natural order’ (Dinello, 2005, cited by Schmeink, 2015: 347–48), and thus punished (as in *Frankenstein*). However, female artificial procreativity has been seen as redundant and, thus, even more uncanny and unrealizable: as Barbara Creed observes of mad scientists in horror films, ‘it is true that female scientists rarely create monsters in an artificial environment. Why should they? Woman possesses her own womb’ (Creed, 2015: 56). Notwithstanding the complication that, in patriarchy, woman rarely ‘possesses’

her womb or body, as '[w]omen's oppression begins with the control of the body, the fruits of labor' (Friedman, S. S., 1991: 390), Creed's rhetorical question implies that when women scientists opt for artificial procreativity, they transgress doubly, both in terms of their 'natural' sex capacities and in terms of cultural professional and gender expectations, creating an extra womb that engenders social disorder.

It is precisely this double transgression into *teknon*-science, or offspring science (to pun in classical Greek), reiterating and amplifying the age-old connection between fertile femaleness qua itself and monstrosity noted in Julia Kristeva's study of abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982: 13), that is explored at length in the episode titled *Puttermesser and Xanthippe* in Cynthia Ozick's 1997 'serial' novel *The Puttermesser Papers*. Despite its undeniable moments of mordant satire that earn it the characterization of 'pithy, nimble and imbued with a smart, ironic wit,' (Sanai, 2013), the novel is a solid example of Ozick's – a 'literary centaur, half artist and half scholar' in Jack Miles's words (1997) – trademark New York-intellectual, somberly midrashic, language-obsessed lifelong engagement with Jewishness in a goy world, that 'oozes erudition' (Sanai, 2013). Here, the angle of Ozick's engagement with unholy secularism is coupled with the Frankensteinian hubris of creating life, unleashing a plague of what can only be described as 'hyperfemininity' that annuls the original noble scientific and feminist impetus. The echoes of 'plague' as divine punishment are not, of course, random: hetero-procreativity has been a bedrock concept not only in defining and regulating the relationship between the sexes since time immemorial, thus spawning an avalanche of cultural practices, but also in setting the limit between the human and the divine:

... in his book *Frankenstein's Footsteps*, Jon Turney claims that popular culture rearranges certain fears and hopes towards the central myth of modernity: man's becoming his own creator. As Dorothy Nelkin and Susan Lindee show in their study *DNA Mystique*, today this myth is based upon a popular understanding of genetics. Genes are constructed as 'a symbol, a metaphor, a convenient way to define personhood, identity, and relationships in socially meaningful ways.'... Scientific facts are superseded by the 'cultural meaning' ascribed to them by popular discourse. Popular culture plays an important role in measuring the possible, forthcoming relations between man and technique. (Pethes, 2005: 168)

As an appropriate response then to such 'popular culture' scenario, Ozick's imagined release from the biological restraints of procreation and the establishment of a utopian *femarche* (female rule and primacy), both of which were once hailed as cornerstones of the second-wave feminist agenda, are deconstructed, parodied, and questioned. At the same time, the figure of the female savant emerges as a tragic one, torn between the impetus to (perfect) nurture, and the catastrophic consequences of that impetus. Using a blend of feminist and posthumanist theory, as well as a close reading of Ozick's text, the paper aims to lay bare not only Ozick's trademark vacillations between Judaic credo and classical scientific philosophy,

but also clandestine patriarchal technobias that still unsettle technofeminist aspirations.

Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers* came out as a series of semi-independent short stories in *Salmagundi* and *The New Yorker*, to be reissued as a complete novel in 1997. It chronicles the life, death, and afterlife of Ruth Puttermesser, a New York Jewish lawyer of immense erudition, vacillating between her love of Greek letters and her obligation to her Judaic patrimony. When Puttermesser, at the age of 46, is fired from her lackluster job as a civil servant in the Office of Receipts and Disbursements because of gender bias, her sense of indignation leads her to create, while in an unconscious trance, a female golem – a soulless, mute, super-powerful creature out of Jewish lore made out of inanimate objects (clay, rags, wood) and given life in a ceremony resembling the act of God bestowing life on Adam. If, according to Simone Naomi Yehuda, the golem stands as a metaphor for muted, oppressed, domestically subjugated Jewish female creativity 'as less than fully human' (2010: 31), then Puttermesser's creation is clearly an act of technofeminist defiance against her sexist boss. She even characteristically uses the loam from her flowerpots, turning the age-old trope of woman as a flower to be deflowered on its head. It is also, however, an act possibly against God as well as, from this defiance, anomaly ensues. Puttermesser, who is single by choice but craves children, initially intends the golem to be a kind of substitute daughter-cum-domestic helper. Yet the golem, from the first moment of its creation, declares its uniqueness: not only is she the only female golem in a history of male ones (Ozick, 1997: 43), but also, contrary to the other golems' legendary docility and mindlessness, determines herself that her name be Xanthippe, like Socrates' legendary 'shrew' of a wife, because she aspires 'to be a critic, even of the highest philosophers. Xanthippe alone had the courage to gainsay Socrates' (ibid.: 49). She also takes it upon herself to fulfil what she knows is Puttermesser's heart's desire: to make Puttermesser mayor of New York and thence New York into a civic paradise-on-earth. In the words of Lawrence Friedman, 'Xanthippe springs from Puttermesser's dreaming of daughters but also of an ideal Civil Service and of New York converted into an earthly paradise .... Puttermesser's vision of New York reformed expands Xanthippe's role from that of surrogate daughter and personal servant to that of social redeemer' (Friedman, L., 1991: 136).

The plan succeeds, and New York under Puttermesser experiences a golden age of euphoric prosperity and civic order which smacks of the blissful womb. But as is always the case in golem stories, Xanthippe's inhuman powers get the better of her, initiating disaster: tasting sexuality for the first time with Puttermesser's own rejected fiancée, Xanthippe develops a monstrous, insatiable sexual appetite, but only for men in high civic offices. Her campaign of rape and terror, a parody of *gynarche* seen before only at the end of Aristophanes' 391 B.C. *The Ecclesiazousae* leaves the upper echelons of New York's civic service literally un-manned, and New York reverts to a state even more crime and decayridden than before. Desperate and disgraced, Puttermesser is forced to leave her office and to destroy Xanthippe by performing the traditional ritual for the dissolution of a golem.

While golems belong solidly to the realm of Jewish mysticism and folklore, Ozick takes pains from the start to categorize Xanthippe's creation as an act of Puttermesser's intensely scientific, scholarly mind: '[i]n law school they called her a grind, a competitive-compulsive, an egomaniac out for aggrandizement. But ego was no part of it; she was looking to solve something, she did not know what,' says Ozick in her initial characterization of her heroine (1997: 3). In describing Puttermesser's initial reaction to her unconscious formation of the golem, we are told that 'She was painfully anthropological,' that 'Puttermesser was no mystic, enthusiast, pneumaticist, ecstatic, kabbalist. Her mind was clean; she was a rationalist,' and that 'What transfixed her was the kind of intellect (immensely sober, pragmatic, un fanciful, rationalist like her own) to which a golem ordinarily occurred' (1997: 44). Such was the mind of the Great Rabbi Judah Loew, the famous maker of the Prague golem, and in fact Ozick re-situates all known golem-makers as 'scientific realists – and, in nearly every case at hand, serious scholars and intellectuals: the plausible forerunners, in fact, of their great-grandchildren, who are physicists, biologists, or logical positivists' (1997: 48). The science-driven origin of Xanthippe is bolstered by an additional detail: right before Puttermesser fell into the trance which led to the golem's creation, she had been reading *The New York Times* and being appalled at the litany of crime and capitalist corruption chronicled there, as well as Plato's *Theaetetus*, the dialogue on the nature and limits of knowledge and the philosopher's engagement in civic affairs. Hence the golem Xanthippe is also a brainchild of lucid Greek thinking and sober sociological contemplation. Science is placed in the service of the procreative urge, but also procreativity in the service of the Word (as both print text and scientific genius). As Elizabeth Baer points out:

In an epiphany, Puttermesser realizes that she is the author of the 'PLAN for the Resuscitation, Reformation, Reinvigoration & Redemption of the City of New York' (67) and that the golem has been her amanuensis. Again a trope common in golem stories, Xanthippe is depicted as Puttermesser's doppelganger: 'I express you. I copy and record you,' Xanthippe tells her (67). So we see that the golem has emerged from a text (*New York Times*) and is, in turn, the recorder of Puttermesser's text. Xanthippe is the very embodiment of intertextuality. (Baer, 2012: 162)

In accordance with her creation, Xanthippe's undoing also comes as a result of both her Greek and feminist ingredients, true to the formula of fatal attraction and righteous repulsion to Hellenism adopted elsewhere as well by Ozick (see Dokou and Walden, 1996): according to Elaine Kauvar, 'It is Puttermesser's realization of a kinship with Xanthippe [an ersatz daughter, genius, alter ego] that manifests Ozick's insights into the warring forces of the human heart: its pagan erotic desires coexist alongside the Judaic call to conscience' (1993: 142). As the golem's powers grow, so does her size, so in the end she can only dress in open-toed sandals and two sheets sewn together into a makeshift toga: 'Xanthippe

the Jewish golem elides into a Greek goddess risen from earth, thereby giving a new twist to Ms. Ozick's old Hellenism-Hebraism dichotomy' (Strandberg, 1994: 104). The idea that giving women power, civic or scientific, will unleash their uncontrollable sexual urges is at least as old in Western patriarchal thinking as Aristophanes' joke in *Lysistrata* about Amazons never falling off the saddle when riding (Aristophanes, 411B.C.: l. 676–79), and it is telling that, of all the golem mishaps available from Jewish lore, it is the Greek sensuality and the old misogynistic bias tying women to uncontrollable emotions that is this *femarche's* undoing. 'Like many doubles, Xanthippe is free to act out Puttermesser's repressed, or simply unexpressed, characteristics: her sexual passion, hunger, a will to power. She is "Puttermesser's id, the irrational, sensual half, the unruly secret sharer which she can no longer control"' (Cohen, 1987, cited by Sivan, 2003: 99). As much as Hellenism is the stuff that has fed Ozick's intellect to gargantuan proportions – as all her critics admit – empowering her alter ego's scientific bent, Judaism and its inexorable law will always call her fiction back at its patriarchal dénouement. According to Kauvar, 'In creating a silent golem who at first only writes and later speaks, Ozick conflates two kabbalistic conceptions for her own symbolic purposes. According to Scholem, ... golems deprived of speech indicate that "the souls of the righteous are no longer pure"' (Scholem, 1965, cited by Kauvar, 1993: 144). Apparently, then, a woman craving the exercise of her mind for the betterment of humankind – or at least New York – is impure. Thus, while all the other golems' destruction is didactically attributed to the injunction against the – always male – rabbis playing God, this golem's fall, taking the city of New York with it, is infused with an essentialist idea of femaleness. This casts Puttermesser 'not only more like Adam, the original golem,' but also makes her 'a fool, or *golem* in Yiddish. She finally sees that she is "the golem's golem"' (136) and that "[t]oo much Paradise is greed. Eden disintegrates from too much Eden. Eden sinks from a surfeit of itself" (156)' (Ozick, 1997, cited by Sivan, 2003: 100).

The attribution of the fall to hyperfemininity brought about by a woman's usurpation of technoscientific power is not only apparent in Xanthippe's sexual voraciousness; it informs the scenes of the golem's undoing and her burial. The destructive ritual is performed with the help of Puttermesser's male would-be fiancé and Xanthippe's first lover/victim, Rappoport, who is used as sexual bait for the 'fiery' Xanthippe and immobilizes her by wrapping her up in white velvet while she lies in post-coital torpor (Ozick, 1997: 96–97). While the act of creation is given a scientific aura, the act of undoing is redolent of rape, biblical seduction (Judith, Delilah), unclean bodily fluids, and the dirty thoughts the undoers must think to reverse the life-giving moment, reducing powerful Xanthippe to a helpless female body. The science this time is concentrated in the 'old green book' of Judaic tradition, which Puttermesser follows blindly to complete the ritual, deaf to her daughter's anguish, like a lab technician vivisectioning a rabbit. It is at that moment that the golem performs her final feat of uniqueness and evolution – unthinkable to all other golems – and acquires a voice, only to plead for her life with her maker:

'My mother.'

A voice!

'Oh my mother,' Xanthippe said, still looking upward at Puttermesser, 'why are you walking around me like that?'

She spoke! Her voice ascended! – a child's voice, pitched like the pure cry of a bird.

[...]

Beginning the fifth circle, Rappoport gasping behind her, Puttermesser said, 'You created and you destroyed.'

'No,' the golem cried – the power of speech released! – 'it was you who created me, it is you who will destroy me! Life! Love! Mercy! Love! Life!' (Ozick, 1997: 98)

The ritual, however, cannot silence and kill the pleading Xanthippe, not until Rappoport takes out his penknife and scrapes the aleph from her forehead and making the word inscribed there read 'dead.' He even says the word itself, affirming the supremacy of the male logos over female procreativity, nurturing urge, and scientific genius; but also re-establishing what Adam Rosenthal recognizes as the implicit violence in the relationship between parent and child, which is that of the imposition of both life and naming of the former on the not-yet-voluble latter:

this violence of the giver of life with respect to the one who is born, or who receives this gift; of the one who always, necessarily, claims the right to name (or to conceive) in unjust and unjustifiable fashion and the one, speechless or unborn or inexistent, who has no choice but to be done this violence to, indeed, who has no choice but to be made the proper subject of violence; this ur-violence of birth always already incriminates every parent, breeder, namer, every giver of any kind, in short, in relation to the givee. (Rosenthal, 2019: 56–57)

Compared to the decisive application of his handy phallic tool, Puttermesser's own name, which means 'butter-knife' in German (as per the narrator's whimsical reference in her closing poetic eulogy of her protagonist – [Ozick, 1997: 236] – that Jack Miles picks up in his 1997 review), casts female technoscience as an instrument domestic, practically decorative, and incapable of cutting to the quick of the matter.

Accordingly, Xanthippe's burial site reflects this victory of masculine civic order over female technoscience. The golem's loam is buried underneath a flower bed, ironically reflecting her feminine origins and overturning their being turned over, like that loam, in the act of creation. The flower bed, moreover, is situated at a hidden spot before the city hall: the burial site for the golem, 'fenced off by black iron staves' in a small park with an 'upward flying fountain' in the 'shadow of City Hall' highlights the hubris of Puttermesser's act as going against God the Creator, her transgression into goy Hellenism, and her final defeat 'of the mayor's untamed self' (Kauvar, 1993: 143). Notable here are the definite Freudian phallic

connotations of the upward bars and the ejaculatory fountain marking and yet not marking Xanthippe's grave, in the same way patriarchy has marked powerful women's contributions – including scientific breakthroughs – only by their erasure. At the same time, the burial in the shadow of the edifice marking Puttermesser's original defeat in the hands of the old boys' club functions as an open admission of the failure of both female *techne* and *arche* to dismantle 'the master's house', even when female agency has had the power to do so.

In conclusion, despite Ozick's brilliant satire of New York *mores*, what impresses readers most poignantly in *Puttermesser and Xanthippe* is the failure of female *techne* to make a lasting social impact, not for any other reason but for its very femaleness. Puttermesser chooses the artificial birth of the golem over the more traditional and 'natural' procreation of flesh-and-blood daughters, and it is this choice, where male procreators had none, that damns her because with choice comes ethical responsibility: in Sivan's words, 'As Adam and Eve learned in Eden, knowledge is composed of moral choices, appetites and law. Puttermesser, who has likened herself to the Creator, must be brought to task' (2003: 100). Ironically, this actually forms the only point of collusion, not collision, between the procreative and the technical endeavor, as, in the words of Lars Schmeink, '[s]cientific experimentation comes with unpredictable challenges and unexpected consequences for the creator, and in that it resembles parenthood. In experimenting with protean, self-organizing and adaptable life, science is challenged and changed' (2015: 366). Perhaps one would expect a different projection from a woman author who might have anticipated recent arguments unfolded by technofeminist critics in the steps of Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. For example, Judy Wajcman, in her seminal work *TechnoFeminism*, claims that 'while men are ill-prepared for a postmodern future, women are ideally suited to the new technoculture' (2004: 64) because cybertechnological enabling 'emphasizes women's subjectivity and agency, and the pleasure immanent in digital technologies' (*ibid.*: 63). Ozick might have even seen in the relationship of Puttermesser with Xanthippe what Adrienne Rich in *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* described as a 'lesbian continuum,' envisioned as a concept with truly life-saving potential:

I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support [...], we begin to grasp the breadth of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism. (Rich, 1980: 647)

Nevertheless, Ozick's need to expiate to her Jewish patrimony for her Grecian attraction leads the script to an ineluctable ending. Or perhaps this may work as

a parable for the larger failure brought on by the very nature of the subject of *teknon*-science as catalytic for metahumanity and the future of our species: as Nicolas Pethes notes, ‘The possibility – if not the ability – to “make” human beings changes the structure of human life and its reproduction. It influences the notions of illness and healing, and of individual characteristics, once it is possible to plan, if not “order,” them’ (2005: 163). Current technoscientific advances, having reached the point of breaching the god/human divide by creating life, must take their cue from speculative fiction and grapple with the ethical responsibility of affecting the future they purport to serve in completely unpredictable ways. Ozick’s tragic protagonist and her wayward daughter sound a call for establishing ethical directives or conclusions on a developing matter with changing variables, thus acknowledging the very real – though very pessimistic – possibility of the Petri dish becoming the new Pandora’s box.

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