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Unsung Heroines
gender construction and female agency in anglophone rewritings of classical mythology

Traduttore, tradittore: all translators are invariably also traitors. According to the Italian idiom, any act of translation is a betrayal of the source material – it can never convey the exact same meaning, given that it is always 'tarnished' by the translator's influence. Although inevitable, any changes to the original are viewed as undesired, a mark of the apparent ineptitude of the translator – or are they? The beginning of the 21st century is seeing a rapidly growing interest in new translations and rewritings of one of the key texts of Western culture: Greco-Roman mythology. One of the key indicators of this trend is the sheer amount of retellings published in the last two decades: From Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Urusla K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2008), Madeline Miller's *Galatea* (2013), Hannah M. Lynn's *Athena's Child* (2020), Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021) and *Elektra* (2022), Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta* (2021), Claire North's *Ithaca* (2022), Charlotte Higgin's *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* (2022), and Natalie Haynes's *The Children of Jocasta* (2017), *A Thousand Ships* (2019), *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (2020), and *Stone Blind: Medusa's Story* (2022), to name but a few. In addition, in 2017, Emily Wilson became the first woman to translate *The Odyssey* into English. This fascination with creative reworkings of the ancient opus is undoubtedly (but not solely) based on the fact that these are novels written by women, about women, for women. And highly educated ones at that.

These rewritings challenge the black-and-white portrayal of women and, consequently, depictions of gendered power relations in a more general sense. It is no coincidence that this new wave of "feminist revisionist mythology" (Tuttle 1986: 184) happens now: In the words of Moira Donegan, "We're in a moment of antifeminist backlash […] that […] seems aimed at silencing women, or punishing the women who won't shut up. It's a perilous time for women's speech – or at least, it's a perilous time for women who speak out against sexism" (2022: 1). On balance, the last few years have not been great for women's (or, indeed, human) rights. In 2022 alone, Roe v. Wade was overturned, numerous Iranians died in the Mahsa Amini protests, the Taliban banned women and girls from education, China's government described women as 'wombs' that can be sterilised or impregnated according to 'demographic needs', and Quatar, a country with a deeply anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-feminist

government, hosted the FIFA World Cup 2022. This is not only cause for great concern because “women’s rights [act] as a weathervane for democracy” (Tamés 2022: 1), but also because these setbacks seem to be symptoms of a widespread systematic disregard of the needs, wishes, and rights of women. McRobbie calls this phenomenon the so-called postfeminist ideology, which she describes as “feminism […] taken into account”, meaning that the need for feminism has been obviated seeing that ‘equality’ of the sexes has apparently already been achieved (McRobbie 2004: 255). Despite (or maybe because of) this decidedly postfeminist atmosphere, Professor Mary Beard, a “wickedly subversive” feminist, has become “Britain’s best-known classicist” (Laity 2007: 1), that is, a celebrity in her field and beyond. In 2017, her most influential work, *Women & Power: A Manifesto*, was published to critical acclaim. There, Beard argues that many of the cultural practices that perpetuate gendered inequality have their roots in Ancient Greece and Rome, where women were rendered powerless and silent.

Greco-Roman myths have played a huge part in the development of Western culture. They are often viewed as the beginning of European literary history and continue to serve as the basis of contemporary literary production in the Anglophone world and beyond. For millennia, but especially since the Renaissance, classical myths have been synonymous with literary perfection, the ideal that each author, artist, and musician should aspire to. Even if active knowledge about classical mythology is arguably declining, mythological tropes and allusions are omnipresent in contemporary literature and culture. According to William Doty, they are not only highly significant core narratives, but they “provide symbolic representations of cultural priorities, beliefs, and prejudices” (2004: 18). In other words, they create and reflect certain societal values as well as power relations between genders. In the vast majority of cases, the female characters in these foundational texts are but the fantasies, desires, and dreams of men: they are objectified, severely punished for any disobedience, and portrayed as inherently lacking agency and wit.

Many sacred and etiological texts rationalise misogyny, nipping any possible criticism in the bud by referring to naturalised rules created by a glaringly sexist deity. Greco-Roman mythology is no exception. However, instead of directly stating that women are worthless and only defined in relation to a male relative (i.e., father, brother, husband, uncle), these narratives ‘perform patriarchy’. In other words, they do not tell, but show why women are supposedly wretched creatures in need of male domination

– especially the ones who refuse to subjugate themselves to men, such as Medusa, Scylla, and Circe. It is thus hardly surprising that many monsters in Greco-Roman lore are coded female. Classicist Debbie Felton wrote in 2012 that these villainesses "all spoke to **men's fear of women's destructive potential**. The myths then, to a certain extent, **fulfil a male fantasy of conquering and controlling the female**" (Felton 2012: 27; emphasis added). In other words, women monsters exemplify the 'terrible consequences' of female independence and liberation, thereby justifying male control. Critic Jess Zimmerman puts this phenomenon in a nutshell when she argues that tales like that of Medusa are, in reality, "the **bedtime stories patriarchy tells itself**" (Zimmerman 2021: 13; emphasis added). The perspective in these narratives is decidedly male: instead of exploring the women's motives, fear, and desires, they are sentenced without mercy (e.g., punished after having been raped), objectified, othered, and reduced to their rage. And ultimately, they are exiled and/or killed by the male authorities, who appear to be the knight in shining armour.

The myths featuring female monsters are, in my reading, cautionary tales: They state societal taboos and frame the 'villainesses' as infringers of the morals and values of the patriarchy in order to justify their extremely harsh punishments. These stories arguably provide a narrative for accepted codes of conduct, where male rage and fury are not only tolerated, but encouraged. Women, however, are converted into scapegoats, often taking a double blow seeing that they suffer at the hand of men and are then framed for the very same action that hurt them (e.g., rape) in the first place. Tragically mirroring the story of Cassandra, they are robbed of their own voices because nobody – not even other women – will listen. Citing the example of Medusa, Cambridge classicist Mary Beard argues that "the beginnings of Western history [show] **a radical separation** – real, cultural, and imaginary – **between women and power**" (Beard 2017: 18; emphasis added). This chasm appears in a myriad of different shapes in Greco-Roman mythology, ranging from the frequent rape scenes to shaming women into certain behavioural patterns to seemingly inconspicuous everyday interactions and traditions that perpetuate the status quo.

Miller's *Circe* challenges such traditional portrayals of the first encounter of Odysseus and the eponymous protagonist. Remembering the encounter years later, she shares the following metafictional critique with the reader:

> Later, years later, I would hear a song made of our meeting. The boy who sang it was unskilled, missing notes more often than he hit, yet the sweet music of the verses shone through his mangling. **I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy**. **Humbling seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep**. (Miller 2018: 181; emphasis added).

Circe's criticism echoes Miller's own feminist stance on the portrayals of women in classical literature: most of them are not heroines in their own right, but primarily serve as a narrative element in the hero's story. It is thus hardly surprising that Miller's rewriting is different in that the heroine has her own storyline. On the surface, Miller sticks to the 'hard facts': Odysseus and his crew beach in Aiaia, they find Circe's house, she turns the crew into pigs but is unable to do the same to their captain, whom she sleeps with. Following Forster's distinction of story and plot, Miller kept the story (which comprises the chronological sequence of events) thus essentially stays the same, but changed the plot (i.e., the underlying logical structure and reasoning; Forster 1927: 93f.). In other words, Miller refuses to simply blame everything on the witch's 'evil heart" or her 'womanly weakness'. She also does not portray Odysseus and Circe as rivals for the symbolic rhabdos, i.e., the power to dominate the other person. Rather, they are described as two tacticians who each try to outwit the other, only to realise that they are equally cunning as they face each other: Circe has already transformed his men, while Odysseus has prudently rejected the wine and is now holding moly, therefore protecting himself from her powers:

> "You have not drunk," I said. "**That is clever. But I am still a witch, and you are in my house**."
> "**I hope we can settle this with reason.**" He had put the goblet down. **He did not draw his sword, but his hand rested on the hilt**. […]
> "I think you are Odysseus," I said. "Born from that same Trickster's blood." He did not start at the uncanny knowledge. He was a man used to gods.
> "And you are the goddess Circe, daughter of the sun." […]
> "**Most men do not know me for what I am**."
> "**Most men, in my experience, are fools**," he said. […]
> "**Prince Odysseus, we are at an impasse. For you have the moly, and I have your men. I cannot harm you, but if you strike at me, they will never be themselves again**."
> "I feared as much," he said. […]
> "**I propose a truce**," I said. "A test of sorts." […] "I have heard […] that **many find their trust in love**." (Miller 2018: 177-179; emphasis added)

Compared to (the translation of) Homer's version, Miller's account of Circe's first meeting with Odysseus seems much more level – while both characters involved are

defensive, none is clearly weaker or stronger than the other. In my reading, there are two reasons for this: Firstly, Odysseus is well aware that he finds himself in front of the ‘daughter of the sun’ (who could kill his crew in a heartbeat) and thus does not throw phallus-shaped sharp objects in her face. And secondly, this version of Odysseus “insinuates [himself] into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking over in its entirety” (Certeau 1984: 21). Put differently, Miller’s Odysseus does not seek to permanently dominate, but to temporarily coexist in the same space as Circe. Miller’s slight adaptation of the plot thus changes the gendered power dynamic completely: the Homeric original portrays them as rivals for the same masculine space that serves to exert control over others. However, seeing that Miller’s Circe and Odysseus are not interested in mutual domination but rather in peaceful, productive coexistence, the original power struggle is rendered void.

This is but one example how feminist rewritings of classical myths simultaneously subvert, honour, and continue the literary tradition that birthed them, thereby opening the door to ancient mythological texts for a whole new generation of engaged, critical (women) readers.

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