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Matthias Heinemann,
Adrian Weiß & Christine Walde (eds.)

**Fantastic antiquities
and where to find them:
ancient worlds in
(post-)modern novels**



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Introduction

“A glance through Muggle art and literature of the Middle Ages reveals that many of the creatures they now believe to be imaginary were then known to be real. The dragon, the griffin, the unicorn, the phoenix, the centaur – these and more are represented in Muggle works of that period, though usually with almost comical inexactitude.”

(‘Newt Scamander’: *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, p. xiv)

J. K. Rowling’s fictional expert on magical creatures in the world of *Harry Potter*, Newt Scamander, is almost comically inexact in consulting Muggle art and literature of the Middle Ages for his handbook on creatures like the griffin, unicorn, phoenix and centaur – even though these beings have far older origins.¹ Yet, in doing so, Rowling addresses a fascinating phenomenon of reception: By making Scamander suggest that these creatures’ appearance in earlier literature is not just fictional but actual evidence of Muggle knowledge of their existence, this draws attention to the ever-shifting nature of interpretation. While some elements, such as mythical creatures, may persist in literature over time, their meanings are continuously reexamined and renegotiated by both authors and readers.

¹ These mythic creatures are already attested in early stages of the antiquities: The griffin is already known in the ancient Near East from at least the fourth millennium BCE onwards; the unicorn is regarded as a real animal in the Greco-Roman world, cf. e.g., Aristot. *hist. an.* 2,1, 499b20 or Plin. *nat.* 8,76; the phoenix seems to stem from Egyptian cult (as portrayed in Hdt. 2,73); the centaurs appear as early as in Hom. *Od.* 21,295 sqq. and Hes. *theog.* 542.

This dynamic interplay between interpretation and reinterpretation finds a natural extension in the novels of the postmodern age, where we see a vibrant resurgence in the reception of antiquities. Consequently, scholars of different literary disciplines have eagerly examined, e.g., the world of *Harry Potter*. We, too, selected the famous wizarding heptalogy and its spin-offs such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001) as our very first starting point. Ironically, the outcome is a volume without a single article dedicated to *Harry Potter*. Instead, what emerged after the international call for papers in March 2023 was a collection of essays organized around broader topics of reception, reflecting the multifaceted ways in which postmodern literature – or, considering recent shifts, post-postmodern – reinterprets and transforms antiquity.

This never-ending reception process can be understood as a form of ‘retelling’ in the broadest sense. Therefore, *Section 1* is aptly and simply titled ‘Retelling Ancient Myth’. Its contributions circle around ‘voice’ – both in the sense of giving voice to figures hitherto marginalized or even ‘silenced’ and of critically revisiting ancient narratives under the perspective of feminism and criticism of masculinity. So, Briana King contrasts the different strategies used by Natalie Haynes and Pat Barker in their Trojan novels to grant ‘compensating’ visibility to the war-stricken women (Andromache, Briseis), therefore inviting us to revisit the classical texts under this perspective. In the same way the contribution of Tiago de Melo Cordeiro and Luiz Fernando Ferreira Sá tackles criticism of heroic masculinity, claiming Achilles as a model of hegemonic masculinity and examining its consequences for identity and self-destruction. Then, Orestis Karavas’s article on Christos Chomenidis’ *Her King* (2020) presents a compelling counterpoint to the feminist-focused retellings of the Helen-myth by imagining her betrayed husband Menelaus as the central narrator. Finally, after an interpretation of Madeline Miller’s popular novels *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), Michael Fischer takes a step back to examine the economic conditions behind the vast number of mythological rewritings in the 21st century, reframing them in the concept of ‘midcult’.

Section 2, ‘Socio-Political Readings of Antiquity’, is even more occupied with the ‘contemporariness’ of the novels analyzed. Francesca Cichetti describes how two disturbing novels – *Llámame Casandra* (2019) by the Cuban Marcial Gala and *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* (2023) the Italian Igiaba Scego – evolve around protagonists (one of them male) identifying themselves with Cassandra, the ancient seer and war victim, thereby voicing a mesmerizing criticism of war and displacement. By presenting the contemporary Croatian novel by Ivica Ivanišević (*Sutra je novi ručak*; 2020), Anđelko Mihanović explores how Croatian identity

is shaped by its real or imagined historical ties with Rome. This puts into focus how stereotyped and oversimplified portrayals of Rome are used in modern political discourse with a contemporary agenda as dubious arguments of legitimation. Both articles, presenting us with novels presumably not well known either to classicists or a wider public, show how the reference to antiquities serves as an interface of entangling personal narratives with wider political contexts. Thus, it offers a critical reflection on both the potential and limitations of using antiquity in contemporary contexts.

The contributions of *Section 3*, ‘Restaging Antiquities’, though on the surface heterogeneous in content, have as a common denominator that they analyze the strategies of transforming and visualizing historical figures, events, settings and even ‘philosophies’ in order to endow them with relevancy for our contemporary societies. Diego De Brasi’s analysis of Mariangela Galatea Vaglio’s novels on the Byzantine Empress Theodora (2018/2022) shows how reimagining ancient figures in terms of modern notions of gender and power hierarchies leads to a better understanding also of the ancient texts. Alicia Matz takes her starting point from the modern phenomenon of fanfiction, identifying it as determining strategy in Elodie Harper’s *The Wolf Den* trilogy (2021–2023). This series blends material evidence and canonical texts with a certain ‘democratizing’ effect to challenge traditional portrayals of Roman life. In analyzing Jo Walton’s *The Just City* (2015), Sonsoles Costero-Quiroga and Marina Díaz Bourgeal discuss a special form of fanfiction, as the novel imagines that the gods Athena and Apollo turn Plato’s *Politeia* into reality, thereby touching the raw nerve of social justice, fair socio-economic organization, and exploitation of marginalized groups (e.g. women and robots).

Section 4, ‘Integrating Antiquity into Children’s and Young Adult Literature’, deals with the adaptation of ancient myths and stories for a special public, the younger audiences. They share a key question: how can the often-violent narratives of antiquity be retold in age-appropriate versions for children of today? The contributions in this section are arranged chronologically by the year in which these novels were published. Emma Ljung maps out how C. S. Lewis in his *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956) engages with multiple layers of tradition simultaneously, including not only Christian literature, medieval cosmology, and mythology in general, but on a more subtle, formal level of reception even narrating patterns used by Ovid. Thais Rocha Carvalho demonstrates the prominent reuse of Persephone’s myth as the dominating paradigm in two novels (Sarah J. Maas: *A court of mist and fury* [2016] and Stephenie Meyer: *Midnight sun* [2020]). Similarly, Babette Pütz analyzes how New Zealand author Sabrina

Malcolm in *Zeustian Logic* (2017) models her young protagonist's identity with Zeus and his 'superpowers' as points of reference. Finally, looking at Alexandra Bracken's novel *Lore* (2021), Avishay Gerczuk shows how contemporary values are reshaped in a modern, feministic reformulation of ancient archetypes.

Section 5 on 'A Different Kind of Imagination: Antiquity in Graphic Novels' widens the generic horizon by introducing graphic novels, even if they are not 'novels' in a strict sense. But without doubt they are a contemporary form of storytelling, combining literary strategies with visual ones. They provide a unique avenue for engaging with classical themes as they present seemingly predefined visual elements, stimulating the reader's imagination and interpretation. These visual components help to recycle certain aspects of ancient worlds and ideas, providing the readers with more immediate access, as the two case studies show: Ronald Blankenborg examines how Eric Shanower's graphic novel series *Age of Bronze* (1998–2019) risks idealizing classical antiquity by presenting a cohesive and visually appealing retelling of the Trojan War that blends literary and visual sources from various historical periods. While the series aims to still be faithful to these different traditions, the product is ultimately a fantastical version of ancient Troy, influenced by both heroic epic storytelling and modern visual standards. Pietro Vesentin traces the editorial evolution of Milo Manara's erotic adaptation of Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (*L'asino d'oro*; 1999) examining how the artist reinterprets the 'original' through his unique blend of structure, imagery, and language in an enormously powerful way.

The sixth and last section rounds off the volume by taking a rather different perspective: While the contributions of the previous sections are focused on different interpretations of various texts that draw on antiquities in some way, 'In the Author's and Publisher's Workshop' we get a glimpse of the composition and the publishing process of such novels: Due to her own close involvement into the publishing process of the late Diane Middlebrook's *Der junge Ovid* (2012) and *Young Ovid* (2015), Sonja Schreiner is able to provide a colorful account of the circumstances how it came about that first the German translation and – only later on – the original English novel were published. Richard Seltzer, author of various novels based on the Homeric epics, offers fascinating insights into his individual creative approach to the ancient texts; his contribution comes with a preview of his latest publication, *Let the Women Have Their Say* (2024).

Taken together, the seventeen case studies of this volume showcase the vast spectrum in which the novels in question interact with the antiquities, ranging from modern retellings of ancient texts and myths to more distant and fragmented reuse. This mirrors to some extent the wide range of contributors va-

rying by age and career stage and comprising practically everyone imaginable from MA and PhD students, independent scholars to full professors; university affiliations and citizenships are not restricted to Europe (Austria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Scotland, and Spain) but also include scholars from Brazil (Minas Gerais and Sao Paulo), Israel (Bar-Ilan) and the United States of America (Boston). This is an index not only of the vivacity of classical and reception studies all around the world but also of the fact that novels as well as other media productions with a strong classical background are a truly international phenomenon that, having left behind academic circles and niche audiences, has captured the mainstream: It is impossible to keep up with the new publications all around the world. The significantly increased popularity and production of novels engaging with antiquity in future will need a deeper analysis – a meta-study – regarding their economic and cultural conditions. Despite the literary richness and variety of these contemporary retellings, the role of capitalism in dominating the book market cannot be overlooked. The resurgence of classical themes is not just a reflection of literary potential. It is also shaped and influenced by market trends. The title of our volume, *Fantastic Antiquities and Where to Find Them. Ancient Worlds in (post-)modern novels*, thus, on the one hand, encourages readers to consider the artistic merit or lack of quality of these works as well as the economic and cultural contexts in which they were produced. On the other hand, it addresses this widespread boom in reception studies of all disciplines, inviting readers to consider the approaches taken by practitioners and scholars of literary studies when dealing with antiquity's rich reception across various genres and forms.

One of the central challenges we faced in assembling this volume was the multifaceted nature of ancient reception. As editors, coming from two different generations, each of us is influenced by his/her own preconceptions; nevertheless, we can speak with one voice when answering in the affirmative the question whether reception studies should be an obligatory part of Classical Studies. This makes necessary a widening of one's horizon in sense of trans- and interdisciplinarity and engagement in one's own contemporary contexts. As the contributions in this volume demonstrate, the study of antiquity in post-modern literature is anything but static. It encompasses a wide array of genres, methods, and motivations, from deep academic dedication to active engagement in reducing social injustice. The diversity of ancient receptions in novels today moves boundaries of traditional literary studies, suggesting that scholars must be equally open to examining so-called high literature alongside more pop-cultural forms, acknowledging the impact of both on how antiquity is perceived

and retold. This will and must have reverberations on our own approaches to classical texts, too.

In a way, this also answers the question why we centered the volume around novels. Novels as the generic successors of the ancient epic remain a uniquely flexible and immersive medium. Yet, the novel's relationship with other media – particularly in the age of digital storytelling – can't be ignored: There is classical reception in visual media (films, video, photos, paintings, sculptures etc.) – and even in board or video games, on social media (e.g. the questionable influencing 'Book Tok'), in fashion and music. However, while these media offer fast-paced and visually stimulating reinterpretations of fragments of antiquity, novels through their literary nature provide a more reflective space for revisiting and immersing in these new versions of antiquity. The reading process allows for a slower, more contemplative reception, enabling readers to deeply engage with the nuances of character, context, and narrative. This extended autonomous engagement offers a rich, more layered exploration of ancient themes, inviting readers to ponder their contemporary relevance in a way that rapid visual media do not allow.

Choosing the images for the appropriate cover illustration proved quite challenging, as we were fully aware that selecting one or two mythological scenes would fail to capture adequately the breadth and multiplicity of the volume's content in its full scope. In the end, after long discussions, we turned to AI-generated images: We leave it to our public to interpret the result, a fusion of the ancient and the contemporary, but we hope that we were able to encapsulate the very essence of this volume's exploration of how antiquity is continuously renegotiated and integrated in today's (literary) worlds.

In conclusion, we extend our gratitude to *thersites*, the journal that made this volume possible. We would especially like to thank Annemarie Ambühl (Mainz) for her invaluable assistance in organizing and funding the publishing process, and Concetta Finiello (Basel), who supported us by discussing all the contributions during an earlier stage of the project. We hope this collection will contribute to the ongoing expansion of classical reception studies and enrich the dialogue on antiquity's place within (post-)modern literature. The discussion must go on and we are looking forward to being part of it.

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Un-silencing the Girls: Critical Classical Reception in Feminist Retellings of Greek Myths

Abstract In recent feminist retellings of Greek myths, the Trojan War has become the preferred mytho-historical setting for reexamining gender performativity in the ancient world. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are foundational texts for how Western culture has historically characterized heroic masculinity, and, in contrast, tragic femininity. Modern novels such as Pat Barker's *Silence of the Girls* (2018), its sequel *Women of Troy* (2021), and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019) turn the focus to the largely silent women of these epics. Through the voices of figures such as Briseis and Andromache, Barker and Haynes adopt a critical narrative of masculine ideals, including the glamorization of war and brutality, in order to highlight women's endurance of sexual violence and victimization as a result of men's pursuit of glory.

As this article explores, by enabling the once silenced women of Troy to voice their experiences of rape and enslavement, these three modern retellings challenge both ancient and contemporary notions of ideal masculinity while further highlighting the historical longevity of sexual violence against women as a consequence of men's wars.

Keywords Epic, Trojan Women, Rape, Toxic Masculinity, Tragic Femininity

INTRODUCTION

And I do what countless women before me have been forced to do. I spread my legs for the man who killed my husband and my brothers.¹

So Briseis of Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) bitterly thinks as she silently witnesses the proud king of Troy, Priam, beg great Achilles to return the body of his beloved dead son, Hector, so that Priam may give him the proper burial rites owed to the Trojan prince. That Briseis is allowed to remain present for Priam's unprecedented visit to his enemy's camp is by no means a mark of distinction for her. While Briseis is a former princess given to Achilles as a high prize for his victories in war, ultimately, she is his slave, of no more value or consideration than any other object in his possession, perhaps even less so. Her presence is both unnoticeable and unnoteworthy until Achilles needs her to perform a duty. But for all her silence during the scene, her suffering is painfully loud to the audience. It is a startlingly blunt and visceral reaction to Priam's declaration that he has done "what no man before me has ever done, I kiss the hands of the man who killed my son,"² from an otherwise self-contained figure who prides herself on not falling victim to the physical and emotional devastation wrought upon herself and her people after the Greek army laid destruction to her city, Lyrnessus. It is a poignant and stark reminder that while the men on both sides of war defend their honor and seek eternal glory, the victims of their war, particularly the women who are taken captive, face far more traumatic consequences than having merely to kiss the hands of their enemy.

This theme runs through Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* and its sequel, *The Women of Troy* (2022), as well as through Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019).³ All three novels, written by women authors, re-tell the fall of Troy from the perspectives of the women who until now had been largely if not completely silent in the Homeric epic, the *Iliad*. Barker and Haynes are part of a growing group of women authors reimagining classical myths which almost exclusively prioritize the masculine perspective and often perpetuate traditional patriarchal and misogynistic characterizations of women. Authors such as Margaret Atwood, Madeline Miller, Jennifer Saint, Costanza Casati, and Claire North, as well as Pat

1 Barker (2018) 240.

2 Barker (2018) 230 & 240. Cf. *Il.* 24.625–628.

3 Henceforth abbreviated as *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*, respectively.

Barker and Natalie Haynes, are engaging in the feminist revision of myths, what Shuvra Sen describes as analogous to “the re-arrogation of the male privilege with a view to achieving female intents and goals.”⁴ Retelling these myths from a female point of view “with an added feminist edge,” as Shuvra Sen describes it, “enables the women authors to recreate the images of women in a different way to how they are represented in traditional classical literature composed by male writers,” while also having the “profound potential not only to reveal how much the traditional mythical literary texts written from a male perspective contribute to the suppression of women, but also challenge the androcentric premise of these cultural texts.”⁵ The French feminist critic H  l  ne Cixous writes that, “women’s weapon is the word, because they talk, talk endlessly, chatter, overflow with sound, mouth-sound: but they don’t actually *speak* , they have nothing to say. They always inhabit the place of silence, or at most make it echo with their singing.”⁶ Cixous rallies women who write to write *as women* , to not deny the difference between masculine and feminine writing because doing so sustains, however unintentionally, the masculine voice which silences the feminine voice: “to be signed with a woman’s name doesn’t necessarily make a piece of writing feminine.”⁷ A call for women to give voice to women can rewrite history, “But first she would have to *speak* [.]”⁸

Barker and Haynes answer Cixous’s call to give voice to silenced women through their retellings of the Trojan War and its aftermath. In giving voice to the female victims of the Trojan War who suffered rape and enslavement, Barker and Haynes contribute to a change in rape scripts, accomplished by what Hesford describes as publicly redefining “the experience of rape from the victim’s perspective, rather than from the perspective of the rapist,”⁹ which, from

4 Shuvra Sen (2020) 46.

5 Shuvra Sen (2020) 46.

6 Cixous (1981) 49.

7 Cixous (1981) 51–52. Cixous acknowledges that it can also happen that masculine writing does not automatically exclude femininity.

8 Cixous (1981) 50. See also Solnit (2017) 24 who writes that “by redefining whose voice is valued, we redefine our society and its values.” Swanson adds, “This reclamation of voice is also a gesture toward rebuilding subjectivities profoundly damaged in the foundational act and cultural consequences of wartime rape,” (2019) 1621.

9 Hesford (1999) 203.

a literary standpoint, translates into “point of view, narrative, or testimonial voice, literary keys to calibrating audience response.”¹⁰ In the context of wartime rape, Swanson adds that “the embrace of the survivor’s point of view demands the restoration of her body/mind/soul to the story of what was, the wresting of that story from men who would deny it[.]”¹¹ Barker and Haynes both restore the Trojan women’s bodies/minds/souls to the Homeric epic by unapologetically and at times graphically addressing their traumatic experiences of rape and enslavement at the hands of the men who killed their husbands, brothers, and sons. Barker’s novels are both told primarily from Briseis’s point of view, while Haynes’s is told from multiple women’s points of view, including not just the former royal Trojan women such as Hecuba, Andromache, and Cassandra, but also Helen, Creusa, Iphigenia, and Penelope. The narrator is Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, as she “sings” to the poet (presumably Homer, though not explicitly identified, only hinted at)¹² who requests her guidance and inspiration to recite his poem, though she is reluctant to do so and only helps if he is willing to accept that war is a “web which stretches out to the furthest parts of the world, drawing everyone into itself,”¹³ not just the heroes, and certainly, if not most importantly, including the otherwise footnoted Trojan women. Interwoven into Calliope’s narration are the women’s stories, regardless, or rather, in spite of, the poet’s reluctance to give them voice.

This article examines the ways in which these three feminist retellings of the Trojan War critically assess the heroic masculinity lauded throughout the Homeric epic as opposed to the tragic femininity which the heroines embody as a consequence of their becoming victims to men’s blind pursuit of victory and glory. The first section considers how feminist retellings of epic myths represent a commentary on modern notions of toxic masculinity and rape culture, and how we may consider both in a classical context. The next section explores how Barker’s and Haynes’s novels relate epic heroism to toxic masculinity in order to subvert Homeric heroic ideals and contrast them with the tragic heroic

10 Swanson (2019) 1622. See also Goff (2022) 4.

11 Swanson (2019) 1622.

12 Calliope describes the unidentified bard as, “old, this man. Older than his hard-edged voice suggests,” and his eyes are “closed for a moment with the intensity of his prayer,” though his eyes are never noted to be open throughout the remainder of Calliope’s narration, suggesting that he is in fact blind; Haynes (2019) 2.

13 Haynes (2019) 109.

femininity exhibited by the once largely silent and absent female victims of the Trojan War.¹⁴ The next section discusses specific characterizations of Achilles in both Barker and Haynes as the epitome of the toxic masculinity/epic heroism dichotomy, as well as of select women who become the unsung heroines of the epic, particularly Briseis. The final section considers how Barker's and Haynes's descriptions of wartime rape and the female victims' traumas echo the traumas experienced by female victims of modern wartime/genocidal rape, emphasizing the historical longevity of sexual violence against women as a consequence of men's wars.

TOXIC MASCULINITY THEN & NOW

In a 2021 NPR author interview, Haynes described her inspiration to write *ATS*, noting that it was not an ancient text or artwork that inspired her, but rather a documentary shown at the Cannes Film Festival about restorative justice in Rwanda:

What I looked at was how these women who had obviously survived the war insofar as they were still alive, but they had been brutalized in the waging of that war... And they were then being asked essentially to live next door to the man who had killed their relatives and brutalized their bodies...It doesn't look to me like these women are receiving any kind of justice. It looks like they're having to tolerate what they're given because there's no alternative. That theme ran through writing *A Thousand Ships* for me.¹⁵

Similarly, in a 2018 *Publishers Weekly* interview, Barker noted that the "issues at stake in *The Silence* are also being played out in modern society. What I felt the last few months of working on the book, and editing it, was that it seemed to become more and more topical."¹⁶ The events in *TSG* are on par with "the very worst atrocities that have happened, or are happening, in the modern world – we

¹⁴ In this article, I focus on Briseis and the Trojan women in both Barker's and Haynes's novels for comparison's sake.

¹⁵ Haynes interviewed by Garcia-Navarro (2021).

¹⁶ Barker interviewed by Reese (2018).

shouldn't kid ourselves about that at all."¹⁷ Barker also cites the Yazidi women in Syria and Iraq as examples of modern slavery,¹⁸ and wrote *TSG* and *TWT* "in awareness of the tens of thousands of women raped during the Bosnian conflict."¹⁹ Barker and Haynes draw a connection between modern crises of the rape and enslavement of women occurring as a result of wartime conflicts with the rape and enslavement evident in the Homeric epics experienced by the Trojan women. Though the epics and the characters therein are mythological, they are mytho-historical in the sense that they reveal contemporaneous ideals of masculinity and femininity, as well as societal and cultural values surrounding violence and war, notably from a male perspective. In retelling the events and the aftermath of the Trojan War through the women's perspectives, Barker and Haynes draw stark attention to the striking similarities between the ancient (Greek) treatment of female victims of war and modern female victims of war, compelling modern audiences of an ancient story to consider how and why behaviors and attitudes that justified the rape and enslavement of women as a result of war as far back as the Homeric historical past persist in modern conflicts.

The subversion of "heroic masculinity"/"epic heroism" from a modern female perspective makes for a compelling comparison with the modern concept of "toxic masculinity." While not all characteristics of heroic masculinity are inherently negative, such as honor and courage, and would not have been considered toxic in the relevant time period, it is the attitudes and behaviors in pursuit of these characteristics that often reveal a darker side to notions of masculinity which threatens/suppresses/even violates others, particularly the embodiment of masculinity's opposite (femininity, ergo women). These attitudes and behaviors manifest in modern toxic masculinity and, consequently, in modern rape culture. Toxic masculinity is an underlying factor in many cases of sexual assault, and thus when we speak of toxic masculinity in the Homeric context, we inevitably also encounter rape culture, which is evident in *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*. The definition of both terms and their application to cultures of antiquity is therefore worth considering, particularly in response to objections of anachronistic theoretical frameworks.

¹⁷ Barker interviewed by Reese (2018).

¹⁸ Reese (2018).

¹⁹ Hughes-Hallett (2021). See also Graham-Harrison (2018) on the Vilina Vlas rape camp where, during the Višegrad massacres in the Bosnian War of the 1990s, Bosniak civilian prisoners were tortured and murdered and women were raped.

Hegemonic and Toxic Masculinity

On the value of “anachronistic” formulations for understanding the past, a timely and recent publication addresses this methodology for examining toxic masculinity in the ancient Mediterranean: *Toxic Masculinity in the Ancient World* (2024).²⁰ The editors, Racette-Campbell and McMaster, distinguish between hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity and map a theoretical framework for examining toxic masculinity in the ancient world. Hegemonic masculinity “refers to a set of values, activities and attitudes that are associated with the most acceptable fulfilment of a mainstream style of manhood in any given society or culture.”²¹ While hegemonic values are culturally specific, in modern Western cultures these values often include “the belief that men are superior to and dominant over women and other groups perceived as lesser; a willingness to use violence; a lack of emotional openness; and avoidance of displays of emotions other than anger.”²² Hegemonic masculinity is not inherently toxic, but it can encourage characteristics of toxic masculinity, which arises when hegemonic masculinity “is taken to extremes or practised by men who lack other forms of hegemonic power, usually due to their class, race, ethnicity, religion or some other part of their life experience.”²³ Hegemonic masculinity is toxic when it is “harmful to other (protected) individuals, to one’s community or to oneself,” and an especially relevant example of when it becomes toxic is violence against women which is “predicated on beliefs of male superiority and control, and the belief that violence is a legitimate means for asserting these[.]”²⁴ These beliefs are often at the heart of patriarchal value systems. Per Nicholls: “patriarchal thinking normalises for men an entitlement to authority – a belief in their own fitness to rule, to set the terms of engagement in their social relations – and a sexual entitlement.”²⁵ The belief in sexual entitlement is especially relevant to the current discussion as will become evident in later sections.

20 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (eds.) (2024).

21 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 2. The seminal work on hegemonic masculinity is Connell (1995).

22 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 2.

23 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 3.

24 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 3.

25 Nicholls (2021) 70.

Studies on toxic masculinity build upon the relatively recent scholarship on masculinity in the ancient world. This subcategory of gender and sexuality studies examines how masculinity was then understood to be acquired through learning and experience/actions (and was therefore variable and capable of being lost); it was dependent on one's ability to continuously and successfully project socially prescribed masculinity and on whether that projection was accepted by one's contemporaries.²⁶ By examining toxic masculinity as a product of hegemonic masculinity, Racette-Campbell/McMaster and the volume's contributing authors aim to determine whether the terminology can be successfully applied to this ancient (largely Greek and Roman) understanding of, and performance of masculinity, ultimately demonstrating that the ancient authors did recognize and critique "the toxic potential in certain aspects of masculinity."²⁷ Some research finds that the misogyny inherent in toxic masculinity comes through in both ancient and modern attitudes toward rape and rape victims,²⁸ while other research finds that toxic masculinity can be perceived in the source material, but not without contextual modification.²⁹

Toxic Masculinity & Rape Culture

Per Burnett, rape culture exists "when rape, or sexual assault, is a normalized expectation."³⁰ It is "an intersectional phenomenon that crosses gender, race, ability, ethnicity, [and] sexuality" wherein "men are taught to be dominant, sexually aggressive, and powerful," thereby creating an environment that "fosters the idea that rape is part of being a man" while often sympathizing with the rapist and blaming the victim.³¹ Societies which foster behaviors or attitudes that en-

²⁶ Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 3. See Foxhall/Salmon (eds.) (1998), Gleason (1998), Nagy (1999) and (2013), Foxhall/Salmon (eds.) (2011), and Rosen/Sluiter (eds.) (2003).

²⁷ Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 9.

²⁸ Ex. Gellar-Goad (2024) 243–256.

²⁹ Ex. Ager (2024) 231–242.

³⁰ Burnett (2016) 1. See also Nicholls (2021).

³¹ Burnett (2016) 1, 1–5.

able sexual violence can therefore be considered as having a rape culture. One of the first scholars to ascribe rape culture to antiquity is Rabinowitz, who in her analysis of Greek tragedy remarks that “the prominence of rape in the heroic corpus may have the effect of normalizing rape.”³² However, scholars such as Lape and Harris contend that to discuss rape in an ancient context, specifically an Athenian context in their respective analyses, is inherently flawed due to modern projections of cultural and moral ideologies.³³ Koutsopetrou-Møller disagrees, arguing that their position presupposes “an unjustified disruption of the historical phenomenon of rape,” and impedes “any sort of causal explanations, which is...possible only by using the comparative method.”³⁴ Instead, we may consider rape as the term most relevant for comparing the phenomenon as it manifests both in the past and in the present, as Bal suggests and Rabinowitz concurs.³⁵

Koutsopetrou-Møller considers the application of the term “rape culture” to antiquity within Classical Athens, examining the legal treatment of rape and comparing it to the literary evidence in Athenian plays where the performance of female rape deviates from the content of the law.³⁶ Koutsopetrou-Møller contrasts the Athenian legal system, which “wilfully undercut the traumatic impact of rape on its female survivors, espousing only attitudes that would keep patriarchy alive,”³⁷ with Classical literature, which discusses “sexual violation of women in different terms, revealing that actual social practices could diverge significantly from the official legal framework, and take into account victims’ feelings.”³⁸ Koutsopetrou-Møller notes that Athenian law considered rape an offense only insofar as it violated the honor of the female victim’s husband (or father, or *kyrios*, the primary male guardian) and that of the *oikos* he con-

32 Rabinowitz (2011) 16.

33 Lape (2001); Harris (2006). See also Konstan (1994).

34 Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 2.

35 Bal (1994) 38: “I would like to take a closer look at the contested term, ‘rape’. In other words, I want to *confront* the phenomenon through the word we *would* use if we were to speak ‘ethnocentrically’ and see what happens”; Rabinowitz (2011) 6, citing Bal (1994).

36 Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021).

37 Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 2.

38 Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 17.

trolled and to which she belonged.³⁹ In contrast, Koutsopetrou-Møller demonstrates that Athenian literature considers the physical and emotional traumas experienced by female rape victims, and that these traumas are characteristic of toxic masculinity and rape culture present today, including the victims' feelings of guilt and shame, their reluctance to come forward, victim-blaming/doubling, and rape apologists/leniency for rapists.⁴⁰

Koutsopetrou-Møller's comparison of Classical Athenian law and literature is noteworthy because she demonstrates that the modern terminology is informative for how we may situate the traumas experienced by female victims of wartime rape today as historically undisrupted and shared traumas, a theme which permeates Barker's and Haynes's respective novels. As Swanson notes, rape "gains meaning through a long history of culturally coded shame, silence, and repression in which gendered subjectivities of victim and perpetrator are assigned according to age-old scripts of hegemonic masculinity."⁴¹ These gendered subjectivities equate female victims of modern rape culture with shame, silence, repression, and liability, in opposition to those which equate male rapists with control, entitlement, and inculpability. These "culturally coded" gendered subjectivities are products of toxic masculinity (and thus by-products of hegemonic masculinity) and are identifiable in ancient cultures as much as they are in modern ones. The similarities between the ancient attitudes and behaviors which constitute rape to the attitudes and behaviors modernity define as distinctive of rape enable us to characterize cultures of antiquity as embodying "rape cultures." This characterization consequently enables writers such as Barker and Haynes to confidently situate ancient women, including mythological women, within a recognizable (and relatable) cultural context from both an ancient and modern perspective. The term "rape culture" may be a modern phenomenon, but the characteristics and precedents thereof, including toxic masculinity, are recognizably ancient in their conception.

³⁹ Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 9–13. On the punishments for rape, cf. Ogden (1997) 30 & Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 17. On the language of rape, see Gaca (2015) and Robson (2013) 103.

⁴⁰ Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 18, examining Euripides's *Ion* & *Auge*, and Aeschylus's *Ag.*

⁴¹ Swanson (2019) 1614.

THE SUBVERSION OF HEROIC IDEALS & TRAGIC FEMININE HEROISM

In *TSG*, when the Greeks sack the city of Lyrnessus during their campaign against Troy, the Lyrnessian women take refuge in the citadel, common women and slaves in the basement and members of royal and aristocratic families on the top floor. From within, the ominous battle cry of Achilles can be heard, drawing ever closer. As Briseis, the titular female character throughout Barker's novel, awaits the unspoken yet expected defeat with the other women, she notes that, "The air was heavy with the foreknowledge of what we would have to face."⁴² Similarly, in *ATS*, the Trojan women huddle together on the shores while the Greeks finish pillaging Troy, waiting to be divided amongst the soldiers, and "all knew that they would never know solitude again," because "When a war ended, the men lost their lives. But the women lost everything else. And victory had made the Greeks no kinder."⁴³ The women, Lyrnessian and Trojan,⁴⁴ understand that repeated rape and enslavement at the hands of their enemies await them, even girls "as young as nine and ten would not be spared."⁴⁵

All of the women express a foreknowledge based on real ancient practice. Gaca defines the practice of aggravated rape and keeping the victims alive, or of aggravated rape and killing the victims or leaving them to die, and of targeting this practice against women and girls belonging to peoples who have been the focus of martial aggression, as "populace-ravaging warfare."⁴⁶ Previously free-born women and girls of a conquered society became war captives and were thus subject to repeated rape and enslavement as a customary and commonly top-down martial practice.⁴⁷ As Fallon notes, due to the sociocultural value placed on women, "the perception that a woman's sexual virtue is a matter of public

⁴² Barker (2018) 5.

⁴³ Haynes (2019) 34.

⁴⁴ Forthwith, all of the captive women will be referred to collectively as the "Trojan women."

⁴⁵ Barker (2018) 5.

⁴⁶ Gaca (2015) 279.

⁴⁷ Gaca (2015), 280–81. This practice and the closely related practice of "andrapodizing" (the enslavement of specific groups of people who do not possess the abilities to fight back, cf. Gaca 2010) are historically corroborated by Herodotus (1.66.3–4, 8.33), Thucydides (3.28.2, 3.35.1–36.6, 3.49.1–50.3, 5.3.4, 5.32.1, 5.116, 6.62.3), and Xenophon (*Kyr.* 7.5.73, *Mem.* 2.2.2 and

ownership often renders it possible to translate an attack against one woman into an attack against an entire community.”⁴⁸ More pointedly, the “‘pollution’ of survivors via the perceived contamination of their body by enemy rape is considered destructive for both the individual and the community, rendering rape an effective weapon of devastation.”⁴⁹ To rape and enslave the Trojan women and to bear children by them renders her former community barren.

Throughout *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*, Barker and Haynes examine the traumas the Trojan women experience through the female victims’ perspectives. As a result, the victory of the Greeks and the glory of the epic heroes, so lauded in Homer and throughout Western cultures, become highly scrutinized. Heroic masculinity begins to take the shape of a far more insidious and recognizably modern phenomenon: toxic masculinity. The Greek camp where the Trojan women are taken and distributed amongst the soldiers is, at its most fundamental, a “rape camp.”⁵⁰ Barker and Haynes, in revealing the toxicity of the epic heroes and underscoring the reality of wartime rape culture, subvert heroic masculinity and instead emphasize the heroism of tragic femininity. Tragic femininity relates to heroines of Greek tragedy who are commonly figures from or related to the Homeric epics (notably the Trojan women), and who are usually characterized as women who suffer the consequences of male decisions and actions.⁵¹ These women, in contending with insurmountable situations, may respond with either vengeful violence of their own, by accepting their fates (to die), or by enduring and surviving (usually with divine intervention).⁵²

Barker and Haynes draw upon this tragic femininity in the sense that what the Trojan women endure is representative of real ancient women who, historically, were raped and enslaved as both a strategy and a result of war. However,

4.2.15). One of my previous publications also examines these practices in relation to the ideology of male victory in the *Iliad* and the role the captive women play in securing this ideology; cf. King (2022).

48 Fallon (2018) 72. See also Shanks/Schull (2000), cited by Fallon.

49 Fallon (2018) 72. See also Sheth (2015) 338, 341, cited by Fallon.

50 As Barker notes, cf. (2018) 291.

51 Roisman (2021).

52 Roisman (2021). On the first response, Clytemnestra and Hecuba are relevant examples. On the second, Alcestis is a loosely related example as the mother of one of the Greek soldiers, Eumelus, who participated in the Trojan War and was in the Trojan horse. On the third, Helen is a relevant example.

through the Trojan women's experiences, the heroism of their resilience becomes clearer, their voices, in effect, louder. It is a heroism specific to femininity, one borne from experiences only these ancient women would have endured in contrast to what defined "heroic" hegemonic masculinity. In what follows, I discuss examples through which Barker and Haynes undermine epic heroic masculinity and instead highlight tragic heroic femininity.

Heroic/Toxic Masculinity

The Trojan women make countless references to the dubious honor of the Greek army in general. In *TSG*, while she is waiting for Achilles to return to his room the first night after being given to him as his prize, Briseis observes Achilles and Patroclus from a secluded cupboard: "Patroclus went into the other room, followed almost immediately by Achilles, who threw his arm across his friend's shoulders, laughing in triumph and relief. Another successful raid, another city destroyed, men and boys killed, women and girls enslaved – all in all, a good day. And there was still night to come."⁵³ The mockery in Briseis's voice is clear. As she awaits her first night with her new master, knowing that he will rape her in a claim to his sexual rights over her body as his war prize just like all of the other captured women awaiting the same fate (if they have not already endured it), Achilles and his fellow soldiers celebrate. Briseis describes the triumph of the sack of Lyrnessus as carrying no more consequence to the men than simply another good day's work. For the Greek army, the devastation they have wreaked is a sign of victory, the emotional and physical traumas experienced by the survivors, inconsequential. If anything, the men look forward to the night as a reward for their triumphs in battle.⁵⁴ Briseis, as with the other women, knows what the night has in store for her just as much as she understands that there is no escaping it. But the Greek soldiers' revelry on a night of what will prove for the captured women to be even further physical and emotional devastation on the heels of losing their families, their homes, and (for some) their freedoms, is salt on a deep and unhealing wound.

⁵³ Barker (2018) 23.

⁵⁴ Barker (2018) 17–18, 22.

In *ATS*, Briseis's sentiments toward the Greek army at large are echoed by other female characters. After the Greeks find and bring Polydorus's corpse before his mother, Hecuba, Odysseus approaches the former queen of Troy and asks whether she has any more sons. With contempt, Hecuba responds, "I had many other sons...But you Greeks have killed them all, one after another, like a pack of wolves."⁵⁵ But the discovery of Polydorus's corpse leads the Greeks to wonder whether there are more sons of Priam and Hecuba who may have survived, one of whom may "try to take his vengeance upon the Greeks, in years to come."⁵⁶ The exchange between Hecuba and Odysseus captures Odysseus's indifference to Hecuba's suffering as well as Hecuba's hatred for the Greeks, the former representative of the Greek army's general apathy toward the sufferings of the captured women and their fallen city, and the latter of the women's pain made worse by their enemy's certainty in there being no other path to victory but savagely slaying all of the men, children included, and enslaving all of the women.

H – You think I might have sent more sons away for safekeeping.

O – Not so safe, perhaps.

H – I have only daughters now...All my boys are gone. Do you hear me? All of them.

O – You lost a war, madam.

H – You could have ransomed my sons. You chose to kill them.

O – With what could you have paid the ransom? *He laughed, his head tilting back towards the sky.* All your treasure belongs to us now.

H – Is this an example of the great heroism of the Greeks?...Gloating over an old woman whose sons have all been slaughtered?⁵⁷

Hecuba mocks the supposed "great heroism" of her enemies, questioning whether men of true honor would treat others, even their enemies, with such disgrace and lack of mercy. The Trojans lost a war, yes, but did the Greeks lose their honor?

Briseis also decries the Greeks' actions in an emotional and forthright discussion with Patroclus. In response to Patroclus asserting that Lyrnessus should

⁵⁵ Haynes (2019) 196.

⁵⁶ Haynes (2019) 197.

⁵⁷ Haynes (2019) 196. Format of the text adapted by present author.

have accepted its place in Achilles's story and surrendered, Briseis responds: "The lives of my family cannot be measured by their deaths. And your friend should hope the bards treat him so kindly. Many men would see no glory in the murder of an old man and his wife. Perhaps they will sing of his senseless cruelty and lack of honour."⁵⁸ Briseis likewise questions how glory can be found in the manner of the violence and death the Greeks inflicted upon her community, including her father and mother. During the same discussion, Patroclus asks Briseis, "Do you always look so sad?"⁵⁹ Briseis, incredulous, responds, "I watched your beloved friend slaughter my greatest happiness... I watched them bleed into the sand. How can you ask me if I was always sad?", to which Patroclus responds, "I didn't ask if you were always sad...I asked if you always looked sad...I wondered if you had always looked like that, or if it is a consequence of your enslavement."⁶⁰ Though Patroclus corrects Briseis to say that he wondered if she *always* looked sad, not just because of her enslavement, the exchange demonstrates that Patroclus is not unaware of the "sadness" the women's enslavement must bring them, as the other Greek soldiers must not be either. Patroclus recognizes the emotional impact of enslavement, but his rather blasé acknowledgement also resonates with the common and ostensibly harmless criticism modern women experience when men tell them to "smile." The modern phenomenon is a toxic male behavior indicative of an underlying expectation that women exist for the male gaze, that men's desires outweigh women's autonomy, and that men are owed the happiness of women.⁶¹ Patroclus wonders if Briseis always looks sad and it is tempting to read in this his way of telling Briseis to "smile" for his sake, despite her enslavement.⁶²

⁵⁸ Haynes (2019) 93.

⁵⁹ Haynes (2019) 92.

⁶⁰ Haynes (2019) 92–93.

⁶¹ Viera in *Fabulize Magazine* (2016). See also Fazlalizadeh (2020) and Baskerville (2023).

⁶² This scene resonates with another similar encounter in *ATS* between Neoptolemus and Andromache. After taking Andromache back to Epirus with him and fathering a child by her, Neoptolemus asks Andromache if she felt that being taken to Epirus was worse than death, to which Andromache admits that she thought so at the time; Neoptolemus asks if she still feels that way, and Andromache hears "the unmistakable note of hope in his voice" (2019) 334. Despite murdering her son, destroying her city, and sexually enslaving her, Neoptolemus craves Andromache's happiness/approval.

The Greek soldiers' attitudes toward the Trojan women align with contemporary perceptions of toxic masculinity, characterized by an extreme and innate capacity for violence (particularly in warrior societies)⁶³ and the belief in sexual entitlement to women as measures of asserting dominance. For the reader, the epic heroes as a whole are less triumphant and more so cruel. These are the realities of war, as Odysseus implies. But no man (or hero) appears to believe that wars can be won differently, that the rape and enslavement of the captive women need not be a foregone conclusion. Through the Trojan women's collective condemnation of the Greek soldiers' actions, Barker and Haynes portray the epic heroes in such a way as to call into question their honor by emphasizing the toxicity of their actions and beliefs with regard to the captured women.

Certain epic heroes face heightened scrutiny which serves to draw greater attention to the toxic masculinity hiding just beneath the surface of epic heroism. Achilles in particular epitomizes this toxic masculinity/epic heroism dichotomy. In many ways, Achilles in *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS* embodies the Homeric hero as he is portrayed in the *Iliad*: courageous, fierce, unmatched in battle prowess, as well as volatile and self-centered.⁶⁴ As Briseis describes him: "At that time, he was probably the most beautiful man alive, as he was most certainly the most violent, but that's the problem. How do you separate a tiger's beauty from its ferocity?...Achilles was like that – the beauty and the terror were two sides of a single coin."⁶⁵ As expected, Achilles rapes Briseis the first night she is brought to his camp. Reflecting on the night, Briseis notes that while Achilles was not cruel, she still hated him: "I lay there, hating him, though of course he wasn't doing anything he didn't have a perfect right to do. If his prize of honour had been the armour of a great lord he wouldn't have rested till he'd tried it out...That's what he did to me. *He tried me out.*"⁶⁶ Achilles expects sexual entitlement to Briseis after having won her for his triumphs in war, and because Briseis is very much an object, he wastes no time in appraising her value (in bed).

Barker does not pretend that there could be an emotional bond between master and slave. The author makes her feelings clear: "What horrifies me is how many commentators assume Briseis was in love with Achilles. Of course,

63 Anderson/Anderson (2020) 50.

64 See Martorana (2024) 137, 140.

65 Barker (2018) 49.

66 Barker (2018) 24.

Achilles is the tallest, the strongest, the fastest, the most beautiful man of his generation. Here you are in bed with this miracle – why would you not fall in love with him?”⁶⁷ In *TWT*, Barker has Briseis echo this sentiment nearly verbatim, subtly criticizing these commentators in the process. While contemplating her marriage to Alcimus following Achilles’s death, Briseis remarks: “The crux was that Alcimus believed – or rather assumed – that I’d loved Achilles, and still loved him. He certainly wasn’t alone in that belief. Then – *and now* – people seem to take it for granted that I loved Achilles. Why wouldn’t I? I had the fastest, strongest, bravest, most beautiful man of his generation in my bed – how could I not love him?”⁶⁸ The answer? “*He killed my brothers. We women are peculiar creatures. We tend not to love those who murder our families.*”⁶⁹ Achilles murdered Briseis’s family and sexually enslaved her. While some may wish to see love blossom between the epic hero and tragic heroine, Barker knows differently.⁷⁰ These circumstances, particularly Achilles’s toxic masculinity as it manifests in both his capacity for extreme violence and his belief in his right to set the terms of his (sexual) engagements with Briseis,⁷¹ hardly encourage a love story.

A further deterrent to there being a love story between Briseis and Achilles is the latter’s propensity for child-like, entitled behavior which mirrors common traits of toxic masculinity.⁷² Barker and Haynes both often portray Achilles as petulant, his demand for the respect “owed” to him self-pitying. In *ATS*, Achilles complains to Patroclus about Agamemnon’s desperation to be superior to him,

⁶⁷ Barker interviewed by Wachtel (2018).

⁶⁸ Barker (2022) 249.

⁶⁹ Barker (2022) 249.

⁷⁰ In *TSG*, Barker directly addresses those who would find a love story in the relationship between the Homeric heroes and their captive women. Briseis wonders at the end of the novel: “What will they make of us, the people of those unimaginably distant times? One thing I do know: they won’t want the brutal reality of conquest and slavery...They won’t want to know we were living in a rape camp. No, they’ll go for something altogether softer. A love story, perhaps? I just hope they manage to work out who the lovers were” (2018) 291.

⁷¹ Cf. Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 3 & Nicholls (2021) 70, as previously discussed.

⁷² Another example of Achilles’s infantile characterization is his apparent Oedipus complex as portrayed by Barker in *TSG*. While toxic in its own way, Achilles’s Oedipus complex is not relevant to the present discussion on toxic masculinity. It is, however, worth noting as a characterization of an epic hero which paints the hero in a new light. Cf. Barker (2018) 38, 50, 82; Altin (2021) 855–856; Barker (2021).

wondering, “How many more lives must I take?’ he asked, and suddenly he was plaintive, like a child. ‘Before they give me my due?’”⁷³ Achilles’s expectation of respect is not in itself toxic. However, his attitude becomes indicative of toxic masculinity when taken to the extreme that Achilles takes it to by withdrawing from the war after Briseis is given to Agamemnon. Kupers suggests that what can lead to toxicity “is the repeated frustration of a man’s need to be respected,” and that “desperate attempts to gain respect where none seems forthcoming lead to an intensification of toxic masculinity...the man who feels he cannot get respect in any other way is the one who feels a strong urge to dominate others.”⁷⁴ Achilles’s frustration with not feeling that he is being shown the respect he deserves, especially by Agamemnon, reaches its pinnacle when Agamemnon takes Briseis from him after being forced to return Chryseis to her father.

Barker and Haynes both portray Achilles’s reaction to this dishonor similarly to how it is portrayed in Homer – Achilles is fiercely angry, embittered, and defiant. In the *Iliad*, Achilles’s wrath and his diatribe against Agamemnon for daring to take what is Achilles’s due when the king himself does nothing to earn it comes across as justified;⁷⁵ as a reader, you sympathize with him. However, because Barker and Haynes describe the incident from a woman’s perspective, any sympathy is difficult to feel. In *TSG*, Briseis remarks that Achilles behaves like a child raging against Agamemnon: “he ranted and raved, fists pumping, spit flying, working himself up into a state of near-insanity...Sometimes you see a toddler, purple with rage, screaming till he gasps for breath – and you know only a slap will shock him out of it. Achilles’ rages were like that.”⁷⁶ From Briseis’s perspective, Achilles’s tantrum is self-indulgent at best. His self-pity only gets worse after his confrontation with Agamemnon, which is ripe with fury as both men let their emotions get the better of them. When Agamemnon’s heralds take Briseis away, Barker’s Briseis notes that, “Achilles cried as I was taken away. *He* cried; *I* didn’t. Now, years later, when none of it matters anymore, I’m still proud of that.”⁷⁷ Likewise, in *ATS*, Haynes contrasts Briseis’s composure with Achilles’s lack thereof: “She did not weep when Odysseus arrived in the Myrmidon camp

73 Haynes (2019) 83.

74 Kupers (2005) 717.

75 *Il.* 1.301–328.

76 Barker (2018) 80.

77 Barker (2018) 98.

and told Achilles that Agamemnon had claimed his girl. Achilles wept, from impotent rage. Patroclus wept to see his friend so angered. But Briseis, carried away to another man's tent, and another man's bed, did not.⁷⁸ Through Barker and Haynes, Achilles's infantile reaction to Briseis being taken away resembles toxic masculine behaviors which manifest when what a man feels entitled to is not guaranteed to be his. Briseis, who has more right than anyone to rage and weep, is the only one among these great heroes to remain composed.⁷⁹

Achilles's fury stems from the fact that Agamemnon has no right to take another man's prize of honor. Per Achilles: "It doesn't belong to him; he hasn't *earnt* it."⁸⁰ But Briseis is more focused on Achilles's word choice: "There was a lot more, but I'd stopped listening. Honour, courage, loyalty, reputation – all those big words being bandied about – but for me there was only one word, one very small word: *it*. *It* doesn't belong to him, he hasn't *earnt it*."⁸¹ Briseis knows too well that Achilles's anger has nothing to do with her as a person; she is an object, an "it", something symbolic in value to Achilles more than in value as a person.⁸² But while Achilles rages against an injury to his pride, Briseis faces further injury to her very personhood. For Briseis and the other captive women, these heroes speak freely of honor, courage, loyalty, and reputation, but none of them consider those most deeply affected by their posturing. Heroic ethics have no place in the Trojan women's consideration. They are long past caring whether a man's honor, especially an enemy's, has been disrespected when theirs has not only been disrespected, but discounted altogether.

Achilles's "impotent rage" parallels the anger that derives from modern toxic masculinity when a man feels that the respect he is owed is not being shown, and he reacts by becoming dangerous to himself and to those within his own community. Achilles withdraws from the war in defiance of Agamemnon's actions, causing countless of his comrades to perish on the battlefield without his leadership and skills, and inhibiting the heroic characteristics that once de-

78 Haynes (2019) 100.

79 That Briseis is the only person to remain composed whilst the men around her lose control of their emotions likely also resonates with a modern female audience used to hearing the stereotype that women get too emotional and men are more adept at regulating emotions.

80 Barker (2018) 97.

81 Barker (2018) 97.

82 Achilles reiterates this sentiment when contemplating the insult to his honor: "That's what hurts – not the girl – the insult, the blow to his pride" Barker (2018) 105.

fined him. Achilles feels that his decision is justified due to the offense against his honor and withdrawing could be “an attempt to (re)establish his hegemonic role, and therefore his masculinity, among the Greeks.”⁸³ Nevertheless, because Barker and Haynes give us the unique opportunity to view this incident from a woman’s perspective, we see Achilles’s behavior in a new and far less favorable light. While the dishonor shown to him would have been understood in his time as highly offensive, and his anger even justified, modern readers instead see that Achilles cares nothing for Briseis or for the fact that she is trading one sex slave owner for another. Briseis’s courage in the face of further degradation is a stark contrast to Achilles’s toxic entitlement and the danger he presents to himself and to his comrades as a consequence.

Tragic Heroic Femininity

Briseis is the foil to Achilles’s toxic masculinity and that of the Greek army in general. She emerges throughout *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS* as a hero(ine), albeit a reluctant one. All of the Trojan women are portrayed as heroic in their fortitude to survive their new circumstances, tragic though they may be. Both Barker and Haynes do not shy from describing the atrocities committed against the Trojan women and in making it clear that the Greek camp was, as Barker labels it, a rape camp; the Trojan War evinced its own rape culture. In *TSG*, when Lyrnessus falls, Briseis witnesses the slave women who had been hiding in the tower basement dragged out first. One slave woman is “raped repeatedly by a gang of men who were sharing a wine jug, passing it good-naturedly from hand to hand while waiting their turn. Her two sons – twelve, thirteen years old perhaps – lay wounded and dying a few yards away from her...She kept stretching out her hands and calling their names as first one and then the other died.”⁸⁴ Briseis witnesses the cruelty of the Greek soldiers, who, with the demeanor of men enjoying a typical boy’s night, gang rape a woman as she watches her sons die, and it is a precursor of things to come in the Greek camp. In the camp, common women, those not distributed to specific soldiers and given to the rest of the men to share, were regularly beaten and raped, some as young as nine and

⁸³ Martorana (2024) 137.

⁸⁴ Barker (2018) 14–15.

ten.⁸⁵ Through Briseis's awareness of these common women and her desperate hope to avoid their fate, Barker also draws attention to women who have "even less voice."⁸⁶ What the Trojan women endure in the Greek camp is no less than a wartime rape culture built on the premise of repeated sexual violence against women for the sake of male dominance and superiority.

As one commentator on *ATS* notes, "In war, fighting isn't the only form of heroism: sometimes simple survival is equally heroic."⁸⁷ The Trojan women certainly prove the veracity of this mindset, personifying a tragic heroic femininity. For, despite being forced into sexual slavery, the Trojan women find ways to become resilient, to maintain their identities, and to draw strength from one another.⁸⁸ Their resilience manifests in various ways. When the Greek soldier Myron dies of an illness, his former slave women, whom he had beaten and raped repeatedly, are required to perform the tasks involved with laying-out the body. Left with his wasted corpse, one of the women lifts his limp penis and waggles it at the others and they all burst into laughter.⁸⁹ Their shared merriment over the undeniable impotence of the Greek soldier who once abused them brings these women a much-needed moment of levity and demonstrates their capacity to find amusement even in the darkest of circumstances. In contrast, in a moment of deep sorrow in *TWT*, the women join Hecuba in what becomes a group howling of grief, "until they turned from women into wolves," all of them howling for "the loss of our homeland – for the loss of our fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, for everybody we'd ever loved. For all the men carried away on that blood-dark tide."⁹⁰ While the Greeks had been like a pack of wolves murdering the Trojan men and showing no mercy, as Hecuba describes it in *ATS*, the Trojan women become like a pack of wolves bonded by grief who must help one another to survive.

⁸⁵ Barker (2018) 45.

⁸⁶ Goff (2022) 10.

⁸⁷ Lowry (2019).

⁸⁸ See also Shuvra Sen (2020) 53. On Helen specifically and her use of tapestry weaving to maintain her identity, see Shuvra Sen (2020) 52; O'Gorman (2006); Linne (2022); Judge (2022). Cf. Barker (2018) 130.

⁸⁹ Barker (2018) 76–77.

⁹⁰ Barker (2021) 81.

This is not to say that the Trojan women do not experience the shame, guilt, and fear common to rape victims. Barker and Haynes both describe the women waiting in fear, some unable to hold back the tears, as the Greeks assembled and assessed them for distribution among the soldiers.⁹¹ Andromache, like Briseis, goes from a queen to being raped by her family's murderer in the same day. In *TWT*, when Andromache returns to the women's hut after her first night being raped by Pyrrhus, Briseis takes her to Alcimus's tent. Andromache hears the rocking of the cradle that had been her son's, the one since given to Briseis for the child of Achilles she now carried. Briseis, distressed, offers to give it back, to which Andromache responds, "'Why would I want it back?...I'll only have to put *his* child into it.' Her gaze slid from my face to my belly. 'How are we supposed to love *their* children?'"⁹² Andromache's question reveals the guilt and shame felt by rape victims, especially those who bear their rapist's child. Andromache expresses guilt for feeling unable to love the child and shame for feeling that she has somehow betrayed her former husband/family. Briseis is not able to comfort Andromache as she has often wondered the same. Briseis feels that the child she carries is not hers: "At times, it seemed more like a parasitic infestation than a pregnancy, taking me over, using me for its own purposes – which were *their* purposes."⁹³ As Scodel notes, when a woman becomes the sexual slave of a captor, the "gift-exchange of normal marriage is replaced by the violent death of the woman's kin";⁹⁴ the captive woman's transfer from one man to another is distorted by her lack of sexual consent on one hand, and on the other by the conspicuous lack of familial involvement. This distortion causes significant emotional turmoil as conveyed by both Andromache and Briseis.⁹⁵ The Greeks are eradicating the Trojan people one forced pregnancy at a time, increasing their own numbers in the process. Briseis, Andromache, and all the other Trojan women impregnated by their rapists grapple with the reality of being a mother to an enemy's child.

However, it is through motherhood that some of the Trojan women find greater resilience. In *TWT*, Maire, a Trojan woman who was a slave in a Trojan

91 Barker (2018) 17; Haynes (2019) 77.

92 Barker (2021) 64.

93 Barker (2021) 57.

94 Scodel (1998) 142.

95 Andromache expresses this turmoil in Euripides's *Tro.* (661–668).

household and is again a slave in the Greek camp, is pregnant. The father is not, as Briseis expected, a Greek soldier, but a Trojan and a former slave himself, though presumably he did not survive the fall of Troy. When Maire delivers a healthy son, Briseis and the other slave women know what is at stake: if the Greeks should discover the child's existence, that a Trojan boy has been born, they will kill him. No Trojan male can be left alive.⁹⁶ And so the women do everything they can to protect the boy – disguising him as a girl and letting it be known that Maire delivered a healthy “daughter.” With the boy's birth, “the girls had a new focus”: helping Maire care for and protect the child gives the Trojan women a new sense of purpose, something unsullied by Greek violence, a light amidst darkness which compels them to survive each day.⁹⁷ The child is a Trojan male who, against all odds, will live because of the women's determination.

Even Briseis begins to envision a different future for herself through motherhood. She struggles with feeling as if the child does not belong to her, and cannot help but notice the shift in the Greeks' attitude toward her. Where once she was blamed for the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles and held responsible for the latter withdrawing from battle, now that she is pregnant with Achilles's child, the atmosphere has shifted: “Only the other day, a man I scarcely knew had placed his hand on my stomach, and not in a sexual, predatory way, but as a mark of his loyalty to the bloodline of Achilles. I was the casket that contained the crown jewels – at least, that's how the Myrmidons seemed to see me. As a person, I didn't count at all.”⁹⁸ Now that she carries the bloodline of Achilles, Briseis's status within the Greek camp has been elevated, supported as well through her marriage to Alcimus. She is still not valued for who she is as a person, but as the vessel through which Achilles's glory continues, she warrants respect. Briseis also knows that the child brings her salvation – she would have been offered to someone else in Achilles's funeral games, transferred yet again from one sex slave owner to another, had it not been for the child. At the end of *TWT*, as the Greeks prepare to set sail from Troy and the Trojan women say their goodbyes as each begins the next chapter of their captivity, Briseis pauses at one of the rock pools on the beach, noticing a starfish with one of its limbs torn off. The starfish inches toward seaweed and the torn limb begins to move as well, and Briseis recalls her mother telling her that “the parent starfish grows

⁹⁶ As conveyed by Barker (2018) 5, 235; Haynes (2019) 197.

⁹⁷ Barker (2021) 236.

⁹⁸ Barker (2021) 57; see also (2021) 143.

a new limb, the amputated limb becomes a starfish – and so, from one damaged and mutilated individual, two whole creatures grow.”⁹⁹ Witnessing this gives Briseis hope. The rape and enslavement she has endured as a result of the Trojan War has certainly changed her. While she refused to break, there are scars. Briseis’s impending birth represents a new beginning, not just for the child, but for her as well.

As Barker notes, “The act of picking up and moving on...is at the heart of *The Silence*,”¹⁰⁰ and Briseis more than any other character epitomizes this sentiment in all three novels. Throughout *TSG* and *TWT*, Briseis retains her “sense of worth and agency.”¹⁰¹ When, in *TSG*, Nestor tells Briseis and the other captured women to forget their past lives, Briseis immediately thinks, “*Forget*. So there was my duty laid out in front of me, as simple and clear as a bowl of water: *Remember*.”¹⁰² This determination to keep her sense of identity and to keep the memory of her people alive carries Briseis through her stay in the camp and thereafter. Though she is repeatedly raped by Achilles (and then beaten and raped by Agamemnon), Briseis refuses to let the Greek camp or the men in it break her. This characterization is consistent across *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*. As she explains to Chryseis in *ATS* after recounting how Achilles murdered her father, mother, brothers, and husband:

‘So when I tell you I have nothing, you know I speak the truth. They took me before I could throw a handful of earth on any of them, so I don’t even have that.’ Chryseis gazed at the woman, whose eyes were not puffy, whose hair was not torn and whose tunic was not ripped. The woman saw her looking and nodded. ‘They will not see my grief,’ she said. ‘They have not earned it.’¹⁰³

Briseis exhibits the composure that reappears in *ATS* when Agamemnon’s heralds arrive to take her away from Achilles. Here, she does not exhibit the same signs of despair commonly attributed to grieving women – the eyes swollen from crying, the torn hair, or the ripped clothes. “‘They have not earned it’” is

⁹⁹ Barker (2021) 305.

¹⁰⁰ Barker interviewed by Reese (2018).

¹⁰¹ Shuvra Sen (2020) 51.

¹⁰² Barker (2018) 18.

¹⁰³ Haynes (2019) 75.

a piercing parallel to Briseis in *TSG* noting that Achilles considered her an “it” which Agamemnon did not “earn.” Briseis makes it clear that none of the Greek men have earned her grief. Whereas Achilles reduces Briseis to nothing more than an object symbolic of his pride, Briseis understands her own value as well as the value of her grief to men who build their pride on the sufferings of women.

Briseis represents the heroism that the Trojan women all possess as part of their collective tragic femininity. In glaring contrast to the supposed epic heroism of the Greeks, the Trojan women’s heroism is built on the courage and resilience to endure in the face of insurmountable odds. As Briseis realizes when she hears a fellow slave, Tecmessa, sing Trojan lullabies to the son she bore by the Greek soldier, Ajax: “We’re going to survive – our songs, our stories. They’ll never be able to forget us. Decades after the last man who fought at Troy is dead, their sons will remember the songs their Trojan mothers sang to them. We’ll be in their dreams – and in their worst nightmares too.”¹⁰⁴ As one scholar notes, “The songs of the captive women are thus set up as a direct challenge to the heroic songs of the Greeks.”¹⁰⁵ The women the Greeks forced into a lifetime of rape and servitude will ultimately be the ones who ensure Troy lives on, and therein lies the true heroism. As Calliope declares at the end of *ATS*: “I have sung of the women, the women in the shadows. I have sung of the forgotten, the ignored, the untold...[This] was never the story of one woman, or two. It was the story of all of them.”¹⁰⁶ As with the Trojan lullabies, so through Calliope have the women’s voices been heard, their tragic heroic femininity emerging from the shadows to outshine the epic heroism we, as modern readers, have to come to see for its toxic masculinity.

Ancient Stories, Modern Crises, & Timeless Victims

In her interview with NPR, Haynes referred to the female rape victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, while in a separate interview, Barker referred to the Yazidi women of Syria and Iraq who were raped and enslaved following the 2014 genocidal campaigns of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Both authors

104 Barker (2018) 266.

105 Goff (2022) 12.

106 Haynes (2019) 339–340.

see reflections of Homeric/ancient wartime rape culture in the pervasive and inhumane treatment of women during and as a result of modern global conflicts. Constraints of the present article preclude a comprehensive analysis of modern examples of wartime rape which bear a striking resemblance to, if not a direct mirroring of, ancient cornerstones of wartime strategies specifically related to the treatment of women, including masculine behavioral and attitudinal patterns which give rise to gender-based sexual violence.¹⁰⁷ Such an analysis forms part of the present author's on-going project to examine the connections between wartime, gender-based sexual violence in the Greco-Roman period and the rape and enslavement of women in modern-era conflicts. Notably recent modern examples include reports of the rape and torture of Ukrainian women by Russian forces during the Russia-Ukraine War, as well as the systemic use of rape and sexual violence against women by Hamas on the October 7, 2023 attacks on the Gaza-envelope of Israel.¹⁰⁸ Because Barker and Haynes cite the Yazidi and the Rwandan women when discussing the inspirations behind their respective novels, I limit myself to highlighting a few parallels between the traumas experienced by the Trojan women and those experienced by the Yazidi and Rwandan women. However, as in-depth analysis owed to such a discussion is not presently feasible, I hope to draw even brief attention to the near-unchanging facets of wartime rape that span an unbroken timeline at least as far back as Homer.¹⁰⁹

Barker and Haynes describe the shame, guilt, and fear experienced by the Trojan women as a result of their traumas, all of which are common, documented modern-day responses to rape, including amongst the Rwandan and

107 Select scholarship on modern cases of war/genocide and gender-based sexual violence which discuss the prevalence and/or impact of hegemonic/toxic masculinity and rape culture: Rittner/Roth (eds.) (2012); Blyth/Colgan/Edwards (eds.) (2018); Anderson/Anderson (2020); Loucks/Holt/Adler (eds.) (2020); Schotanus (ed.) (2022); Jones (2022). See also Neilsen (2015) 86–87.

108 On the Russia-Ukraine War: UN Press Report (June 2022); UN News Report (Sept. 2023); Méheut (2023); Keaton (2023); Shapiro (2023). On the Hamas attacks: UN News Report (Dec. 2023); Williamson (2023); Wright (2023); McKernan (2024); Gettleman/Schwartz/Sella (2024).

109 Other examples of modern wartime rape worth noting include the previously mentioned Višegrad massacres in the Bosnian War (cf. Graham-Harrison (2018)) and the use of mass rape in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in the midst of the region's resource wars in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide (cf. Swanson (2019)).

Yazidi genocide rape victims.¹¹⁰ However, the Rwandan women who testified at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in 1997 broke through societally-imposed silence and their fears of retribution and further victim-shaming to describe their experiences and to wrest their stories from those who would deny it; they were critical in bringing about “the world’s first conviction of rape as a crime of genocide.”¹¹¹ Similarly, the Yazidi women who have come forth with their experiences being sold as slaves in the sex markets and then repeatedly raped by fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) in the military bases have forced a new global awareness of the atrocities committed against the Yazidi.¹¹² While the Yazidis have “suffered massacres and oppression for generations,” the attacks in 2014 gained far greater media notice in large part due to the graphic reports of the sexual violence committed against the Yazidi women.¹¹³ Testimonies from the Yazidi victims have shed new light on the sexual crimes committed against them in fulfillment of ISIS ideologies used to justify sexual enslavement and rape as necessary tools for conversion to (their interpretation of) Islam.¹¹⁴ Barker and Haynes have helped to give voice to ancient women who were victims of wartime rape, enabling previously silenced women, even mythological ones, to speak on behalf of real ancient women whose emotional and physical traumas as a result of wartime rape culture were considered inevitable consequences and thus not worthy of note beyond proof of victory.¹¹⁵ In a modern parallel, the Rwandan and Yazidi women who have testified also give voice to the countless other female victims of sexual violence during the respective genocides, helping to ensure that the atrocities they and other women endure(d) are known globally, such that future such atrocities may be prevented.

110 Bijleveld/Morssinkhof/Smeulders (2009) 215; Fallon (2018); Swanson (2019); Kizilhan/Steger/Noll-Hussong (2020).

111 Swanson (2019) 1620. See also Rettig (2008) and De Brouwer/Chu/de Volder/Muscatti (eds.) (2019).

112 Otten (2017); Castellano San José (2020).

113 Otten (2017).

114 Otten (2017); Masmoudi (2018); Castellano San José (2020); Jaffal (2020); Vale (2020).

115 In *TSG*, Priam echoes this sentiment to Briseis; Barker (2018) 255. In the *Iliad*, Greek victory is officially marked by the capture and enslavement of the Trojan women (2.354–356).

Toxic masculinity is also discussed in relation to the Rwandan genocide. Mullins writes that sexual violence “was just one more way for Hutu men to dominate and destroy the Tutsi population.”¹¹⁶ Poverty and social inequity commonly produce a “crisis within masculinity” which has been interpreted as a key component of mass rapes in other genocides, particularly in the former Yugoslavia and in other African countries as well.¹¹⁷ Mullins notes that while this crisis within masculinity has not been discussed specifically in relation to the Hutu men, they did experience “as much deprivation of gender capital as men in those societies where research has established strong masculinity crises. Through murder, rape and the framing of these actions as an enactment of ethnic superiority, Hutu men denied access to typical masculinity capitals could use the genocide itself as a fulcrum for the reclamation of their masculinity.”¹¹⁸ The rape of the Tutsi (and Hutu) women enabled the Hutu men to “reclaim masculine dominance and empowerment” which had been lost to social forces beyond their control.¹¹⁹ The belief in sexual entitlement as well as the belief in one’s right to dominate are, as previously discussed, pillars of toxic masculinity whereby men take hegemonic masculinity to an extreme in response to a lack of hegemonic power in other areas of life which are critical to the masculine ideal.

The Trojan War was fought to reclaim the honor of the house of Atreus after Paris abducted Helen, and the Greeks’ success against the Trojans was dependent on their ability to eradicate the Trojan men from the city and, most importantly, to rape and enslave their women, rendering Troy barren. At the heart of this war was an attack against one man’s hegemonic masculinity, conveying real values of the ancient Greek hegemonic masculinity which were inextricably tied to a man’s ability to control his house and the women within it.¹²⁰ As Evans notes, “War incentivized bold action, creating opportunities for men to

116 Mullins (2009) 732.

117 Mullins (2009) 732.

118 Mullins (2009) 732.

119 Mullins (2009) 732.

120 Paris’s actions are also in direct violation of his oath of *xenia* to Menelaus, the concept of “guest-friendship” by which hospitality between two parties extended to material and non-material reciprocity and included due respect shown to one another’s properties (including wives).

express their masculinity.”¹²¹ We see this in *TWT*: Pyrrhus displays a clear pattern of what modern readers would interpret as toxic masculinity due in large part to the respect he feels is owed to him as the son of Achilles. That Pyrrhus is likely doomed to live in his father’s shadow goads him into acting out violently in order to assert his masculinity, even murdering the slave girl Amina who had witnessed his botched slaying of Priam and therefore posed a threat to his heroic masculinity (and reputation). Also in *TWT*, after Helen is returned to the Greek camp, Menelaus punishes her for what he considers her role in the deaths of countless Greek soldiers, choking, beating, and raping her; he asserts violent and sexual physical dominance over her for threatening his own masculinity as both a king and a husband. In both *TSG* and *ATS*, Achilles sulks whenever the respect he feels is his due is not met, exemplified most dramatically by his refusal to fight when Agamemnon takes Briseis. The heroes’ actions are largely in response to “crises in masculinity.” War as the means through which ancient Greek men reclaimed and reasserted their masculinity through ultimately toxic and sexually violent behaviors targeted against women is thus echoed in the ways in which the Hutu men expressed and/or reclaimed their masculinity during the Rwandan genocide.

Finally, a still-harrowing but perhaps hopeful comparison. As previously discussed, in *TWT*, Maire gives birth to a Trojan boy whilst living as a slave in the Greek camp. Maire’s son is a ray of light in an otherwise dark existence, and not just for Maire. The other slave women form a sort of “group motherhood,” helping to raise the boy and finding new purpose and resilience in this sign of renewal and hope. Similarly, research on maternal-resilience processes exhibited by Rwandan genocide-rape survivors finds that “motherhood assemblages can potentiate modes of resilience that empower women and open to expanded opportunities for life chances.”¹²² Many of these Rwandan women found new purposes and different paths toward the future through motherhood “that were not overdetermined by their personal biographies involving brutal violence, excruciating pain, myriad illnesses, and disease.”¹²³ A common thread amongst the Trojan women is their difficulty in accepting that many of them would inevitably bear the children of their enemies, a reality which real ancient women would have also faced. But, as Maire’s experience demonstrates, this forced mother-

121 Evans (2024) 48.

122 Zraly/Rubin/Mukamana (2013) 416.

123 Zraly/Rubin/Mukamana (2013) 430.

hood also fostered female community, as well as a resistance to their traumas determining how the women would be defined, not unlike the Rwandan women. Briseis, pregnant with Achilles's child, envisions a new future for herself in light of her impending motherhood, rewriting her own story outside that of Achilles's. Here, we see that motherhood as a result of wartime/genocide-rape is borne of insidious intentions, but, for some victims, can be their route to defiant and healing empowerment.

The previous observations are but a few of the many parallels between ancient warfare and modern, specifically in relation to gender-based sexual violence as a calculated strategy for achieving victory/success and the toxic masculine attitudes and behaviors at the heart of such strategies. Whether modernity would classify the Trojan War, albeit a mythological war, a "genocide" is unlikely. There are markers of genocide: the complete and utter eradication of a people, the rape and enslavement of women, the use of rape to force women to bear their enemy's children in order to devastate their former community,¹²⁴ and the slaughter of children. My intent has not been to compare the Trojan War to modern genocides and to classify the former as a pseudo-ancient example of genocide. Rather, my intent has been to highlight the ways in which gender-based sexual violence has been used in periods of war, then and now, and to draw attention to the precursors of modern toxic masculinity and rape culture as epitomized by the epic heroes and their treatment of the Trojan women. Additionally, I hope to have shown in even just a few examples the similarities in the ways in which female victims of wartime rape then and now not only manage to survive, but to overcome. Barker and Haynes draw these parallels more poetically, and, more pointedly, through the victims' voices.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article has been to examine the use of ancient Greek (Homeric) myths as a vessel for two contemporary female authors to engage with classical reception with a distinctly feminist agenda in mind. Through these feminist retellings of mytho-historical narratives, modern readers become attuned to what we might consider ancient precursors to toxic masculinity and rape cul-

124 Cf. Fallon (2018) 72 on genocidal sexual violence.

ture, both of which find distinct manifestation in modern wartime conflicts. In *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*, Barker and Haynes draw specific attention to the gender-based sexual violence women experienced as an important strategical component of, and result of ancient warfare through the eyes and voices of the Trojan women. Striking, however, are the similarities between the traumas experienced by the Trojan women and those experienced by female victims of modern wartime rape, similarities which Barker and Haynes are unapologetic in emphasizing due to what is an apparently undisrupted history of gender-based sexual violence in periods of conflict. At the root of this sexual violence are pillars of what modern society would identify as toxic masculinity which forces women into the role of rape victim in order for men to feel successful in asserting control. In un-silencing the Trojan women, Barker and Haynes have not only given voice to previously unheard ancient female figures, but they also speak on behalf of the women forced to endure modern wartime rape and enslavement, compelling us as readers to question the systems in place today which make it possible that they hear themselves with startling and painful clarity in the voices of ancient women.

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Pat Barker's Achilles: Excess of Manliness and Hegemonic Masculinity toward Self-Destruction

Abstract In this article, we analyze the figure of Achilles as Pat Barker rewrites him in *The Silence of the Girls* (2018). The first section intertwines the concept of hegemonic masculinity, developed by Raewyn Connell, with the two types of Homeric masculinities identified by Barbara Graziosi: proper manliness (ἠννορέη) and excess of manliness (ἀγηννορέη). By dedicating each following section to a specific character, we analyze and discuss how they are reinvented in Barker's retelling of the Trojan War. We juxtapose Achilles as a representative of hegemonic masculinity to Patroclus as a representative of exemplary masculinity. Finally, we investigate the extent to which Briseis and Achilles undergo a process of loss of identity inasmuch as hegemonic masculinity is concerned.

Keywords Achilles, Briseis, Patroclus, hero, masculinities

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last decades, many authors have tried to recreate, re-imagine, and reclaim Homer, in a phenomenon Jeremy Rosen (2013) postulates as minor-character elaboration.¹ *The Silence of the Girls*, Pat Barker's fifteenth novel, is part of a plethora of feminist rewritings of Classical literature for a contemporary audience. Famous for her *Regeneration* series, which takes place during the final months of World War I, Barker is not new to historical fiction or war narratives. Divided into three parts, *The Silence of the Girls* explores both sides of the Trojan War and offers different perspectives on the War and its aftermath through the eyes of two opposite characters, Achilles and Briseis.

Barker revisits the Trojan War through the numerous dichotomies that Achilles and Briseis represent: master/slave, male/female, and winner/loser. Barker also shows, in this three-part novel, the no man's land that is the battlefield. In other words, Barker depicts the perfect place for these dichotomies to vanish.

Part I includes Chapters 1 to 15 and covers Briseis' life before she is taken by Achilles in Lyrnessus until Agamemnon claims her. It gives a glimpse of what the Trojan War was like before the famous quarrel that opens the *Iliad*: endless raids to nearby cities. Part II overlaps with the *Iliad*'s plot and covers the events from Books 1 to 18 of the epic poem. Part III covers the remaining Books of the epic and glimpses at the prospective future of Briseis after Achilles' death. Whereas Part I is narrated by Briseis, Parts II and III have two narrators. While Briseis narrates the war as a first-person narrator, another voice, which we assume is Achilles', covers the other half and tells the story as a third-person narrator.

Although Briseis only raises her voice in Book 19 of the *Iliad*,² she is part of the driving force that sets the poem of Achilles' wrath in motion. Rosen argues, in "Minor Characters Have Their Day: The Imaginary and Actual Politics of a Contemporary Genre" (2013), that "[o]ver the last several decades, a vibrant transnational genre – a genre constituted by the conversion of minor characters from canonical works into protagonists – has been simultaneously flourishing and hiding in plain sight".³ This rising new genre has been recognized by the

1 Rosen (2013) 139.

2 Il. 19.357–360.

3 Rosen (2013) 140.

voice it gives to previously silenced characters and has, under the aegis of cultural, postcolonial, and feminist studies, established a new dialogue with Classical antiquity.

However, these works tend to overlook the figure that puts the epic in motion: the hero. We concur with Kevin Boon, who affirms the hero is a metanarrative of masculinity⁴ and the male identities inhabiting Classical literature lack critical attention. Although these acclaimed new novels put overlooked, often female, characters, like Briseis, in the spotlight, they also provide an insightful perspective on the different masculinities that abound in the ancient Greek world.

Novels like *The Song of Achilles* (2012), *Circe* (2018), *The Penelopiad*, *A Thousand Ships* (2019), and *The Silence of the Girls* have been recognized as rewritings of Homer's epics,⁵ which, according to Thomas Van Nortwick, are reflections on masculinity and male development in the ancient Greek world. Whereas *The Iliad* describes how a young man matures from adolescence to adulthood, *The Odyssey* is the first and most famous story of a son's apprenticeship.⁶ Unlike Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, these novels not only give voice to rather neglected characters but also offer a different glimpse of the Homeric hero.

DEFINING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN *THE SILENCE OF THE GIRLS*

Under the aegis of Gender Studies, a reasonable assessment of masculinity, with which we concur and consider critical to this article, reads: masculinities are constructed with a view to establishing "the social roles, behaviors, and meanings prescribed for men in any given society at any one time".⁷ By using masculinities instead of masculinity, Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson draw attention to the notion that "masculinity means different things to different groups of people at

4 Boon (2000) 303.

5 See "The Silence of the Girls by Pat Barker review – a feminist Iliad" (2018), by Emily Wilson, and "Circe, a Vilified Witch From Classical Mythology, Gets Her Own Epic" (2018), by Alexandra Alter.

6 See Van Nortwick (2008) 4. Cf. Van Nortwick (2008) 28.

7 Aronson and Kimmel (2004) 504.

different times".⁸ Not only do men build their masculine identities in opposition to femininity (in terms of a binary logic) but also in relation to themselves and to an exemplary kind of masculinity that is promoted by a specific socio-historical context.

Conflicting assessments of masculinity also arise when we analyze the society Barker depicts in *The Silence of the Girls*. Assessments of masculinity and femininity are contrasted with notions of godhood in Homer as well as in Barker. Although Barker promotes a much rawer, unideal war tale, men and women closer to the gods are idealized and bound to be placed in the highest positions of the social hierarchy.

Although ancient Greek civilization is highly hierarchical, such order can sometimes be disturbed and the most likely event that disrupts it is war. In *The Silence of the Girls*, this is shown by the status and reverence warlords are due as well as by Briseis' recollections of her previous life. The novel shows female slaves and their ladies constantly changing their position; whereas women's status can easily change, kings and warlords, like Agamemnon, hardly suffer anything. After all, their power stems directly from Zeus, the patriarchal figure around whom the Greek cosmos revolves.

So long as those hierarchical relations are concerned, one of the essential ideas men's studies has provided literary analysis is the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Although hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed concept, it can be perceived as a cultural construct that reinforces some male characteristics in a specific socio-historical context. We approximate Connell and Messerschmidt's definition of hegemonic masculinity, "the pattern of practice that allowed men's dominance over women to continue"⁹, to Barker's novel. *The Silence of the Girls* portrays, rather poignantly, women's submission to men, for it makes evident the relation between the demotions of one's personal identity through one's objectification, in terms of becoming a token of male honor.

From the perspective of feminist studies, which takes into consideration Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity, the link between male hegemony and women's domination is conspicuous. Barker exemplifies this connection not only by promoting the demotion of Briseis' identity, from Lynerssus' queen to Achilles' concubine, but also by pointing out how women's destinies are attached to men's will. Briseis sheds light on the matter:

8 Aronson and Kimmel (2004) 504.

9 Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) 832.

[o]ne girl, who'd been a slave in Lyrnessus – and a kitchen slave at that, the lowest of the low – was now the concubine of a great lord, while her mistress, a plain, slack-bellied woman near the end of her childbearing years, had to scratch and scrape for food around the fires. Nothing mattered now except youth, beauty and fertility.¹⁰

Hegemonic men have the power to disrupt relations that have been tightly woven into the social fabric.

Barker ensures that both positions Briseis occupies corroborate the notion that “[w]omen serve as a kind of currency for men to improve their ranking with other men”.¹¹ Briseis tells her audience that, after the gathering of the loot, in the very first scenes of novel, she belongs in “a much smaller group of very young women and girls, all pretty, all healthy-looking, a few with babies at their breasts”,¹² from which Achilles is the first warrior to choose his treasure. Marco Fantuzzi (2007) argues “the person of Briseis is not what makes Achilles’ revenge unavoidable, but what she represents as a unit of currency in the Homeric economy of [honor]”.¹³ In the *Iliad* and in every literary work revisiting it, Briseis is unequivocally linked to the notion of *kleos* (glory), the quintessential attribute of the Homeric warrior.

While theories of masculinity converge to one point – hegemonic masculinity is patriarchy’s main weapon to oppress women¹⁴ –, scholars have become aware of the necessity to consider the other side of the gender spectrum. To what extent have relations between men and masculinities been neglected? Victor Seidler (2006) presents a skeptical point of view toward Connell’s argument by asserting that hegemonic masculinity tyrannizes not only women, for “[w]e tend to think of every young man in terms of power, and we find ourselves unable to think about the powerlessness of men in specific situations”.¹⁵ Masculinity studies concerned with the representation of men throughout time expresses the same concern.

10 Barker (2018) 46.

11 Kimmel (2006) 5.

12 Barker (2018) 19.

13 Fantuzzi (2007) 102.

14 Connell (2005) 77.

15 Seidler (2006) 10.

Van Nortwick points out in *Imagining Men: Ideals of Masculinity in Ancient Greek Culture* (2008) that “[i]n the strongly patriarchal cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, it is perhaps not surprising that the state most prized was that of the adult male, the time when a man was most able, physically and emotionally, to exhibit control over himself and his world”.¹⁶ The connection between heroism and masculinity is a common motif in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In order to understand how masculinity was comprehended then, we refer to Graziosi’s two types of masculinity: proper manliness (*ῆνορέη*) and excess of manliness (*ἀγηνωρίη*).

According to Graziosi, “[b]oth nouns [*ῆνορέη* and *ἀγηνωρίη*] are etymologically linked to the word *ἄνηρ* [(man)] and ... [both words] are gendered terms in Homeric epic”.¹⁷ On the one hand, Graziosi claims *ῆνορέη* is positively connected with those men concerned with the safety of the group on the battlefield. On the other hand, *ἀγηνωρίη* is considered by some scholars as demeaning, for its meaning is intertwined with individualistic behavior as well as with isolation. Excessive manliness leads men to withdraw from other men and to act recklessly.

Along with the typology of masculine hierarchy put forth by Connell in *Masculinities* – hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized types –, proper manliness and excessive manliness are perceived as two sides of the hegemonic type. Proper manliness can be interpreted as men’s solidarity with other men, so as to boost morale on the battlefield. As stated by Chris Hedges in *War is the Force That Gives us Meaning* (2003), “war is the ultimate definition of manhood”,¹⁸ which makes proper manliness essential for ancient warriors to build rapport and to heighten a sense of communion.

Conversely, excessive manliness can be regarded as the hegemonic attempt to oppress men and women alike, placing masculinity against “the larger male project of establishing and guarding human civilization”.¹⁹ Because ancient Greek culture was rooted in competitiveness, so was their notion of masculinity. This is the main issue relative to ancient Greek masculinity: if a collective effort, like the Greek army assembled by Agamemnon, is to thrive, talented young men,

¹⁶ Van Nortwick (2008) 25.

¹⁷ Graziosi (2003) 60.

¹⁸ Hedges (2003) 69.

¹⁹ Van Nortwick (2008) 52.

like Achilles and Ajax, must come to terms with the idea that their martial excellence is as important as their obedience and willingness to share power.

Such willingness – rarely found in *The Iliad*, where episodes of *aristeia* (excellence) abound – can be associated with proper manliness, while excessive manliness points to the warriors' isolation, to the disregard for human values, and to social hierarchy. Graziosi notes that the word that denotes excessive manliness (ἀγνηγορία) is also associated with the behavior of male beasts in the *Iliad*.²⁰

Briseis gives us a feminist account of the Trojan War, but the novel is also a valuable source for the analysis of the male characters that have inhabited the Western literary tradition since Homer. According to Terry Eagleton, “[our] Homer is not identical with the Homer of the Middle Ages, nor [our] Shakespeare with that of his contemporaries”.²¹ From the troubled relationship between Thetis and Achilles – the latter, according to Briseis, resembles “a small child crying to be picked up”²² – to Ajax mistaking his slave girl, Tecmessa, for a Trojan soldier²³, Barker's narrative shows different aspects of Homer's heroes.

We contend that Connell's hegemonic masculinity and Graziosi's excessive manliness culminate in a process of towering rage and animalization in Barker's novel. To exemplify that notion, which is further explored in section III of this article, we resort to the first sentence in Barker's novel. Like the *Iliad*, Barker opens *The Silence of the Girls* with the hero in the spotlight. Whereas Homer is reverential, Barker's tone is one of mockery: “[g]reat Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles. How the epithets pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called him the butcher”.²⁴ The gradation of epithets ends up with an unflattering one, echoing the soldiers' corpses that populate the first lines of the *Iliad*.²⁵

Achilles' excellence united to his wrath brings the Greek army to the brink of its demise. In this context, proper manliness and excessive manliness are sides of the same coin, hegemonic masculinity. Proper and excessive manliness can be used separately to shed light on how, in the Homeric society, the former is

²⁰ Il.12.299–309; Il.12.41–50; Il. 20.164–75. Cf. Il.22.454–9.

²¹ Eagleton (2008) 11.

²² Barker (2018) 33.

²³ Barker (2018) 51.

²⁴ Barker (2018) 51.

²⁵ Il.1.1–6.

used to endorse positive male features that protect patriarchy and the latter is a destructive force that one can use not only against one's peers but also against oneself.

Because Barker does not depict as diligently the life of the common soldier, the novel explores the intricacies of the links between hegemonic men. Hegemonic men in Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* are aristocrats who, from their childhood, were trained in oratory²⁶, were instructed how to wield a sword and spear,²⁷ and were taught to be zealous of their honor. Those men are also emotionally needy²⁸ and drink too much to escape their problems.²⁹ Barker's novel raises relevant issues, such as how hegemonic masculinity can promote the demotion of men's and women's identities, something to which we return in the next sections.

BRISEIS: QUEEN, SLAVE, AND ACHILLES' BRIDE – A FEMALE DEPICTION OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Adrienne Rich in "When We Dead Awaken" states "[n]o male writer has written primarily or even largely for women, or with the sense of women's criticism as a consideration when he chooses his materials, his theme, his language".³⁰ In the overtly masculine world of *The Iliad*, Briseis is allowed to profess her own voice only once throughout the almost sixteen thousand lines of the epic.³¹ The only reference a contemporary readership can find about Briseis outside Homer is in later authors from the Hellenistic Period (323 BC–146 BC) or from the Western Roman Empire (130 BC–476 AD).³²

²⁶ Barker (2018) 209.

²⁷ Barker (2018) 259.

²⁸ Barker (2018) 44.

²⁹ Barker (2018) 56.

³⁰ Rich (1972) 20.

³¹ Il. 19.285–300.

³² The Hellenistic Period covers Greek history from the death of Alexander the Great until the dawn of the Roman Empire. The emperor Diocletian (r. 284–385 BC) divided the Roman Empire into two. The Eastern Empire was ruled from Byzantium (modern Istanbul) while the

In *The Iliad*, Briseis “has great structural importance, but is an absent structure”.³³ Agamemnon defines her as Achilles’ gift of honor (γέρας). Barker departs from Homer to re-create her own Briseis. One of the poignant scenes *The Silence of the Girls* depicts is the one where Briseis is handed to Achilles by the Greek army. He is the bravest warrior, so it is his right to have the most beautiful woman as his gift of honor.³⁴ In the society Homer portrays, women are part of men’s *kleos* (glory).

The opening quarrel of *The Iliad*, which Barker humorously refers to as a bar brawl in her epigraph, is a significant display of power. Briseis and Chryseis symbolize their captors’ τιμή (esteem). In the Homeric world, honor and esteem are highly valued possessions that a man can only obtain at the expense of another human being. Agamemnon, fully aware that returning Chryseis to her father will damage his reputation, strategically seizes Achilles’ gift of honor, further highlighting the power dynamics at play.

Additionally, Barker portrays Briseis in accordance with Homer in *The Iliad*. Not only is she referred to as Achilles’ prize, but also as Achilles’ bride. Throughout *The Silence of the Girls*, Barker’s Briseis ponders whether she should marry Achilles, the man responsible for her downfall and the death of all her other male relatives. As ludicrous as it may seem to a contemporary audience, Barker voices the challenging position in which Briseis might have been, as she would have no final word on the matter had Achilles decided to marry her. In Barker’s literary project, Briseis is no longer an absent structure: she is a powerful tool to comprehend Homeric notions on gender roles and on the amount of power hegemonic men hold in that society.

As Van Nortwick points out, the life cycle of a woman is similar to a “story that reflects the Greeks’ view of a woman’s life, the abduction and return of Persephone, daughter of the goddess Demeter, by Hades, god of the Underworld”.³⁵ Persephone’s myth, narrated in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, reveals the stages of a woman’s life would lead her to be, as Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) puts it,

Western Empire was ruled from Rome. Insofar as the novel follows Homer closely, we will not address Briseis as seen in Ovid.

33 Fantuzzi (2007) 99.

34 Barker (2018) 22.

35 Van Nortwick (2008) 16.

“Born – Bridled – Shrouded – / In a day”.³⁶ The tripartite division of birth, marriage/abduction, and death has been present in women’s lives throughout centuries.³⁷

Van Nortwick also claims Persephone’s is “a story that implicitly compares the experience of a young girl’s marriage not only to a forcible abduction, but to a kind of death”.³⁸ Briseis tells her audience that the Myrmidons would behold her returning to their general as “[a] woman so heavily shrouded in white she might have been a corpse”.³⁹ This scene sets Briseis apart with her new identity in the Greek war camp – she is Achilles’ bride and slave – and at the same time buries her former life as the respectable queen of Lyrnessus. Briseis’ change of status mirrors another type of fall, which is also connected to Achilles’ story, Thetis’.

Briseis often ponders whether she would marry Achilles. However, such ponderings are not born out of love for him; they funnel down to a matter of survival and to a lack of agency. Patroclus is the agent of patriarchy to ensure this marriage take place. By the end of the novel, thinking about the child Briseis is carrying, Achilles, another symbolic force of patriarchy, marries Briseis to Alcimus, a Myrmidon under his command.

Just like Persephone’s myth, Briseis’ symbolic and actual marriages – to Mynes, to Achilles, and to Alcimus – display the power patriarchal structures have over women and, to some extent, echo Thetis’ marriage to Peleus. Seth Schein discloses that “there was a prophecy that Thetis would give birth to a son mightier than his father, who would overthrow him. This prophecy discouraged both Zeus and Poseidon from mating with her and led to her being married perforce to a mortal, Peleus”.⁴⁰ Achilles, who would otherwise have been a child of Zeus, is doomed to be a mortal. Thetis begins to mourn her son from the moment he is born until his last day.⁴¹ What Briseis’ story has in common with Persephone’s and Thetis’ is that patriarchy, enforced by representatives of

36 Dickinson (1960) 15.

37 As we compare Briseis’ tale to Persephone’s myth, we choose to overlook the female role in a patriarchal society that encompasses childbirth and care.

38 Van Nortwick (2008) 17.

39 Barker (2018) 240.

40 Schein (1984) 92.

41 Barker (2018) 298.

hegemonic masculinity, is a force that can and will work against female agency by making women marry whomever is more suitable to men's maintenance of power.

On the one hand, Briseis is often falling and rising in the social hierarchy of the period: she occupies the space of a queen, a slave, a bride, a bargaining chip to Agamemnon, a slave again, and, then, the wife of Alcimus, a Myrmidon. On the other hand, while free and slave women are bound to domestic labor in the Homeric society, free men have war as their main occupation. This state of affairs makes Briseis' scope of action always limited to indoor work; which is no coincidence, for in the Homeric world, war is the work of men.⁴²

Briseis' indoor activity is the key point in our analysis: she retells the Trojan War. As Graziosi explains, "[the Homeric poems] explore masculinity from a variety of angles offering paradigms of male behavior that became extremely influential in Greco-Roman antiquity".⁴³ Furthermore, Susan Lanser advocates in *Fictions of Authority* (2018) the view that "[f]emale voice is not an essence but a variable subject position whose I is grammatically feminine".⁴⁴ In short, a female-centered perspective provides not only a glimpse of what a silenced existence was like to a contemporary readership but also offers a different angle from which to analyze the construction of male identities.

Marion Gymnich, in "Gender and Narratology" (2013), points out that "readers tend to ascribe more authority to the narrator than to the characters simply because the narrator is regarded as the source of the story".⁴⁵ Not only does *The Silence of the Girls* give an account of the defeated but it also elaborates on a female portrayal of a male hero, a portrayal that is distinct from those that render the hero praiseworthy. Whereas in Homer Achilles is divine, in Barker he is bestial.⁴⁶

Where patriarchy seems to be considerate of women, as in the exchanges Patroclus has with Briseis, we suspect that there is still a subtle effort to control women's lives. In relation to the comparison we discussed before (Briseis and Persephone), Van Nortwick argues "[p]atriarchy is portrayed as potentially ty-

⁴² Il.6.586–587.

⁴³ Graziosi (2003) 60.

⁴⁴ Lanser (2018) 17.

⁴⁵ Gymnich (2013) 709.

⁴⁶ "the son of Peleus, half beast, half god, driving on to glory", Barker (2018) 219.

rannical in the [*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*] and is reinforced by male solidarity. Helios is kind to Demeter in her grief, but urges her to be grateful that Persephone has such an admirably powerful husband".⁴⁷ Patroclus, like Zeus or even Helios, claims he can make Achilles marry Briseis and that it would be a change of prospect for her. In the portrayal of hegemonic men Barker gives us, where war indulges some few old kings like Priam to "kiss the hands of the man who killed [their sons]",⁴⁸ patriarchy forces Briseis and countless women to "spread [their] legs for the man who killed [their husbands] and [their brothers]".⁴⁹ Patroclus' offer does not let the reader forget that Briseis would still be marrying the man responsible for her current position.

Briseis' voice in *The Silence of the Girls* – following Rich's standpoint that to rewrite means to revise ancient tales – also serves as an attempt to describe the experience of women as slaves and prisoners of war. By withdrawing Briseis from the position of being merely Achilles' slave or future bride, Barker highlights how men's perspectives on women can be quite similar. In the following passage, Briseis tries to convey the emotional state of the Greek camp when Trojan forces are on the verge of breaking their defenses,⁵⁰

[s]ome of the girls, mainly those who'd been slaves in their previous lives, were genuinely indifferent. No likely end would bring them loss or leave them happier than before. But those of us who'd once been free, who'd had security and status, were torn between hope and fear. Some managed to convince themselves that if – if – the Trojans broke through they'd greet us as their long-lost sisters. But would they? Or would they see us as the enemy's slave girls, theirs to do what they liked with? I knew which outcome I thought more probable.⁵¹

The situation of slave women would hardly be changed because the Trojan army, like the Greek one, was an institution made of and for men, grounded on the notion that women are prizes, the extension of male glory.

⁴⁷ Van Nortwick (2008) 20.

⁴⁸ Barker (2018) 267; Cf. Il.24.561–562.

⁴⁹ Barker (2018) 267.

⁵⁰ Il. 15.843–850.

⁵¹ Barker (2018) 135.

The Silence of the Girls divides Briseis' voice into what Susan Lanser characterizes as personal and communal: "the term personal voice refer[s] to narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories"⁵² while "communal voice [refers to] a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority".⁵³ In Barker's novel, a plethora of I's and We's point to the tale of those who have no voice of their own but, like soldiers in a war camp, have a lot to share about the neglected side of war.

One such neglected wartime casualty is Briseis: ever since the beginning of the novel, after the ransacking of her city, Lynerssus, she has been demoted. We should take a closer look at the scene in which Briseis meets Achilles for the first time in the Greek camp,

[a]nd then a hand, fingertips gritty with sand, seized hold of my chin and turned my head from side to side. At the centre of the arena [Achilles] stopped and raised both hands above his head until the shouting died away

Cheers, lads, he said.

She'll do. And everyone, every single man in that vast arena, laughed.⁵⁴

With one sentence, "[s]he will do",⁵⁵ Achilles undermines and subdues Briseis while he simultaneously establishes his authority and superiority over the other soldiers.

Briseis, the most valuable war prize, becomes the "visual confirmation that [Achilles] was, as he'd always claimed to be, the greatest of the Greeks".⁵⁶ Briseis undergoes another loss of identity in the hands of another hegemonic man in the novel, Agamemnon. After the quarrel over Chryseis and the plague, Briseis has to go to the Mycenaean king's compound.

There, Briseis finds out that slave women can be used as a threat to other men, for she no longer is Achilles' prize. She becomes Agamemnon's warning, as the passage below exemplifies,

52 Lanser (2018) 24.

53 Lanser (2018) 26.

54 Barker (2018) 22.

55 Barker (2018) 22.

56 Barker (2018) 67.

[in Agamemnon's tent, Briseis] served a particular purpose. Men carve meaning into women's faces; messages addressed to other men. In Achilles's compound, the message had been: Look at her. [Achilles'] prize awarded by the army, proof that [Achilles is what he's] always claimed to be: the greatest of the Greeks. Here, in Agamemnon's compound, it was: Look at her, Achilles's prize. [Agamemnon] took her away from him just as [Agamemnon] can take your prize away from you. [Agamemnon] can take everything you have.⁵⁷

However, as the dispute between Agamemnon and Achilles goes on, Briseis symbolizes something else. Briseis makes it clear that she is telling The Trojan War as if it were a communal event.⁵⁸ Barker's Briseis is an emblem of what women suffer at war, Greek or Trojan. She often changes places and fills in the shoes of important and neglected females in the mythic narrative of the Trojan War.

Briseis witnesses first-hand Achilles' childlike need for his caretaker in Thetis' plotline. After the disastrous outcome of the embassy in Book 9 of *The Iliad* – in which Barker omits the presence of Phoenix –, Briseis becomes another silent woman of myth, another reason behind men's actions: she becomes Helen.⁵⁹ To Briseis is addressed the hostility and contempt of the Greek soldiers, which had been up to that point addressed to Helen. Briseis, like Helen in Troy, is surrounded by enemy forces who must fight a war whose cause is a foreign woman.

The last transformation Briseis goes through, from a thing into a good man's wife, is a reminder that a war story is, among other things, a tale of survival. While the flames are engulfing Achilles' body, Briseis realizes that

[we, the Trojan women,] are going to survive – our songs, our stories. They'll never be able to forget us. Decades after the last man who fought at Troy is dead, their sons will remember the songs their Trojan mothers sang to them. We'll be in their dreams – and in their worst nightmares too.⁶⁰

57 Barker (2018) 120.

58 Barker (2018) 213.

59 Barker (2018) 124.

60 Barker (2018) 296.

After Achilles' death and the fall of Troy, she is finally allowed to tell a different tale from those in which "[s]ilence becomes a woman".⁶¹ Perhaps, in this tale, Briseis and the other Trojan women are (re)born not to be shrouded (or silenced) in a single day.

War, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity make Briseis realize that she and other women as well would "do anything, anything at all, to stop being a thing and become a person again".⁶² In order to achieve that, Briseis has to try and walk out of Achilles' story.⁶³ The hero's narrative is a stark omen that those who perform male hegemony may be unaware of the demotion of their identities. A reckoning that may come too late, as is the case we explore in the next section.

THE OTHER-THAN-HUMANIZATION OF THE HERO: ACHILLES AND THE CLOAK OF EXCESSIVE MANLINESS

Whereas Achilles, as Barker depicts him, is hegemonic – he oppresses women and is a model of unachievable masculinity to other men in the Greek and Trojan armies –, Achilles falls short of being human. Different narrators attempt to portray Achilles as something other than human, either in the novel or in the epic poem. Achilles' personal identity is not only demoted by his hegemonic traits but also diminished by the constant process of animalization embedded within it. In Homer, for example, recurrent similes compare heroes to natural elements such as fire or to animals such as wild beasts.⁶⁴

Homer's use of similes has been extensively discussed by Classical scholarship;⁶⁵ but we focus on how the similes are not only a poetic resource but also an inner mirror to the hero's frame of mind. As Michael Clarke argues, "the symbolism of aggressive wild animals is much more than a matter of style, and they

⁶¹ Barker (2018) 326.

⁶² Barker (2018) 93.

⁶³ Barker (2018) 324.

⁶⁴ Clarke (1995) 141: "Throughout the *Iliad* war and the warrior are associated with fire on many different levels of figured language and narrative, of which similes are only the most explicit".

⁶⁵ See Clarke (1995); Graziosi (2003); Schein (1998).

play a major part in Homer's portrayal of the ethical and psychological problems of heroism".⁶⁶ In Homer, this constant comparison between men and beasts, or men and forces of nature, is a means to depict the hero's frame of mind in a moment of detachment from his personal identity.

Similarly, Briseis and the omniscient narrator, who takes over Parts Two and Three of the novel, depict Achilles sometimes as human, sometimes as non-human. The first thing that strikes the reader is Achilles as something other than human in terms of the hero's voice, "I [Briseis] heard him before I saw him: his battle cry ringing around the walls of Lyrnessus".⁶⁷ In this passage, Briseis echoes Homer;⁶⁸ in respect to the power Achilles' war cry has on those who hear it. It is so potent, so terrifying, it can freeze a whole army; we can only imagine the effect it would have on a group of scared women and children.

Another moment Barker brings Achilles' voice center stage is to emphasize Achilles' double nature when the hero is in one of the elements of his mixed birth, the sea. At her first night in the Greek camp, Briseis decides to swim. On the shore, she again hears her captor before she can see him:

I listened, straining to hear above the roar of the waves, and it came again – definitely a man's voice, though I couldn't make out the words. And suddenly, I was afraid. I'd been frightened for days – I'd forgotten what it was like not to be frightened – but this was a different kind of fear. The skin at the back of my neck crawled as the hairs rose. I told myself the voice must be coming from the camp, somehow bouncing off the wall of mist so it seemed to be coming from the sea, but then I heard it again and this time I knew it was out there. Somebody, something, was churning up the water beyond the breaking waves. An animal – it had to be, couldn't be anything else, a dolphin or a killer whale.⁶⁹

This passage highlights two poignant features of Achilles' non-human depiction.

Firstly, the fear he inspires in Briseis resembles an encounter with a preternatural or supernatural force: fear that makes one shiver and become speech-

66 Clarke (1995) 138.

67 Barker (2018) 3.

68 Il. 18.251–266.

69 Barker (2018) 32.

less.⁷⁰ Secondly, at this moment Barker starts to draw a comparison between Achilles and other animals. Briseis later recalls that “[Achilles] had been playing with the sea like a dolphin or a porpoise, as if it were his real home”⁷¹ and that “[Achilles] raised his head and shoulders and floated upright, like a bottling seal”.⁷² Instead of using the lion or the boar – figures used extensively in Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* –, Briseis uses similes to compare Achilles to marine animals, a dolphin, a porpoise, and a seal.

Another part of the comparison to marine animals comes in the last part of the novel. There, the hero admittedly acknowledges that his feet, the source of the numerous songs about him and part of his most famous epithet, *okumoros* (swift-footed), are also a source of great shame: “[i]n fact, his toes are webbed, as indeed his mother’s are; though on her the extra skin’s translucent. On him, it’s thick and yellow; he’s ashamed of it. [Achilles is] ashamed of his feet”.⁷³ Achilles’ epithet, swift-footed, points to a two-pronged sword and simultaneously attests to the hero’s brief life and to his battle skills.

Achilles’ feet in Barker’s novel enhance the dualities that encompass all aspects of Achilles’ existence⁷⁴ and shed light on why Homeric culture and Homeric masculinity depend on the honor/shame system. Barker makes it clear that the source of Achilles’ undying glory (*kleos aphthiton*) in the Homeric world is, indeed, the source of his shame. Barker also hints at contemporary notions that heroism is not as glorious as the society depicted by *The Iliad* makes it or wants it to look like.

Moreover, Barker breaks with the genre expectations to some extent. There is something rather comic in imagining Achilles’ feet as Barker describes them. Achilles, the prototype of the tragic hero, has as an all-too-human fatal flaw in his appearance, which counters ancient Greek ideals of masculinity that often rely on male beauty.⁷⁵ In Barker’s retelling of the Trojan War, the hero’s wobbled feet can be considered a stain to his reputation as the most handsome man of

⁷⁰ See *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 281.

⁷¹ Barker (2018) 33.

⁷² Barker (2018) 33.

⁷³ Barker (2018) 246.

⁷⁴ See Muellner (2020) 99–102.

⁷⁵ *Imagining Men* (2008) 14; Cf. *Od.* 23.153–162.

the time.⁷⁶ To parallel Achilles' feet, we turn our attention to Achilles' hands. In the three scenes that *The Silence of the Girls* puts the hero's hands in the spotlight, the dialogue with *The Iliad* is evident. Like his feet, a reminder of his speed, Achilles' hands define him, set him apart: they convey the idea of how lethal he can be. Twice in Baker's novel, Achilles is forced to look down at his hands.⁷⁷

Homer calls attention to Achilles' hands being man-killing, for in *The Iliad* the epithet is used twice – first, in Patroclus' funeral; second, in Priam's visit to Achilles' compound.⁷⁸ In the novel, the first time Achilles stares at his hands is on the day of Patroclus' death, and the second is on the day Priam comes to offer a ransom for Hector's body. In both occasions, the hero's frame of mind is of confusion and delusion, for “when [Achilles] looks down, he sees there's something wrong with [his hands].⁷⁹ They're big at the best of times, a fighter's hands, trained from childhood to wield a sword and spear, but surely they've never been as big as this”. However, Briseis tells us Achilles is not ashamed of his hands, as they are also his source of pride. Achilles' hands, disproportionately big, shape the hero as we see him in *The Silence of the Girls*.⁸⁰

Barker often implies that Achilles is other than human. She does that through the observation that there is always violence “simmering beneath the surface [of Achilles']”⁸¹. We have already analyzed Achilles' voice and the comparison to marine animals, which attest to his other-than-human or half-divine nature. Like Homer, Barker also endorses Achilles' other-than-human aspect by approximating the hero to other animals. That which separates him from other men, his exceeding beauty, emphasizes the dual aspect of Achilles.

Briseis recollects,

[as] the torchlight fell full on [Achilles'] face and I could see the strange markings on his skin. The areas covered by the forehead and cheek irons of his helmet were several shades lighter than the exposed skin around his eyes and mouth, almost as if the helmet had become part of him, had somehow embedded itself in his skin.

⁷⁶ Barker (2018) 56.

⁷⁷ Barker (2018) 241; Barker (2018) 259.

⁷⁸ Il. 23.20–21; Il.24.559–562.

⁷⁹ Barker (2018) 259.

⁸⁰ Barker (2018) 285.

⁸¹ Barker (2018) 43.

Perhaps I exaggerate the effect. For me, the tiger-stripes on his skin were the most noticeable thing about him. At that time, he was probably the most beautiful man alive, as he was certainly the most violent, but that's the problem. How do you separate a tiger's beauty from its ferocity? Or a cheetah's elegance from the speed of its attack? Achilles was like that – the beauty and the terror were two sides of a single coin.⁸²

Barker promotes a singular portrayal of heroism, which endorses the notion proposed by Boon that heroism may transform men into something beyond human, but it does so on account of detaching men from their personal identities.⁸³ Achilles, who, so far, has been compared to marine animals, is now compared to mammals that are as beautiful as they are dangerous.

Throughout *The Iliad* and *The Silence of the Girls*, Achilles is compared to animals, forces of nature, and even vegetation. In *The Mortal Hero* (1984), Schein notes that Peleus' son is the only Greek hero described in terms of vegetal imagery.⁸⁴ Barker acquiesces to this tradition and endorses the idea that “what makes Achilles great is also what isolates him”.⁸⁵ Both in Homer and in Barker, Achilles' process of other-than-humanization, even of animalization, is gradual. It follows the hero's wrath.

In *The Iliad*, Andromache, Hector's wife, admits that, although Achilles has caused her a lot of pain by killing her male relatives and by capturing her mother, he still acts respectfully toward his enemies.⁸⁶ Indeed, Achilles follows the honor code even at times of war. He accepts ransom when it is possible and does not always use the battle as an excuse to slaughter people. Even Barker's Briseis acquiesces to the notion of a civil and thoughtful Achilles, “[n]othing would have pleased me [Briseis] more than to be able to think of Achilles as a thug with no redeeming characteristics or grace of manner; but he was never that”.⁸⁷ However, that is bound to change once Patroclus is killed by Hector.

82 Barker (2018) 56.

83 Boon (2005) 304.

84 Schein (1984) 96–98.

85 Van Nortwick (1996) 44.

86 Il.6.490–512.

87 Barker (2018) 264.

In ancient Greek society, “the heroic temperament and the pursuit of glory lead inevitably towards death”.⁸⁸ The willingness to risk life in battle makes a true man in Homer’s epics.⁸⁹ Those notions can be encapsulated in Graziosi’s proper manliness and excessive manliness. Achilles and Ajax, the bravest heroes, have their posts on both flanks of the Greek army, the most exposed positions in a war camp. Proper and excessive manliness are two sides of the same coin, hegemonic masculinity. Whereas the former leads to what is the main feature of hegemonic masculinity in Connell’s theory, women’s domination, the latter may promote the disruption of patriarchal structures.

Excessive manliness, in Graziosi’s estimation, is repeatedly associated with animal similes, which suggests that in Homer, “the mental and emotional state of the fighting animal can be assimilated to that of the fighting man more closely than would ever be possible in a culture like our own”.⁹⁰ *The Iliad* is a poem about Achilles’ wrath and its stages⁹¹; even more so after the loss of Patroclus, for Achilles is perceived as more and more other-than-human. The word that opens *The Iliad*, *menin* (wrath), is a suggestive noun in ancient Greek.⁹² It does not point to a human feeling; rather, it symbolizes the kind of rage that would be felt by a god, which is another feature that isolates Achilles from his peers.

To exemplify that, we resort to the fatalistic meeting between Hector and Achilles as well as to two scenes in Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls*. To Clarke, in *The Iliad*, Achilles forsakes all links to mankind and is completely other-than-humanized in Book 22, where he affirms that “[t]here are no binding oaths between men and lions”.⁹³ Although Hector has tried to make a pact with Achilles, observing the code of warrior society, “the point of comparison [men and lions] is pinned on psychology and social mores as well as action: wolves and lions do not feel affection or make contracts in the way that normal people do, and this is the relationship in which Achilles stands to the man at this feet”.⁹⁴ Similarly,

88 Clarke (1995) 148.

89 Clarke (1995) 147.

90 Clarke (1995) 146.

91 See Graziosi (2003) 65; Van Nortwick (1996) 40–41; Schein (1984) 91.

92 Schein (1984) 91.

93 Il. 22.310.

94 Clarke (1995) 144. Cf. Il.22.307–315.

in Barker's retelling, after Achilles kills Hector – whom stand as part of his second-self –, the hero plunges away from what makes him human.

Barker does not portray the battle between Hector and Achilles. Instead, we are presented with the hero's recollections of the moment and his feelings. Achilles, wrapped in excessive manliness, does not ponder human values and is associated with a wild animal. Achilles is pure instinct and wrath,

[k]illing Hector isn't enough. [Achilles] knew that the minute he did it. What he really wanted to do was eat [Hector] – there aren't many people he'd say that to, but it's the truth. He'd wanted to rip Hector's throat out with his teeth. That's why he'd dragged the corpse three times round the walls of Troy, knowing Priam was watching, and even that was no more than a pale substitute for the taste of Hector's flesh on his tongue.⁹⁵

As horrifying as it is, contemplating eating human flesh is not enough to placate Achilles' wrath; nor is it the last stage of the hero's other-than-humanization in Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*.

As Schein argues, “paradoxically, both [Achilles'] love and grief for [Patroclus] and his own imminent death, which is repeatedly prophesied and prefigured, isolate him even further from his comrades, and the savagery with which he routs and slays the Trojans cuts him off from all normal humanity”.⁹⁶ Even after Achilles does everything he thinks necessary to grant Patroclus a dignified funeral – killing Hector, slaying the twelve Trojan youths, killing Patroclus' horses and dogs⁹⁷ –, “[Achilles] can't sleep. Can't eat, can't sleep, can't play the lyre – and now, apparently, can't fuck”.⁹⁸ By forswearing symbols of human life – such as feeding, bathing, sleeping, copulating, and playing the lyre –, Achilles hints at his desire to be apart from humanity.⁹⁹

Achilles' other-than-humanization finally reaches its last stage after Patroclus' funeral, when the hero starts a new routine. He takes Hector's body around Patroclus' grave every day. As a consequence, every day, Achilles looks into

⁹⁵ Barker 230–231; cf Il.22.407–410.

⁹⁶ Schein (1984) 98.

⁹⁷ Barker (2018) 235; cf Il.23.23–27.

⁹⁸ Barker (2018) 235; cf Il.23.23–27.

⁹⁹ Van Nortwick (2008) 7.

the mirror afterward and sees “[r]eflected back from the shining metal, the injuries he’s just inflicted on Hector [lying] like shadows on his own skin”.¹⁰⁰ This scene portrays Achilles’ self-created hell, which corroborates the idea of self-loathing.¹⁰¹

Whereas Homer resorts to animal and vegetal similes, Barker depicts the demotion of Achilles’ personal identity: his excessive attachment to his heroic status and his status likening him to animals and things. The last thing to which Achilles is compared in Barker’s narrative is Hector’s corpse. Achilles inflicts wounds on Hector’s body and performs the most violent and blasphemous acts of *The Silence of the Girls* because his hegemonic status allows him: no one in the entire Greek war camp would go against Achilles’ resolve.¹⁰² By demoting Achilles’ identity bit by bit, Barker shows how hegemonic masculinity, equivalent to Graziosi’s excessive manliness, is also harmful to those who perform it.

The cloak of excessive manliness does not let men perceive that they are vulnerable too. Achilles’ death wish after Patroclus’ demise is a sign of how emotionally immature he is. Achilles admits that everything he has done is in the hope that he could bargain with his own grief.¹⁰³ Because Achilles is excessive, because his heroic stature sets him apart from everyone, mortals and immortals alike, he is as vulnerable as he is untouchable. Achilles’ powerlessness over grief confirms Seidler’s assertion that hegemonic masculinity can lead men to a path of self-destruction.

In the patriarchal world Homer and Barker depict, this path is paved with the notion of glory to be achieved at the highest point of a hero’s life, his death. As Robert Renehan notes, “[t]he high road to undying glory was to be found primarily in being the best and in being preeminent above others”.¹⁰⁴ This requirement brings Achilles to his doom. Achilles’ resolve to be sung forever is what makes him be represented as a model of masculinity, which in turn bestializes and brutalizes him: Achilles forsakes his peers, disregards the army’s hierarchy,

100 Barker (2018) 250.

101 Van Nortwick (2008) 14.

102 In *The Iliad*, even the gods find Achilles’ behavior outrageous and excessive Il.24.46–61. Apollo compares Achilles to a lion, which confirms Clarke’s notion that Homer’s similes express the darkest implications of Achilles’ isolation: the hero is, indeed, forsaking human values and embracing death instead of life.

103 Barker (2018) 241.

104 Renehan (1997) 112.

and is irresolutely hubristic. Each one of his actions fits excessive manliness as a cultural construct.

However, from the moment we have access to Achilles' thoughts, his identity is not only divided into his mortal and divine natures; it also shifts between him and Patroclus. Van Nortwick claims that Patroclus is more than Achilles' companion or lover, something at which Barker also hints;¹⁰⁵ Patroclus is Achilles' second self. Deprived of Patroclus, Achilles truly shows his colors as hegemonic/excessive: the hero breaks all the acceptable rules of conduct in warfare, for he does not grant Hector a proper funeral; he commits human sacrifice and keeps fighting without rest. No longer will a representation of proper manliness (ἡννοπέη) suit Achilles after Patroclus has been killed.

The hegemonic/heroic status is destructive because it forces the hero to be above other men, despite his grief or mental state. The heroic status is a painful reminder that the hero cannot be above the gods, nor can the hero undo the fact that he and his second self are mortals.¹⁰⁶ Unknowingly, the hero becomes a superimposition of man and lion¹⁰⁷, of the greatest killer¹⁰⁸, a token of excessive manliness. Only this can allow Achilles to retrieve his position of male hegemony, for no other man can be compared to him. Conversely, such a restless quest inevitably leads to Achilles' other-than-humanization and self-destruction.

GENTLE, KINDHEARTED PATROCLUS: THE HERO'S SECOND-SELF: THE UNRAVELMENT OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY?

In *Somewhere I Have Never Traveled*, Van Nortwick notes that Patroclus' first appearance in *The Iliad* is not a remarkable one.¹⁰⁹ This appearance calls to mind the relationship between a master and a servant. Conversely, Patroclus' debut in *The Silence of the Girls* is stunning. He has a kind exchange with Briseis, offers her

¹⁰⁵ Barker (2018) 300.

¹⁰⁶ Barker (2018) 241.

¹⁰⁷ Il. 24.39–45.

¹⁰⁸ Barker (2018) 115.

¹⁰⁹ Il.1.398–408.

wine, and promises her she will be safe. Surprising in that scene is that Patroclus, second in command to none other than Achilles, waits on a slave. That episode is relevant because in a society as layered as the ancient Greek one, Patroclus slightly breaks with the hegemonic prescriptions of masculine behavior. This section juxtaposes Patroclus and Achilles' relationship with women because Patroclus expresses qualities that Achilles lacks. Patriarchal societies thrive on hegemonic masculinity, for both tend to curb women's agency.

Although "on the battlefield, in the thick of the fighting, [Patroclus] was every bit as ferocious as the rest of [the Myrmidons]"¹¹⁰, in the camp, among the captive women and their children, he was kind and considerate. It is difficult to picture hegemonic men being kind or considerate to women, especially in a society where women are a form of currency. Patroclus, in *The Silence of the Girls*, breaks with some of the requirements to which hegemonic men are bound.

There might be a reason why Patroclus is so considerate to Briseis in the novel: to some extent, he can recognize himself in her. Because Patroclus is exiled from his father's kingdom, he becomes *anônymos* (nameless) in ancient Greek culture.¹¹¹ He admits the reason he treats Briseis and the other women kindly is that he knows "what it is like to lose everything and be handed to Achilles as a toy".¹¹² Patroclus, a member of the aristocracy (at least, theoretically), feels similar to Briseis, a slave. On the one hand, Barker's literary project attempts to depict what a slave woman's life would be like in a war camp. On the other hand, Barker also shows that the process of identity loss that Briseis and other women go through is also experienced by their captors.

David Halperin (1990) argues that "Patroclus performs many of the functions for Achilles that a wife or female dependent normally performs in the Homeric World; for example, he places food before Achilles when the two of them are dining alone¹¹³ and, when they are entertaining guests, it is Patroclus who distributes the bread".¹¹⁴ Patroclus is the weaker part in his relation to Achilles; however, Barker presents a Patroclus who is not only aware of this but also one

110 Barker (2018) 212.

111 Strauss (1993) 27.

112 Barker (2018) 71.

113 See Il.19.315–17. Cf. Il. 9.216–17; cf. Il. 11.624–41.

114 Halperin (1990) 84.

who, contrary to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, seems not to resent his subservient state.

Patroclus, as Barker rewrites him, is a mysterious figure. Even witty Odysseus cannot decipher him. Glory does not entice him and he seems unaffected by the rumors of his role in sexual activity in the Greek camp, “[Patroclus is] a king’s son. Does he really want to go down in history as Achilles’s bum-boy? Because that’s the way it’s heading”.¹¹⁵ In a culture where masculine value is embedded in the honor/shame system, Patroclus’ polite disregard for his honor can be analyzed through the notion of the second self, proposed by Van Nortwick.

According to the classicist,

[t]o express Achilles’ divided nature and his struggles to resolve it, the poet of *The Iliad* creates in Patroclus an alter ego, or second self, for his hero. The second self is essentially a figure who represents parts of the hero that he is denying or has somehow lost touch with, usually through arrogance and pride.¹¹⁶

However, it seems reasonable to assume that if both men represent what the other lacks or denies – Achilles being the brutal part of Patroclus and Patroclus being the kind part of Achilles –, then both men struggle with the relative loss or weakening of their personal identities.

Barker points out that when Patroclus arrives at Phthia, his reputation has been spread throughout Peleus’ small kingdom,

[as] soon as it became known that Patroclus had killed somebody, had actually done what they were all being trained to do, the other boys were queueing up to take him on. He became the one to beat. And so he was always fighting, like a chained bear that can’t escape the baiting, but must go on and on, whimpering and licking its wounds at night, dragged out to face the dogs again by day. By the time Achilles finally plucked up the courage to approach Patroclus, he was well on the way to becoming the violent little thug everybody believed he was.¹¹⁷

115 Barker (2018) 165.

116 Van Nortwick (2008) 8.

117 Barker (2018) 116.

What this excerpt declares is that Patroclus could have become a glaring representative of hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Meeting Achilles, however, sets him on another course.

Patroclus' engagement with the hegemonic prescription of masculinity is curbed by Achilles' presence and vice-versa. They act as judges of each other's actions. For example, Achilles is not cruel to Briseis, as Agamemnon is to his slave girls, and is not as harsh to those under his command.¹¹⁸ As Briseis notes, "Patroclus was clearly second in command, subordinate. Only that wasn't the whole story".¹¹⁹ Patroclus also represents, in Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, a kind of reformed masculinity, which, according to Alex Hobbs (2013), sets a positive model for male protagonists who do not conform to masculine stereotypes.¹²⁰

Patroclus is still a skilled swordsman, reliable on the battlefield, protective of his comrades' welfare, and a resolute mediator. All these features would make him a conspicuous ally to patriarchal rule. However, because he recognizes himself in Briseis – that is, he partially identifies himself in reference to femininity – and does not seem troubled by that, Patroclus embraces parts of Achilles' masculine identity that the hero himself cannot afford to accept.

Whereas Achilles kills himself through his excessive actions, Patroclus puts himself in danger not because the hegemonic prescription of masculinity compels him to win glory, but as a way to perform proper manliness and to protect the Greek army. The only exception is when Patroclus wears Achilles' armor. Not only does Achilles' armor connect the three men who wear it¹²¹, but it also indicates a symbolic suicide: once one puts it on, one is bound to act as an exemplar of excessive manliness and, through it, one finds one's end.

In the end, Patroclus fails to disengage completely from the destructive side of hegemonic masculinity. However, his portrayal by Barker, and even by Homer, opens the path to different representations of men in a patriarchal society. Because hegemonic masculinity is not a concept set in stone, different times and societies imagine and construct their own definition of the term. Patroclus, as

118 Barker (2018) 284. Cf. Barker (2018) 52.

119 Barker (2018) 39.

120 Hobbs (2013) 390.

121 Van Nortwick (2008) 12.

Barker rewrites him, embodies a kind of masculinity that, to some extent, can simultaneously act properly toward men and women.

CONCLUSION: KING PRIAM, ACHILLES' BRIDGE TO THE WORLD OF MEN

We have shown that Achilles, Briseis, and Patroclus lose part of their identities either because of their engagement with the hegemonic prescription of masculinity or because of their interaction with hegemonic men. We also consider that the hegemonic role transforms men into something other than human. However, what we question in the last section of this article is whether there is a road back: to what extent can men who engage with hegemonic masculinity return to their old selves? In order to respond to this question, we analyze Achilles' interaction with Priam.

In *The Iliad*, the unofficial audience occurs in Book 24, where Priam urges Achilles to remember Peleus twice before the hero can respond.¹²² In Barker's *The Song of the Girls*, Priam also resorts to the figure of Peleus.¹²³ Although Priam is bidding Achilles to pity him as he would pity Peleus, Priam's request is a reminder to the hero: he must return to the world of men.

If there is anything Barker and Homer's depictions of Achilles hold in common is the notion that the hero's masculine identity is incomplete and inadequate somehow. Barker points out that "[Thetis] left when [Achilles] was not quite seven, the age at which a boy leaves the women's quarters and enters the world of men. Perhaps that's why he never quite managed to make the transition".¹²⁴ Van Nortwick contends that to reach maturity in ancient Greek and other Mediterranean cultures, heroes must be separated from their mothers and come to terms with the world of their fathers.¹²⁵ What Priam is urging Achilles to do when he resorts to Peleus' figure is to remind Achilles of his duties as a son, a warlord, and, more importantly, as a man in ancient Greek society.

122 Il.24.569, Il.24.589.

123 Barker (2018) 257.

124 Barker (2018) 307.

125 Van Nortwick (2008) 7.

The first step Achilles takes to return to the world of men is to offer Priam hospitality (*xenia*). Achilles offers the old king food and shelter, by “selecting the juiciest cuts of meat and transferring them deftly to his plate”.¹²⁶ *Xenia* (hospitality) in this passage does not simply symbolize Achilles' duty toward Priam or vice versa. It is, rather, the solid affirmation that the hero is aware that it is about time he let go of his wrath, for, only “when Achilles is touched by Priam's desperate supplication and the two virtually adopt one another as father and son¹²⁷, does Achilles put an end to his wrath”.¹²⁸ Once the hero's wrath can be put aside, he can take the second step in the direction of the world of men: returning Hector to Priam.

In *The Iliad* and in *The Silence of the Girls*, Achilles' treatment of Hector's body resembles another trait of his excessive masculinity. Whereas Achilles is hurting himself, his being staggeringly against giving Hector a proper funeral suggests the hero is not able to let go of his grief. A question remains unanswered: is Achilles grieving Hector, Patroclus or himself?

After all, Achilles “resembles the Trojans whom he defeats in that his own death is as bound up with that of [Hector] as is the fall of the city”.¹²⁹ Returning Hector's body to Priam symbolizes the hero's acceptance of his own mortality, which, to Van Nortwick, is the summit of mature masculinity in the Homeric epics.¹³⁰ Achilles and Priam's meeting is disturbing for both, since “[t]hey seemed to be standing at opposite ends of a time tunnel: Priam seeing the young warrior he'd once been; Achilles the old and revered king he would never be”.¹³¹ The aftermath of their exchange is Achilles' last step toward the world of men: the restoration of patriarchal power.

Achilles' reckoning with his own mortality – through King Priam, a representative of civilization – leads Achilles to having a change of heart. After that, he is more concerned with the preservation of Peleus' lineage and with the com-

126 Barker (2018) 264.

127 Il. 24.509–11. Cf. Barker (2018) 257.

128 Schein (1984) 99.

129 Schein (1984) 90. Schein also notes that, like the fallen Trojan warriors, Achilles is the only Greek who is sometimes described in terms of vegetation. Refer to Il. 4.547–564; Cf Il.1.274–278 and Il.18.64–67.

130 Van Nortwick (2008) 74.

131 Barker (2018) 265.

mitment to ancient laws. When Achilles returns Hector's body to Priam and honors the funeral rites, he starts to walk his way back to proper manliness and civilization.

In the last chapter of *The Silence of the Girls*, Achilles summons Alcimus, one of his warriors, and gives him these instructions, "Briseis is pregnant. If I die, I want you to marry her and ... I want you to take her to my father. I want the child to grow up in my father's house".¹³² These instructions demonstrate that Achilles considers Briseis not only his property but also a means to preserve Peleus' bloodline and patriarchal order.

In Homer and Barker, Achilles has a son, Pyrrhus, who has been brought up on Scyros.¹³³ Proper prescriptions of masculinity, however, demand that he take care of Peleus and Peleus' kingdom in his old age.¹³⁴ By securing Peleus' bloodline, Achilles takes the last step to return to civilization. He fulfills all his duties as a man in the patriarchal society depicted in *The Silence of the Girls*: he makes peace with Agamemnon, protects the other Greek warriors, achieves his glorious death on the battlefield, and ensures his lineage is preserved.

Whereas excessive manliness is a consequence of the greatest venue to express masculinity, war¹³⁵, proper manliness compels Achilles to return to a type of masculinity that does not threaten civilization but still subordinates women. In *The Silence of the Girls*, hegemonic masculinity, when taken to the extreme, would not only animalize men but also threaten the *status quo*. Instead of thrusting men on a path toward heroic deeds, excessive manliness would lead them to seek their end alongside the destruction of the patriarchal order. Men who disengage from the hegemonic prescription of masculinity, like Patroclus and Priam, serve as bridges to and reminders of valuable masculine attributes, courage and even consideration for the weak, which can be constructed outside the battlefield and which do not require the hero's self-destruction or the demotion of women's identity.

132 Barker 304.

133 Barker (2018) 50.

134 Il. 24.584–585. Roisman (2008) 41.

135 Connell (2005); Hedges (2003); Van Nortwick (2008).

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Le roi d'Hélène de Christos Choménidis : l'histoire d'Hélène racontée par Ménélas

Abstract In April of 2020, Christos Chomenidis (Athens, 1966) published his eleventh novel, a book of over 400 pages by the title *Her king*. The main character is Menelaus and the starting point is Helen's run away with Paris. Menelaus decides to tell his truth about this well-known story. In *Her king* all great heroes of the legend of Troy participate, but they are presented through a distorting mirror: e.g. Menelaus is the bravest son of Atreus and not Agamemnon; Leda's story is a lie; the Dioscuri are a couple of imbeciles. My paper is mostly a review on Chomenidis' book, where I highlight the deviations from the "official" story about the beginning of the Trojan war and find the possible ancient sources that the author chose to follow or not.

Keywords Menelaus, Helen of Troy, Christos Chomenidis, Trojan War

*Tout prêt pour le sacrifice inutile
(en tout cas Hélène reviendrait un jour).
Olympia Karagiorga, Iphigénie (1974)*

INTRODUCTION

Le roi d'Hélène (titre original : *Ο βασιλιάς της*, c'est-à-dire *Son roi*) est le onzième roman de l'écrivain grec Christos Choméniadis (né à Athènes en 1966). Il fut publié en avril 2020. Un an et demi après, un autre roman du même auteur, *Niki*, fut couronné par le Prix du livre européen. *Le roi d'Hélène* raconte l'histoire de la guerre de Troie, mais vue par le mari légitime d'Hélène, Ménélas. Il est divisé en quatre parties d'une centaine de pages chacune : « Le roi de soi-même », « Le roi d'Hélène », « Le roi du pays » et « Le roi de la misère ». Bien que toutes les généalogies soient fondées sur la mythologie grecque, Choméniadis traite l'histoire d'Hélène en pleine liberté en créant des caractères plus modernes qu'archaïques. Les trois quarts du roman décrivent des événements datant d'avant la guerre de Troie et portent surtout sur la construction de la personnalité de Ménélas, qui ne ressemble pas beaucoup au personnage ancien tel que nous le connaissons. C'est pourquoi dans le présent article, on s'occupera notamment de la dernière partie du livre, où on essayera de retracer les sources littéraires antiques que l'auteur contemporain a suivies et dont il a choisi de s'écarter.

LE ROI D'HÉLÈNE : RÉSUMÉ DU ROMAN

Le livre commence *in medias res*, comme *Illiade* ; pourtant ici tous les sentiments sont inversés. Dans l'épopée homérique, Achille est plein de colère ; dans le roman de Choméniadis Ménélas, le narrateur, installé sur le toit de son palais, regarde tranquillement et presque souriant Pâris et Hélène s'embarquer dans le petit bateau troyen et s'éloigner. Il ne sonne pas l'alarme ni n'envoie de barques pour les arrêter. Son cœur fait la fête. Alors il promet de parler honnêtement afin de restaurer la vérité et de nous révéler la raison pour laquelle il a laissé Pâris et Hélène s'enfuir vers Troie.

Le récit de Ménélas commence par la mort d'Atrée : Agamemnon, le fils aîné, avait huit ans et Ménélas quatre. Leur mère, Érope, se voit obligée de se marier

avec le frère jumeau d'Atrée, Thyeste. Le nouveau roi décide de se débarrasser des jeunes princes, mais comme il arrive dans presque tous les mythes grecs, le pédagogue qui se charge de la perte des deux enfants les sauve et les conduit à son île d'origine, Pityoussa, l'île des pins.¹ Là, les deux Atrides sont adoptés par un meunier et une tisserande. L'île est gouvernée par une liberté totale, tant politique qu'érotique. Ménélas vit les meilleurs moments de sa vie : il devient médecin, pêcheur, agriculteur, fermier. L'île de Pityoussa et le nouveau nom qu'il acquiert, Staphylinos (« carotte », parce qu'il est roux), les suivront pendant toute sa vie. Néanmoins Agamemnon souffre, c'est pourquoi il s'échappe en sa compagnie.

Les deux frères suivent des chemins différents. Agamemnon désire revendiquer le trône de Mycènes, alors que Ménélas se trouve à Sparte, parmi les prétendants de la belle Hélène. La mère de la princesse, Léda, le reconnaît aussitôt et avoue sa grande surprise, puisque tout le monde savait que les deux fils d'Atrée étaient morts. À Sparte, Ménélas fait connaissance avec tous les héros de la mythologie homérique : Ajax, Thésée, Diomède, Ascalaphe, Tlepôleme, Idoménée, Ménéstée, Las, Léontée, Agapénor, Eumélos, Mérion, Patrocle et, bien sûr, Ulysse. À la surprise générale, Hélène choisit Ménélas comme mari et disparaît avec lui.

Les deux fugitifs parcourent tout le Péloponnèse avec destination finale l'île de Pityoussa. À Argos, dans le palais de Diomède, ils rencontrent Thyeste et plus tard Agamemnon, qui mène une vie de terroriste. Hélène et Ménélas arrivent à Pityoussa où ils trouvent un pays incendié et tous ses habitants tués. Le responsable du massacre est Thyeste, qui s'était vengé après s'être rendu compte (trop tard) que les deux Atrides étaient vivants. Ménélas décide d'aller à Méthana, où, selon les paroles d'Agamemnon, se trouve leur jeune frère utérin, Cércape,² deuxième enfant de Thyeste et d'Érope après Égisthe, qui fut expulsé de Mycènes car il était aveugle. Là-bas, il fut adopté par Elpis (qui signifie « espoir »), une prêtresse d'Héphaïstos : Cércape était doué du don de la man-tique, raison pour laquelle Elpis avait fondé un oracle d'Apollon afin d'y installer l'aveugle devin. Hélène et Ménélas décident de s'installer aussi là-bas et de diriger une taverne pour tous les visiteurs de l'oracle. Quelques années après, ils ont eu une fille, Hermione.

1 Elle s'identifie à l'île de Spetses.

2 Il n'a rien à voir avec le roi légendaire de Rhodes, fils du Soleil.

Bien que plusieurs héros et anciens prétendants d'Hélène passent par la taverne de Méthana, personne ne reconnaît la belle princesse de Sparte, qui s'est rasée les cheveux et aide non seulement son mari, mais aussi son beau-frère le devin, en collectant des informations sur les raisons qui ont amené les pèlerins à consulter l'oracle. Seul Ulysse a reconnu les deux époux et les nouvelles qu'il apporte ne sont pas bonnes : Castor est mort et les deux rois de Sparte, Tyndare et Léda, âgés, ne peuvent pas compter sur l'aide de leur autre fils, Pollux. C'est pourquoi Ulysse leur demande de rentrer pour régner sur Lacédémone.

Le retour d'Hélène à Sparte la métamorphose complètement. Elle devient la reine des pauvres et désire désespérément un fils. Ménélas, quant à lui, aide son frère Agamemnon, qui a épousé la sœur d'Hélène, Clytemnestre, à reprendre le trône de Mycènes. Ensuite, il affronte les propriétaires terriens et anciens habitants de Sparte qu'il accuse de la mort de Tyndare. Hélène est déprimée après une fausse couche et c'est à ce moment que Pâris apparaît et l'enlève. Ménélas admet qu'il l'a laissée car il l'aime trop pour l'empêcher de recommencer sa vie.

Agamemnon apprend l'événement, accuse Ménélas de mollesse et parcourt la Grèce entière afin d'organiser une attaque panhellénique contre Troie pour laver l'affront. Un millier de navires sont rassemblés à Aulis où Agamemnon accepte de sacrifier sa fille Iphigénie pour permettre le départ de la flotte achéenne. Une fois arrivés à Troie, Hector, le fils de Priam et futur roi de la ville, les reçoit et leur propose un combat entre Ménélas et Pâris avec Hélène comme trophée. Ménélas vainc, mais épargne Pâris. Ainsi commence la guerre de Troie qui durera six ans et demi. À la cinquième année, un groupe d'alliés des Troyens tue Patrocle. Cela provoque la rage d'Achille qui tue, à son tour, Hector. La mort d'Hector déclenche toute une série de meurtres : Achille, Pâris, Ajax, Déiphobe et d'autres grands héros de la mythologie homérique meurent dans un seul jour. Ulysse prend l'initiative de faire la paix avec le plus jeune fils de Priam, Troïlos. Les Achéens construisent une sorte de village aux pieds de Troie et vivent tranquillement jusqu'au jour où, un an et demi après, Ulysse conduit une attaque qui se termine par la chute de Troie et Ménélas redevient ainsi le roi d'Hélène.

MÉNÉLAS

Le caractère principal du roman se présente à nous comme le plus renommé cocu de l'Antiquité ! Cependant, Choméridis esquisse un Ménélas capable de faire tout ce qu'il veut : il devient médecin, pêcheur, propriétaire de taverne, de-

vin, roi de Sparte et chef d'armée. Bien que guerrier fort et courageux, il n'aime pas les combats ; c'est la raison pour laquelle Agamemnon fut nommé chef des Grecs pendant la guerre de Troie. Après la mort d'Hector et d'Achille, et avant la chute de Troie, Ménélas se fait le médecin officiel de l'armée des Achéens.

Dans la littérature grecque³, Ménélas apparaît pour la première fois dans le deuxième chant de l'*Illiade*, brûlant de venger l'enlèvement de son épouse Hélène (2, 586–590). Homère l'accompagne toujours par l'épithète « belliqueux » et, selon le récit d'Anténor, un noble troyen et beau-frère de Priam, il parle peu, mais clairement, avec concision, sans s'écarter de son sujet (3, 206–215). Le dix-septième chant de l'*Illiade* est consacré en entier à ses exploits. Néanmoins, l'épisode le plus célèbre dans l'épopée homérique est le combat entre lui et Pâris que propose Hector pour terminer la guerre qui dure déjà dix ans (3, 340–381). Les deux adversaires s'affrontent, mais il n'y a pas de vainqueur : lorsque Ménélas lance son javelot contre Pâris, Aphrodite enlève le jeune troyen et le fait atterrir dans le lit d'Hélène, tandis que le chef grec le cherche parmi les combattants dans le champ de bataille. Chomémidis recompose la scène en la plaçant au premier jour de la guerre, juste après le débarquement des Grecs sur le sol de Troie. Hector leur fait la même proposition et les deux armées s'accordent. Bien que Pâris, totalement ivre, soit vaincu, Ménélas décide de ne pas le tuer, dans l'idée que, si Pâris meurt, Hélène l'aimera pour toujours.

Ménélas est aussi représenté dans le quatrième chant de l'*Odyssee*, où Télémaque visite Sparte pour s'informer du sort de son père. Dans la tragédie classique, Ménélas est un caractère principal ou secondaire dans cinq pièces d'Euripide : *Andromaque*, *Les Troyennes*, *Oreste*, *Hélène* et *Iphigénie à Aulis*. Les quatre premières racontent des événements postérieurs à la fin de la guerre de Troie, c'est pourquoi Chomémidis intègre seulement *Iphigénie à Aulis* dans son roman. Ménélas figure aussi, très brièvement, dans l'*Ajax* de Sophocle.

Le personnage de Ménélas de Chomémidis ne ressemble pas au chef de la littérature grecque qui reste toujours en deuxième place, sous l'ombre de son frère Agamemnon. Chomémidis ne crée pas un caractère belliqueux, mais un homme libre et aimant la tranquillité, intelligent et philanthrope, qui se trouve comme protagoniste dans les épisodes historiques les plus importants par hasard. La plupart des fois, il s'identifie au nom que l'on lui a donné pendant son séjour à Pityoussa, Staphylinos – qu'Agamemnon emploie à dessein de l'humilier exclusivement. Quand la vie lui offre la plus belle femme du monde, il la protège en

³ Voir Dirat (1976) 6–8.

préservant sa liberté. Si elle, elle a envie de s'échapper de sa vie de princesse, lui, il la suit. Si elle, elle désire rentrer et jouer le rôle de la reine de Sparte, lui, il devient le roi à son côté. Et si elle, elle se lance dans les bras d'un jeune homme et s'enfuit avec lui, Ménélas ne l'arrête pas. L'amour perpétuel pour Hélène est le seul point commun entre le Ménélas classique et celui-ci.⁴

HÉLÈNE

Hélène est déjà décédée dans le roman de Choméridis quand Ménélas commence à nous raconter son histoire. Elle se considère comme la fille de Zeus et elle est convaincue d'être née dans un œuf avec son frère Pollux. Elle aime sa famille, mais se sent emprisonnée dans le palais. Quand l'opportunité de partir lui apparaît, elle la saisit sans trop réfléchir. Elle déteste le rôle de la plus belle femme du monde et n'hésite pas à s'enlaidir afin de pouvoir vivre cachée parmi les gens. Elle sait mener une vie simple comme propriétaire de taverne, mais elle n'oublie pas son origine quand le destin lui impose d'hériter le trône de Sparte. L'Hélène de Choméridis est compliquée comme tous les caractères féminins des romans contemporains puisque tout au long du livre elle met en question les institutions traditionnelles : la famille, le mariage, la maternité, la profession, l'origine, la nationalité. Elle est aussi libre que Ménélas et si à la fin elle accepte de rentrer à Sparte, c'est parce qu'elle se sent vaincue, non pas par la Grèce ou les ruses d'Ulysse ou par soi-même, mais par le temps. Elle a déjà vécu sa vie et a créé sa propre histoire.

Hélène est présente dans les deux épopées d'Homère,⁵ les poèmes de Sappho,⁶ les tragédies *Hélène*, *Oreste* et *Les Troyennes* d'Euripide,⁷ les épopées post classiques de Triphiodore et de Collouthos,⁸ et aussi dans les fameux éloges rhéto-

4 Pourtant Choméridis ne relate pas le fameux épisode selon lequel Ménélas, l'épée à la main et prêt à tuer Hélène, voit son sein nu et se repent (Eur., *Andr.* 629–630 et Aristoph., *Lys.* 155–156).

5 Voir Worman (1997) 156–167, Morin (2003) 52–57 et 61–62 et Blankenborg (2022).

6 Voir Worman (1997) 167–170.

7 Voir Worman (1997) 180–197.

8 Voir Karavas (2018).

riques qu'Isocrate et Gorgias ont composés en son honneur.⁹ Pourtant, on ne trouve pas dans le livre de Choméridis le point le plus intéressant de son histoire : celui que raconte Stésichore dans sa *Palinodie* et que reprend Euripide dans son *Hélène* que la reine de Sparte fut transportée en Égypte avant son enlèvement et que Pâris n'a ramené à Troie avec lui qu'un fantôme.¹⁰

AGAMEMNON

Mis à part *Illiade*, où Agamemnon est le chef de l'armée grecque et l'auteur principal de la rage d'Achille – le mot-clé de l'épopée –, le fils aîné d'Atrée est protagoniste aussi dans *l'Agamemnon* d'Eschyle, *l'Hécube* et *l'Iphigénie à Aulis* d'Euripide, et il apparaît à la fin de *l'Ajax* de Sophocle. Comme on l'a noté plus haut, Choméridis intègre seulement l'action de *l'Iphigénie à Aulis* dans son roman. Au moment où la flotte grecque se trouve immobilisée à Aulis, Agamemnon et Palamède se disputent le commandement de l'armée. Le devin Calchas, en rôle d'arbitre, leur demande ce qu'ils sacrifieraient pour conquérir Troie. Agamemnon propose de sacrifier sa propre fille, Iphigénie. Calchas lui dit qu'il faudra l'exécuter tout seul. Et lui, il obéit.

L'Agamemnon de Choméridis est un impérialiste atroce, un polémarque cruel, jamais content de ce que la vie lui offre. Une fois orphelin et exilé, il désire rentrer afin de récupérer le trône de Mycènes. Une fois roi de Mycènes, il désire rassembler une armée de la Grèce entière, traverser la Mer Égée et aller conquérir le monde. Il déclare que même sans Ménélas à son côté, il mènerait cette croisade contre Troie pour récupérer Hélène, morte ou vivante. Choméridis le représente laid et boiteux, avec une cicatrice dans la moitié gauche de son visage, rigide et impitoyable.

9 Voir Worman (1997) 171–180 et Morin (2003) 73 : « Dans le débat qui a été ouvert par l'atmosphère philosophique et sophistique de la fin du Ve siècle sur les problèmes de responsabilité, Hélène est devenue un matériau de réflexion, un exemple qui s'impose, un *sujet à l'ordre du jour*. Gorgias, dans son *Éloge d'Hélène*, au début des années 20, l'avait déjà imposé ; Isocrate, quelques 20 à 25 ans plus tard, y reviendra. »

10 Sur l'influence du mythe d'Hélène sur la poésie grecque moderne, voir Yatromanolakis (2004).

ULYSSE

Le héros le plus célèbre de la littérature grecque est sans aucun doute Ulysse. Dans le roman de Choméridis, il fait partie des prétendants d'Hélène, bien qu'il avoue être amoureux de Pénélope. Son talent est de raconter la réalité comme s'il s'agit de la fiction : il transforme les incidents quotidiens en poésie. Ulysse persuade Hélène de rentrer à Sparte pour devenir reine, fait la paix avec Troïlos et précipite la chute de Troie.

L'Ulysse de Choméridis ressemble aussi au héros homérique « aux nombreux tours » (*polutropos*) qu'au caractère malin et diabolique de l'*Hécube* et du *Cyclope* d'Euripide ou du *Philoctète* et l'*Ajax* de Sophocle.¹¹ Choméridis entreprend une tâche similaire à celle de l'orateur des deux premiers siècles de notre ère, Dion de Pruse, qui, dans son *Discours troyen* (*Or. XIX, Ilion n'a pas été prise*),¹² essaie de rejeter les mensonges d'Ulysse et de réécrire la fin de l'*Iliade* en présentant les Troyens comme vainqueurs de la guerre.

LES AUTRES PERSONNAGES

Dans les pages du *Roi d'Hélène* parodent beaucoup de héros antiques : Atrée, Thyeste, Érope, Égisthe comme fils des deux derniers, Tyndare et Léda, leurs enfants Castor, Pollux et Clytemnestre, Hermione et Iphigénie. Parmi les prétendants d'Hélène, on rencontre Nirée le roi de Symé, Thésée, Ajax le fils de Télamon, Diomède, Ascalaphe, Tlepolème, Idoménée, Ménésthée, Las, Léontée, Agapénor, Eumélos, Mérione et Patrocle. Durant la guerre de Troie apparaissent aussi les Achéens Nestor, le roi de Pylos, Achille, Thersite, Calchas, Palamède, l'autre Ajax, Protésilas, Antiphos et Phénix, et les Troyens Priam, Hector, Pâris-Alexandre, Déiphobe, Troïlos, Socos et Charops, le petit Astyanax, Andromaque et Cassandre.

Choméridis invente aussi quelques personnages qui possèdent un prénom ancien, comme Cercaphe l'autre fils de Thyeste et d'Érope, Elpis sa mère d'adoption, Mélanippe un employé dans la taverne de Méthana, Philippe le fiancé d'Hermione, le médecin Lysandre, et d'autres qui ne se rapportent à aucun

¹¹ Ulysse apparaît aussi dans le *Rhésus*.

¹² Voir Minon et al. (2012).

héro de l'antiquité : Mimas le chef des propriétaires terriens de Sparte et ses fils Thermon et Léocharès, le pédagogue Bakès, la nourrice Grynô, Spinther le fils adopté par Ménélas et sa mère Augé, Pancratès, Euclétos, Crocos, Simoësios, Cléoboulos et Pédasos.

Les dieux y sont aussi mentionnés. Mis à part Zeus qui est considéré comme le père d'Hélène et le grand-père d'Hermione (une fois abandonnée par sa mère, elle commence à s'appeler comme ça), on trouve Héphaïstos et Apollon qui ont des temples à Méthana. Pendant la guerre de Troie, on apprend qu'Athéna, Héphaïstos et Hermès protégeaient les Grecs, tandis qu'Artémis, Arès et Aphrodite soutenaient les Troyens.

Enfin, on détecte des mentions dispersées de noms des personnages connus comme Pélops, Pélée, Oreste, Icarius, Lélex, Nauplios et Philyra, Charon, Atropos, Asclépios et Médée.

LES SOURCES ANTIQUES (I) : HOMÈRE

Bien entendu, Homère est la source principale pour le roman de Chomémidis, non seulement quant à l'histoire et aux personnages, mais aussi concernant des scènes concrètes.¹³ Chomémidis puise surtout aux chants 3 et 22, le premier décrivant le combat entre Ménélas et Pâris et le deuxième racontant la mort d'Hector. Jusqu'à la dernière partie du roman, le caractère principal nous a été présenté comme un homme intelligent, viril, mais à la fois sentimental et compliqué. Il sait jouer les rôles que la vie lui offre, c'est pourquoi c'est lui qui se charge du rôle de chef d'armée lacédémonienne pendant la guerre de Troie et non pas Pollux. Comme on l'a déjà vu, Chomémidis transpose le temps du combat entre Ménélas et Pâris au premier jour de l'arrivée des Grecs à Troie. L'issue du combat reste telle que chez Homère mais au lieu d'Aphrodite qui sauve Pâris, Chomémidis explique le comportement de Ménélas comme résultat de sa philanthropie en supprimant toute intervention divine.

De même, Chomémidis transpose l'action du chant 22 de *Illiade* au dernier jour de la guerre, c'est-à-dire après les cinq (et non pas dix) ans du séjour des Achéens sur le sol troyen. Hector sort des murailles de la cité pour offrir aux

13 Chomémidis emploie aussi deux comparaisons homériques, toujours dans la dernière partie du roman où il raconte la guerre de Troie (pp. 335 et 384).

Grecs la tête de Patrocle ainsi que les coupables de son assassinat. Chez Homère, Patrocle est tué par Hector après être sorti au combat revêtu de l'armure d'Achille. Ensuite, Achille dans une nouvelle armure forgée par Héphaïstos tue Hector et maltraite son cadavre jusqu'au moment où, à la fin de l'épopée, Priam apparaît afin de lui demander le corps de son fils pour le transporter à Troie, corps autour duquel Hécube, Andromaque et Hélène commencent leur thrène. Choméridis résume la fin de la guerre en quelques lignes ensanglantées d'une succession des morts où les meilleurs héros tuent et sont tués : Achille tue Hector, Pâris tue Achille (mais non pas par une blessure au talon), Pollux tue Pâris, Socos tue Pollux, Tlépolème tue Socos, Charops tue Tlépolème, Cléoboulos tue Charops, Simoësios tue Cléoboulos, Ajax fils d'Oïlée tue Simoësios, Déiphobe tue Ajax, Thersite tue Déiphobe, Pédasos tue Thersite et Antiphos tue Pédasos.

L'*Iliade* ne décrit aucune mort après celle d'Hector. Alors Choméridis puise dans d'autres sources non homériques et altère les faits dans son roman à satiété. Pour donner quelques exemples : Hélène apparaît une nuit dans la tente de Ménélas et passe la nuit avec lui ; le cheval de Troie n'est que le campement où les Grecs passent un an et demi après la paix faite entre Ulysse et Troïlos ; ce campement fut brûlé par Ulysse la nuit de la chute de Troie ; les chefs grecs rentrent régulièrement chez eux en congé après la deuxième année de la guerre, comme le font tous les soldats dans le monde entier ; Ménélas même assiste aux fiançailles de sa fille Hermione, qui s'engage avec le fils de Mimas et non pas avec le fils d'Achille, comme en témoigne Homère (*Od.* 4, 4-9) ; Pollux participe à la guerre de Troie, malgré la plainte d'Hélène chez Homère (*Il.* 3, 237-243), et il meurt aussi là-bas.

LES SOURCES ANTIQUES (II) : LES TRAGÉDIES CLASSIQUES

Comme on l'a déjà dit, les personnages principaux du roman apparaissent dans les tragédies classiques. Néanmoins, plusieurs d'entre elles traitent des événements postérieurs à ceux que raconte Homère dans l'*Iliade* et, par conséquent, Choméridis. *Hécube* et *Les Troyennes* relatent les moments qui suivent directement la chute de Troie : dans la première, le fantôme d'Achille exige le sacrifice de Polyxène avant le départ des Grecs, et dans la deuxième, Ulysse jette le petit Astyanax par les murailles de Troie, avant que les femmes soient réparties entre leurs nouveaux maîtres. Pourtant, chez Choméridis, Hécube n'est ni mentionnée ni même nommée et Astyanax est jeté des murailles par sa propre mère

Andromaque pour ne pas être saisi par les Grecs.¹⁴ De plus, dans *Les Troyennes*, Ménélas dialogue brièvement avec Hélène avant de partir avec elle.

On a déjà noté que dans l'*Hélène* d'Euripide, on trouve la version selon laquelle Hélène n'a jamais été enlevée à Troie, puisque Pâris, trompé, amena avec lui à Troie un fantôme. Choméridis ne fait qu'une toute petite allusion à cette histoire quand Hélène, dans la tente de Ménélas, la nuit où elle l'a secrètement visité, lui raconte que parfois elle pense qu'une statue pourrait être à sa place à Troie.¹⁵ De même, Choméridis s'inspire de ladite tragédie euripidéenne en ce qui concerne la défiguration d'Hélène, juste après sa fuite de Sparte avec Ménélas : dans *Hélène* 261–263, l'héroïne souhaite être laide, et dans le roman, elle s'enlaidit pour ne pas être reconnue par les gens. Pendant leur séjour à Méthana qui a duré cinq ans et demi, Hélène avait les cheveux complètement rasés. Enfin, je crois que notre auteur emprunte à l'*Hélène* le caractère d'amoureux que Ménélas conserve dans le roman entier.

La tragédie *Agamemnon* d'Eschyle relate l'assassinat d'Agamemnon et de Cassandre par Clytemnestre et Égisthe au jour même de leur rentrée à Mycènes. Dans le roman, ce meurtre n'est décrit que dans un seul paragraphe : Égisthe, revenant secrètement à Mycènes, égorge Agamemnon pour se venger de Ménélas qui l'avait exilé avec leur mère Érope. Choméridis fait d'Égisthe un frère utérin des deux Atrides, reclus et timide, plus aimé par Érope que ses deux premiers enfants ; néanmoins, selon la mythologie, Égisthe était le fruit d'un inceste, fils de Thyeste et de sa propre fille Pélopie. Dans son monologue à la fin de l'*Agamemnon* (1583–1609), Égisthe raconte l'histoire horrible d'Atrée qui avait tué et cuit les enfants de Thyeste avant de les lui donner à manger.¹⁶ C'est ce crime qui déclenche tous les meurtres de la génération maudite des Atrides et qui terminera par le matricide d'Oreste, sa purification et l'acquittement par l'Aéropage à la fin de l'*Orestie* d'Eschyle. Dans le roman de Choméridis, Clytemnestre n'est guère présente : pourtant, c'est elle qui conseille à Ménélas de se comporter avec Hélène comme un étranger.

Les tragédies de Sophocle *Ajax* et *Philoctète* ne sont pas une source d'inspiration pour Choméridis : Philoctète est totalement absent du roman et Ajax n'est pas conduit à la folie par Ulysse. Pourtant, le caractère cruel et dégoûtant que

14 Les femmes de Souli eurent une réaction similaire pendant la Révolution grecque de 1821, et évidemment, Choméridis évoque ce fait célèbre de l'histoire moderne de la Grèce.

15 Voir Morin (2003) 63.

16 Choméridis ne fait qu'une seule allusion à ce fait, au début de son roman (p. 22).

possède Ulysse dans le roman est dû plutôt aux tragédies classiques qu'aux épopées homériques.

D'AUTRES SOURCES ANTIQUES

La plupart des noms des prétendants d'Hélène que mentionne Chomémidis dans son roman sont attestés chez Apollodore (3, 10, 8) : « Les souverains de la Grèce se rendirent tous à Sparte, pour disputer sa main. Les prétendants étaient : Ulysse, fils de Laërte ; Diomède, fils de Tydée ; Antilochus, fils de Nestor ; Agapénor, fils d'Ancée ; Sthénéelus, fils de Capanée ; Amphimachus, fils de Ctéatus ; Thalpius, fils d'Eurytus ; Mégès, fils de Phylée ; Amphilochus, fils d'Amphiaräus ; Menesthée, fils de Pétée ; Schédius, fils d'Epistrophus ; Polyxénus, fils d'Agasthènes ; Pénélee, fils de Léïtus ; Ajax, fils d'Oilée ; Ascalaphus et Ialménus, fils de Mars ; Eléphénor, fils de Chalcodon ; Eumélus, fils d'Admète ; Polypcètès, fils de Pirithous ; Léontée, fils de Coronus ; Podalire et Machaon, fils d'Esculape ; Philoctète, fils de Pœas ; Eurypyle, fils d'Evaimon ; Protésilas, fils d'Iphiclus ; Ménélas, fils d'Atrée ; Ajax et Teucer, fils de Télamon ; Patrocle, fils de Ménoëtius. »

Apollodore (3, 10, 9) doit être aussi la source de Chomémidis pour le serment des prétendants : Tyndare force les prétendants à formuler un serment afin de respecter le choix d'Hélène et de la protéger aussi à l'avenir.¹⁷ Pour renforcer la valeur du jure, Tyndare sacrifie une jument.¹⁸ De surcroît, Apollodore (3, 10, 7) cite le premier enlèvement d'Hélène par Thésée, qui est mentionné comiquement chez Chomémidis comme un flirt de jeunesse.¹⁹ Enfin Apollodore (3, 11, 1) nomme un deuxième enfant de Ménélas, Nicostrate, qu'il a eu avec Hélène après leur rentrée à Sparte,²⁰ ou Mégapenthès, qu'il a eu avec une esclave. Chomémidis évoque ce dernier à travers le visage de Spinther, fils de l'esclave de Mimas Augé : Ménélas l'adopte après avoir aidé à sa naissance.

Chomémidis garde un silence total sur l'épouse de Pâris, la nymphe de l'Ida Œnone. Peut-être est-ce parce que dans son roman les dieux n'apparaissent pas

¹⁷ Cf. Isokr., *or.* 10, 40.

¹⁸ Cf. Aristoph., *Lys.* 192.

¹⁹ Cf. Isokr., *or.* 10, 18–20.

²⁰ Cf. Hom., *Od.* 4, 11–12.

en personne. Pourtant, le tour dans les îles de la mer Égée après l'enlèvement d'Hélène est bien attesté : selon Homère (*Il.* 3, 445), l'union des deux amants a eu lieu sur la petite île de Cranaé.²¹ Enfin, Choméridis préfère présenter Nirée, le plus beau des Grecs après Achille, selon Homère (*Il.* 2, 673–674), comme un roi laid et imbécile, de la même manière qu'il esquisse une Lédà rêveuse, un Pollux impotent ou un Thésée vieux et menteur.

Le rôle du devin qui prévient les Troyens des maux et que la mythologie attribue à Cassandre ou à Hélénos, est réservé à Priam dans le roman de Choméridis. C'est lui qui avise son peuple du mal qu'introduit Pâris pour la ville, et les habitants de Troie lui répondent avec une citation de l'*Évangile selon Matthieu* (27, 25) : « Son sang, qu'il soit sur nous et sur nos enfants ! ».

CONCLUSIONS

Il vaut noter que Choméridis n'exploite pas les épopées de l'antiquité tardive telles que les *Posthomerica* de Quintus de Smyrne, *La prise d'Ilion* de Triphiodore ou *L'enlèvement d'Hélène* de Collouthos qui continuent d'une manière ou d'une autre les épopées homériques et illuminent les épisodes de la légende troyenne qu'ils trouvaient les plus intéressants. Notre auteur aurait pu profiter de la bataille nocturne que décrit Triphiodore (506–691) ou de l'épisode de l'abandon de la petite Hermione chez Collouthos (326–386), pour ne pas parler de la suite de 9.000 vers de l'*Illiade* que compose Quintus de Smyrne. Il paraît, en fait, que l'intérêt de Choméridis n'est pas de combler les lacunes qu'a laissées Homère dans ses poèmes, ni de récrire l'*Illiade* puisque la trame de l'épopée homérique ne représente qu'un quart de son roman. Son but est clair et sincère : en plaçant au niveau d'un protagoniste un personnage périphérique de la légende troyenne, Ménélas, qui apparaît aussi dans l'*Illiade* et l'*Odyssée* que dans les tragédies d'Euripide, il met en évidence une tendance dominante dans la réception contemporaine de la littérature ancienne dans les romans postmodernes, comme l'ont fait aussi Madeline Miller, Margaret Atwood ou David Malouf.²²

²¹ Voir Karavas (2014) 7.

²² Voir Akgün (2018). J'aimerais remercier chaleureusement le cher collègue et précieux ami Jean-Luc Vix pour son aide et ses remarques utiles.

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Madeline Miller and the Midcult

The Song of Achilles and *Circe* as Exemplary Cases of 21st Century Mythological Retellings

Abstract Madeline Miller's novels *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018) comprise fictional autobiographies of the figures of Patroclus and Circe, respectively, known from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Revolving around Homeric side characters and the themes of homosexuality as well as female agency in the traditionally heteronormative and patriarchal ancient world, they pose perfect examples of 21st century mythological retellings with their typical focus on characters and topics considered underrepresented. With recourse to the concept of 'midcult', i.e. literature that suggests high-cultural and social relevance while not living up to this claim, Miller's novels will serve as exemplary cases demonstrating the chances and limitations of modern mythological retellings. Miller's broad media presence will additionally allow for insights on her poetic self-conception and the role of public epitext in the process. Due to misrepresentations of the ancient tradition, untenable accusations against classical scholarship, and a rather narrow conception of homosexuality, *The Song of Achilles* will be revealed as midcult, whereas the variety of female topics and strong female characters, the skilful reworking of Odysseus and Circe's encounter, and the intertextual play with Odyssean narrative techniques render *Circe* a successful balancing act of a modern approach to the ancient tradition.

Keywords Madeline Miller, mythological retellings, midcult, reception of Homer

THE 21ST CENTURY: A NEW WAVE OF MYTHOLOGICAL RETELLINGS

Despite the relatively continuous line of productive reception that can be drawn from Homer as the archetype of ancient and western literature in general up to the present day, it may still be striking that classical mythology appears to have only recently experienced a certain renaissance in popular fiction: the 21st century has been spawning a wide variety of mythological retellings that generally enjoy a huge popularity, and several announcements up until January 2025 show no sign of an end to this trend.¹

Between 2005 and 2013, for instance, Scottish publisher Canongate Books subsequently released a total of eight instalments as parts of their Canongate Myth Series, an arrangement of internationally renowned authors' takes on ancient mythology.² Apart from a single nonfiction book, the compilation consists of retellings only, i.e. reworkings of ancient myths for contemporary readers. While a single instance of them, respectively, covers Norse as well as Irish myths, and two of the works retell biblical tales, it is a total of three of these novels – Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* (2005), Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) – that are thematically located within the field of Greek or Roman mythology. Although the books of this series were by far not to remain the only instances of this type of literature, the compilation still exemplifies some of its most characteristic traits: first of all, the increased interest in ancient narrative traditions does not seem to be limited to those of ancient Greece or Rome; it is, however, this latter cultural sphere from which the majority of modern retellings originates. Secondly, Winterson, Atwood and Smith are all female writers commonly known for their explorations of gender roles, queerness, or feminism. Generally, recent mythological retellings are predominantly authored by women and revolve around individuals, groups of people, or themes perceived as traditionally underrepresented or marginalised.³ Altogether,

¹ See Bea Fitzgerald's *The End Crowns All*, Claire North's *The Last Song of Penelope*, Susan C. Wilson's *Helen's Judgement*, or Pat Barker's *The Voyage Home*.

² Cf. Canongate.

³ In Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005), the years of Odysseus' absence and his eventual return to Ithaca are recapitulated through the eyes of his wife Penelope. Pat Barker's Trojan War trilogy starting with *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) follows Briseis and other female pro-

it seems that the 21st century trend of mythological retellings operates under the flag of a corrective claim.

Madeline Miller: An Exemplary Case

Two of the most prominent examples of such retellings are Madeline Miller's novels *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018) which both revolve around figures known from either Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, respectively: *The Song of Achilles* tells the story of prince Patroclus, who, exiled from his home country as a child, is taken in among other foster boys by king Peleus of Phthia. This is how he meets Achilles, the king's son and future hero, with whom he forms a strong bond of friendship that would eventually develop into a homosexual love and make them an inseparable couple. After spending time with the centaur Chiron as their common tutor, and on the island of Scyros as a hiding place from the Trojan War, Achilles decides to join the Greek army before Troy, where Patroclus follows him. The novel thus provides an account of the hero's life and the typically epic subject of the Trojan War through the perspective of his lover. *Circe*, then, centres around the eponymous goddess, who grows up in the halls of her father Helios, but never quite belongs to the other gods due to the rather human characteristics she possesses. As punishment for an act of witchcraft, she too is exiled to an otherwise deserted island of the name Aiaia, where she continues to develop her magic skills. The human and divine encounters she experiences throughout her life on Aiaia as well as during a visit to her sister's palace on Crete gradually shape her personality and make her the enchantress known for meeting Odysseus and transforming his companions to pigs in the *Odyssey*.

Either novel has proven remarkably successful in that it sold more than two million copies and appeared on the *The New York Times* Best Sellers List, where *Circe* took no less than first place directly after release. Both works have been translated into 35 and 33 languages,⁴ respectively, and have by and large

tagonists through the turmoil of the war, as does Natalie Haynes' episodic novel *A Thousand Ships* (2019). Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta* (2021) centres around the lives of Helen and her half-sister Clytemnestra, to name only some of the most typical examples specifically recasting Trojan War mythology.

4 Cf. Goodreads, "The Song of Achilles > Editions"; "Circe > Editions".

been overwhelmingly favourably reviewed. Especially *The Song of Achilles* has been awarded several nominations and earned Miller the notable Women's Prize for Fiction in 2012. On *Goodreads*, the social cataloguing platform for books, they achieved ratings of 4.33 (*The Song of Achilles*) and 4.24 (*Circe*) out of 5 stars, respectively, with more than a million individual assessments each.⁵ Her announcement of a third novel⁶ suggests that more can be expected from Miller in the future, and a planned adaptation of *Circe* in the form of an HBO TV series indicates that the novel's potential has been recognised by cinematic content creators as well.⁷

Miller traces her fascination for Greco-Roman and particularly Homeric mythology back to her early childhood, from which she likes to tell the anecdote of her mother reading the *Iliad* to her as a bedtime story.⁸ This enthusiasm seems to have persisted: she recalls learning Latin in high school as well as ancient Greek with the motivation to read Homer in the original and later continues her education at Brown University, from where she graduates with a BA and MA in classics. After years as a high school teacher, the financial success of her novels ultimately allows her to become a full-time writer.⁹

As the initial inspiration behind her creative engagement with the Homeric source texts, Miller mentions a number of irritating factors both direct and indirect:¹⁰ during research for her originally planned master's thesis on "interpre-

5 Cf. Goodreads, "The Song of Achilles"; "Circe".

6 Cf. E14. The following discussion will be supported by instances of epitext, i.e. authorised texts in the broadest possible sense (interviews, essays, posts on social media etc.) which allow Miller to wield an influence on the public reception of her novels. Like in this case, the respective texts were cited using abbreviations.

7 Cf. Andreeva (2019).

8 Cf. E4 00:38.

9 Cf. Miller, "The Author"; Harris (2022).

10 As much as Miller remembers being "frustrated" (E2 13:00) and "angry" (E12 56:06) in the wake of her academic exploration of how the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus had been interpreted in post-Homeric depictions or scholarly literature, her first encounter with Circe, as she appears in the *Odyssey*, is described by her as "disappointing" (E1), "shocking" (E6 08:47), and – again – "frustrating" (E5 07:38); she recalls being "infuriated" (E1) as well as "mad" (E19 12:01) and "outraged" (E21 12:28), and in fact, she declares having been "fueled by rage" (E21 49:02) as the impelling force behind both of her novels.

tations of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers through the centuries”¹¹, it occurred to her that “a number of articles [...] kept sidestepping the love between him [Patroclus] and Achilles, which to me felt so obviously at the story’s heart”¹². The theme of homosexual love, which to her represented the centrepiece of the *Iliad*, was perceived by Miller as “forcibly closeted”¹³, for which she saw “no good reason [...] except homophobia”¹⁴. She regularly refers to Aischylus and Plato as authorities testifying that an understanding of Patroclus and Achilles as lovers was common in antiquity,¹⁵ and as a result, she claims to have been “propelled by a desire to set the record straight”¹⁶ and “make the case for that [...] as a very powerful interpretation”¹⁷. “[T]he purpose of the story”, in her own words, “was to take this larger than [...] life epic and tell it from a really intimate [...] perspective with a love story at the centre”¹⁸.

The situation is similar with *Circe*, as another anecdote from Miller’s school days illustrates: while reading the *Odyssey* in class, she reports to have been excited about Odysseus’ encounter with the Homeric Circe, as she had heard about the latter’s powerful witchcraft and outstanding intellect. Expecting a “battle of wits”¹⁹ between two cunning characters, she remembers severe disappointment over the resolution of their conflict, as Odysseus “pulls out his sword and threatens her with it and she screams, falls to her knees, begs for mercy, and invites him into her bed [...] all in one breath”²⁰. She additionally deemed it unsatisfactory that Homer never answers the question of why the enchantress

11 E7 05:34.

12 E11.

13 E6 33:39. Alternative phrasings used by Miller to denote an active suppression of this interpretation are “covered over, put in the closet” (E12 56:18), “silenced and ignored and not talked about and cut out of commentaries and not taught” (E5 25:25), as well as “pushed aside and ignored and silenced and written out” (E21 01:02:37).

14 E8 16:56.

15 Cf. E2 53:09.

16 E11.

17 E8 17:01.

18 E5 25:11.

19 E10 10:32.

20 E10 11:02.

transforms men into pigs in the first place,²¹ and that Odysseus as “the most curious man in literature”²² is never inclined to ask this very question.

Further studies in later years, according to her, eventually drew her attention to the fact that the figure of Circe has, in post-Homeric reception, largely been reduced to the role of one among various antagonists to be overcome by Odysseus to successfully complete his journey home. Miller has been perceiving this as a considerable contrast to her portrayal in the *Odyssey*, where she and Odysseus surmount their initial conflict and develop sympathies for each other, causing him to spend no less than a year on her island, after which his crew actively has to persuade him to embark for Ithaca. She emphasises that it is Circe who, before their departure, gives them quite helpful advice for their further travels and therefore proves to be one of the most supportive characters throughout the entire *Odyssey*.²³ The later vilification of Circe to her had been representing a prototypical instance of what women undergo in patriarchal societies if perceived as too powerful.²⁴ It is, therefore, not surprising that Miller claims – with *Circe* just like with her former novel – to have been driven by the intention to speak up for something that she had been perceiving as marginalised in classical epic literature: “[a]ll these stories are composed by men, largely starring men, and I really wanted a female perspective”²⁵. As a result of the desire to produce an instance of such epic literature revolving around a strong female protagonist and thus “give [...] a woman’s life the same treatment that Achilles and Odysseus and Ajax have had for centuries”²⁶, it seems only suitable that she terms her second novel a “feminist project”²⁷.

21 Cf. E6 08:43.

22 E24 17:24.

23 Cf. E10 13:26.

24 Cf. E27.

25 E1.

26 E20 04:50.

27 E19 21:37.

Popular Realism and the Suspicion of the Midcult

As honourable as the cultural turn towards political correctness and increased awareness of diversity in its central demand certainly is, it also entails a number of problems: German philologist Moritz Baßler, who has been researching contemporary popular fiction, states that ideologies have, to a worrying degree, become part of literary criticism. He argues that the facilitating role of social media in connecting like-minded people has led to groups of mutually self-affirming readers no longer relying on any type of professional assessment.²⁸ A first consequence of this deprofessionalisation, according to him, is that an “individual work’s specific literary constitution”²⁹, i.e. its genuinely aesthetic layer, plays less of a role for opinion making than a perceived authenticity. This extends so far that novels of certain writers are rejected outright, or their identity is adduced as a “quality criterion and answer to the question ‘Who should be allowed and able to write and judge this?’”³⁰. Works by authors of certain backgrounds are considered welcome, legitimate and authentic, while others are accused of reproducing exclusive privileges or of appropriation.³¹ Baßler admonishes that the awarding of prizes is increasingly based on such standards,³² and that even in academia, where aesthetics are a genuine part of the profession, more and more ideology-based assessments can be observed.³³

It is this loss of awareness of formal and aesthetic categories that Baßler holds responsible for the development of ‘popular realism’ (*Populärer Realismus*) written in an “International Style”³⁴, i.e. a literature which is ‘popular’ in that it is intended to appeal to broad readerships, and ‘realistic’ in the sense that “anything relevant takes place on the diegetic level”³⁵. That the character level, con-

28 Cf. Baßler (2021) 132–34.

29 Baßler (2021) 135: “spezifisch literarische[] Verfasstheit des Einzelwerks”.

30 Baßler (2021) 146: “Qualitätsargument und Antwort auf die Frage ‘Wer darf und kann das schreiben und beurteilen?’”

31 Cf. Baßler (2021) 145–46; Wesselmann (2021) 7–10.

32 Cf. Baßler (2021) 145–46.

33 Cf. Baßler (2022) 186; (2021) 137–39.

34 Baßler (2022) 49.

35 Baßler (2022) 45–46: “Alles Relevante findet sich [...] auf der diegetischen Ebene [...]”

versely, is hardly essential for an understanding of these types of narrative is the result of a simple prose intended to be easily readable for ensuring a certain reading flow. The independence of its diegesis from the language conveying it thus renders this type of literature not only incredibly easy to consume, but also to translate, and even to adapt to other media – factors greatly favouring financial success, also internationally.³⁶ The interplay of this linguistically realised low threshold and the unambiguously likeable identification figures typically featured in popular realist storytelling usually constitutes a “twofold principle of immersion”³⁷.

The fantasy genre, which largely depends on its invented worlds of little allegorical potential, and mostly unfolds on the diegetic level only, is considered by Baßler to be “quintessential International Style”³⁸. If popular realist storytelling is applied to the non-fictional world, however, an ideological narrowing of reality takes place without our becoming aware of the narrated world’s constructed nature³⁹. Especially in contrast to literary modernism and its eagerness to experiment with languages and modes of narration, Baßler notes that popular realism “appears to fall short of the formal possibilities that have been available to literary fiction since the 20th century”⁴⁰. Still, he does not overlook the fact that this is the result of a somewhat democratic process: the extensive production of popular realist works in a comprehensible language is, after all, the result of a respectively high demand. If large reader groups additionally wish to be confirmed in their ideological views, it does hardly surprise that these ideologies are reflected in popular literature too, especially since different topics or beliefs may become exclusion criteria.⁴¹ Speaking in market logics, expectations on the reception side are to be fulfilled on the side of production.

This all leads to Baßler’s assertion of a new ‘midcult’: this concept, as coined in the 1960s by Umberto Eco and Dwight MacDonald, originally denoted popular

36 Cf. Baßler (2022) 46–49.

37 Baßler (2021) 141: “*doppeltes Immersionsverfahren*”.

38 Baßler (2022) 110: “*International Style in Vollendung*”; cf. 105–10.

39 Cf. Baßler (2021) 141.

40 Baßler (2022) 9–10: “*Allzu deutlich scheint er [der Populäre Realismus] [...] hinter den formalen Möglichkeiten zurückzubleiben, die literarischer Fiktion seit dem 20. Jahrhundert zur Verfügung stehen.*”

41 Baßler (2022) 47–51, 194–95.

fiction written with the intention of being effortlessly consumable and at the same time giving recipients the impression of experiencing high culture.⁴² The observation was that an otherwise hardly challenging text was decorated with “literary and cultural markers of significance”⁴³ suggesting meaningfulness. This way, the original midcult “satisfies its consumer by convincing him that he has just experienced culture”⁴⁴, while not doing justice to the high-cultural artifacts it references. The new midcult, on the other hand, is characterised by Baßler to be permeated by “ethically and socially relevant topics”⁴⁵ like “loss, trauma, abuse, misogyny, racism, capitalism, flight”⁴⁶. In addition, these topics be preferably approached by authors in the position to authenticate them from their own experience, and in a way that corresponds to already given convictions:⁴⁷ whereas the “offence”⁴⁸ of the midcult originally consisted in a form inappropriate to its contents, it nowadays appears to arise from the expectation that literature “addresses and confirms what one believes to be right, true, and important anyway”⁴⁹. In either case, they signal a discussion which eventually does not take place, and thus comprise a “structural lie”⁵⁰.

Bearing in mind the essential characteristics of 21st century mythological retellings as described above, it is not difficult to see that this form of literature harbours much potential for midcult in the original as well as the new sense: as manifestations of the “often-invoked ancient roots of our culture”⁵¹, the settings or narratives in question suggest an engagement with high-cultural matters, while the above-mentioned corrective claim promises relevant statements on

42 Cf. Baßler & Drügh (2021) 166–67; Baßler (2022) 69–72.

43 Baßler (2022) 70: “literarisch-kulturelle Bedeutsamkeitsmarker”.

44 Eco (1989) 192; cf. Baßler (2022) 70, 185.

45 Baßler (2021) 146: “ethisch-sozial bedeutsame[] Themen”.

46 Baßler (2021) 145: “loss, trauma, abuse, Misogynie, Rassismus, Kapitalismus, Flucht”.

47 Cf. Baßler (2022) 185–90, 194–95.

48 Baßler (2022) 71, 211: “Tatbestand”.

49 Baßler (2022) 189–90: “[D]ie strukturelle Lüge, die eine Bezeichnung als ‘Neuer Midcult’ rechtfertigt, bestünde dann darin, etwas für bedeutende Literatur zu halten, weil es wunderbarerweise das thematisiert und bestätigt, was man ohnehin für richtig, wahr und wichtig hält”.

50 Baßler (2022) 71, 185, 189: “strukturelle Lüge”.

51 Wesselmann (2021) 10: “oft beschworenen antiken Wurzeln unserer Kultur”.

current societal issues. The facts that most of the typically female protagonists of 21st century mythological retellings are written by women, and that the only instance of a queer topic within the Canongate Myth Series comes from an author identifying accordingly indicates a close affinity between authorial identity and legitimacy of the narrative. As if to further emphasise this assumed correlation, the information on an author's classicist background is mentioned too, wherever applicable, for an impression of literary authority over ancient matters.⁵² It goes without saying that a modern perspective on an ancient value system perceived as overcome additionally provides a solid foundation for establishing strong identification figures who, as victims of these discriminatory structures, will attract most readers' sympathies. Considering the simple prose in which such retellings are usually presented, they also regularly follow the binary mechanism of immersion observed above to be so characteristic of popular realist storytelling.

Miller and the Midcult: Poetic Self-Conception

As the ten-year and seven-year development periods of her novels as well as her self-designation as a "magpie [...] go[ing] through all the ancient sources"⁵³ suggest, Miller likes to present herself as a typical *poeta doctus* composing her own work in close consideration of her literary predecessors. When confronted with the possibility of approaching other mythologies than the Greeks' or Romans' in future works, she even objects to doing so for the reason of not "ha[ving] that same grounding"⁵⁴. Although the above-mentioned literary objectives – retelling traditionally heroic-epic-masculine matters from an intimate and amorous perspective on the one hand, and from a genuinely female perspective on the other hand – clearly correspond to typical midcult characteristics, the authority Miller lends herself this way implies the expectation of an appropriate treatment of the chosen contents.

52 Apart from Miller, examples would be Natalie Haynes, Claire Heywood, Costanza Casati, Emily Hauser, or Susan C. Wilson.

53 E20 17:08.

54 E10 42:53.

As to the social-ethical dimension of midcult, Miller seldom misses an opportunity to present herself in a philanthropic light: she terms Emily Wilson's 2017 translation of the *Odyssey*, the first translation by a woman, "a glass ceiling that is shockingly overdue for shattering"⁵⁵, raises awareness for "an initiative called Black Publishing Power"⁵⁶, and expresses regret over classicism's "hurtful history being co-opted by things like white supremacy"⁵⁷. Repeated references to current political issues in the US, such as the legal situation regarding abortion⁵⁸, or the characterisation of Agamemnon as the "most Trumpist figure [in the Greek canon]"⁵⁹ additionally demonstrate a certain strive for topicality in doing so. As it would be typical of midcult, such utterances make it quite transparent which values Miller stands for, and what to expect in her novels. Readers sharing these values therefore seem more likely to pick up her novels in the first place. Beyond that, however, she also claims to have achieved a certain missionary effect on others:

I've had so many people come up to me and say, "I never thought I would read a gay love story, but I really enjoyed *The Song of Achilles* and it's really changed the way I think." That to me is the highest honour, it means so much to me and [...] I've had lots of [...] men come and say "*Circe* really expanded the way I thought about what women struggle with." [...] [O]ne of my favourite interactions [...] was a woman who said: "My son is going off to college, I bought a copy of *Circe* for him and every one of his male friends, and I am giving it to them and I'm saying, 'read this and then go off to college and think about consent and think about what it means to be a woman in the world [...]'. I mean that is like 'wow' [...]. [H]umans are such emotional creatures. You know, we can look at a fact sheet and [...] it doesn't [...] hit us, but stories, they [...] get in there and they transform. That has happened to me so many times in my own life, and so I hope that [...] I can be part of stories transforming people and increasing their empathy and allowing them to make the world a better place.⁶⁰

55 E18.

56 E5 00:18.

57 E5 22:28.

58 Cf. E6 37:05.

59 E12 01:04:17.

60 E6 42:15.

Although this self-attested ethical impact somewhat reminiscent of Aristotelian *catharsis* is hard to falsify and Miller may have experienced such encounters, statements like this certainly cast doubts: one may indeed wonder whether the described effect would also be observed among readers truly objecting to the values represented by Miller, and whether it thus actually transcends the self-affirmation efforts of readers already committed to them. That a sceptical attitude is only appropriate becomes additionally evident when Miller projects her philanthropism into the Homeric source texts: her irrevocable convictions that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* “were intended not just for an elite audience, but for everyone”⁶¹, or that “it is impossible to [...] think that Homer is pro-war because he is so clear about the physical violence and what happens to men’s bodies in war and how brutal and disgusting and gory it is”⁶² obviously subverts these poem’s original nature of being sung at the courts of a privileged nobility, and their genuinely heroic perspective on fighting as an honourable and reputationally promising act.⁶³ One may gain the impression that the message to be sent was prioritised over the actual historical context of Homer’s epics, and it is especially their assumed inclusive nature as well as, derived from this, the implication of her work too being designed “for everyone”⁶⁴ that undeniably reveals the popular realist characteristic of appealing to the largest possible audience. Miller’s emphasis that prior mythological knowledge will provide familiar readers with “goodies”⁶⁵ but is by no means necessary for an understanding of her novels represents an intentional act of addressing several audiences at once⁶⁶, and thus additionally supports this notion. In the light of linguistic simplicity and the minor importance of the aesthetic level in popular realist literature, it is particularly interesting that Miller seems to anticipate this exact point of criticism and, as if to refute it, comments on the aesthetics of her novels’ linguistic level itself:

61 E16.

62 E6 19:13.

63 Cf. M. Reichel, HGL I (2011) 9, 15.

64 E10 50:02.

65 E10 50:08.

66 Cf. Baßler (2022) 70.

I do read aloud. I think reading aloud is important, particularly because I'm so influenced by Homer, which was originally oral poetry and so I really want the sentences to have [...] an oral quality to them, an oral presence, I guess.⁶⁷

Referring to the Homeric epics' oral origins, she acknowledges that the sound of epic literature must have been important and derives from this her ambition to also provide her own novels with certain acoustic qualities, and her habit of regularly verifying them by revising and reading aloud.⁶⁸ Her concept of this 'oral presence', however, remains rather vague: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*'s oral past is reflected linguistically in the extensive use of the hexameter, formulaic verses and repetitions, epithets, as well as an overall artificial language far from "any Greek dialect used at any time in any place in Greece"⁶⁹. Since an imitation of this genuinely Homeric style, however skilfully rendered into English, would certainly not pose a low-threshold reading, it is surely not what Miller had in mind.

Her remarks become only seemingly clearer when she elsewhere refers to Callimachus as another model for her writing: resembling the latter's principles of lyric poetry as a desirably elaborate and small-format alternative to epic standards⁷⁰, Miller ascribes to such poetry that it "is doing exactly what novels are doing, they're just doing it really compressed and really compacted and so it reminds me that I want every word in my novels to be load-bearing"⁷¹. For this reason, she states to "start many writing days reading a little bit of poetry and [...] trying to remember that I want each word to feel active"⁷². While comprehensible in theory, an approach like this appears difficult to grasp in its concrete application: as typical examples of Hellenistic poetry, the callimachean ideals resulted in works of "the highest standards in terms of content, language

67 E12 1:08:36.

68 Cf. E12 1:09:51

69 M. Reichel, HGL I (2011) 19: "Die homerischen Epen sind in einer poetischen Sprachform verfaßt [sic!], [...] die sich von jeder zu irgendeiner Zeit an irgendeinem Ort Griechenlands verwendeten Umgangssprache erheblich unterscheidet."

70 Cf. Detken (2003) 1291–92 and D. Meyer, HGL II (2014) 144, 152–154.

71 E5 28:31.

72 E12 1:07:31.

and metre”⁷³, which may lead one to expect from Miller a prose of challenging linguistic complexity and elaborateness. What she, however, is actually aiming at becomes evident from the continuation of the above quote:

So I do read aloud, and you can hear pretty quickly when you’re reading aloud if there’s [...] a real clinger in there. What are the things you stop over, what are the things you stumble over?⁷⁴

Miller reads aloud to ensure effortless readability, and as much as this is substantiated by references to the origins of epic literature or elusively generalised understandings of ancient poetry and its formal requirements, what is described here is what Baßler would term ‘International Style’ – a language whose most distinctive characteristic consists in its inconspicuousness, allowing for the most immediate experience of diegesis. Bearing in mind Baßler’s understanding of the fantasy genre as the most genuine form of International Style, Miller’s assumptions that “if Homer [...] was composing today [...] the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* would go right on the fantasy shelf”⁷⁵, or that “for me, Greek mythology and fantasy seem like the same thing”⁷⁶ appear all the more revealing. An identification like this does certainly not do justice to Homer’s style or his world, which reflects historical geographical conditions and cultic sites rather than a fictitious setting,⁷⁷ let alone to the various allegorical readings of Homer in ancient times.⁷⁸

The variety of languages in which Miller’s novels have been published proves the ease with which texts of International Style can be translated, especially in contrast to similarly recent but truly lyrical reworkings of Homeric matters like *Memorial* (2011) by Alice Oswald, for which *Goodreads* lists translations into only six languages and not more than 1,650 ratings.⁷⁹ While such market-oriented

73 D. Meyer, HGL II (2014) 66: “Das poetische Kunstwerk [des Kallimachos] sollte inhaltlich, sprachlich und metrisch allerhöchsten Ansprüchen genügen [...].”

74 E12 1:08:53.

75 E25 48:17.

76 E22 24:57.

77 Cf. M. Reichel, HGL I (2011) 37–40.

78 Cf. M. Reichel, HGL I (2011) 52–54.

79 Cf. Goodreads, “Memorial”.

means represent a perfectly valid artistic choice in themselves, it is thoroughly misleading to present them as rooted in ancient poetry to affirm one's own place within a time-honoured tradition. While Miller's questionable self-authentication certainly poses a first indicator of a 'structural lie' in the sense of a potential midcult, a final verdict should not be passed without a look at Miller's novels as the actual products resulting from the described literary self-conception in the following.

Patroclus – Miller's Misfit or Homeric Hero?

Looking up Achilles in any of the common encyclopaedias of classical studies will suffice to see that, in the larger scheme of her narrative framework in *The Song of Achilles*, Miller indeed remains faithful to the mythological canon surrounding the Greek hero. In fact, the allusions and references to ancient works are so dense and numerous that they could justify a scholarly commentary⁸⁰, and certainly confirm Miller's good knowledge of her sources. Problems begin, however, with her treatment of Patroclus: considering her stated aim of shifting the traditionally heroic focus of Trojan War mythology towards a rather intimate perspective, she presents him as the most suitable protagonist: among the multitude of Greek heroes characterised as destroyers of cities or victorious fighters,⁸¹ Patroclus is, according to Miller, mainly referred to as "gentle"⁸² and "kind to everyone"⁸³. She also mentions his Homeric backstory of "a tragic childhood – he accidentally killed another boy and was exiled from his kingdom, which is how he came to meet Achilles"⁸⁴.

In the way they appear in her novel, these pieces of information harmonise well with each other: Patroclus's unheroic nature had long been causing his

80 This is not to say that explanatory notes were needed at any point. Rather to the contrary, Miller is always aiming at effortless comprehensibility, one of the characteristics of popular realism.

81 Cf. E8 41:16.

82 E2 43:28.

83 Ibid.

84 E26.

father to perceive him as an unmanly disappointment,⁸⁵ and in view of the homicide committed by his son, he does not hesitate to exile him.⁸⁶ At the same time, the traumatic childhood experience of being responsible for the fatal consequences of physical violence anticipates the novel's major theme of Patroclus's lifelong aversion to fighting and killing, as well as combat exercises.⁸⁷ It is this aversion which accounts for his extensive inability to fight⁸⁸ and his wish to rather learn about medicine and surgery from his and Achilles' common mentor Chiron⁸⁹ – an inclination which eventually proves him an appreciated physician within the Greek camp.⁹⁰ Altogether, he almost poses a private counterpart to his lover, who is not only exceptionally skilled in battle and fond of traditionally epic matters like glory and honour, but even appears as “*Aristos Achaion*”⁹¹.

The textual evidence given by Miller indeed references specific passages in the *Iliad*: after Patroclus's death in battle, the effort to retrieve his body is accompanied by the call to think of his gentleness and how kind he had been to everyone while alive.⁹² When mourning over him, Achilles's slave girl Briseis too calls him “always gentle”⁹³, and addresses him as the one who treated her best.⁹⁴ The unintentional homicide eventually leading to his exile, then, is also reported in a speech delivered by Patroclus himself.⁹⁵ But as accurate as this information is, and as precisely as it is retrieved from the Homeric text, it is also incomplete: Homer's Patroclus is also *μεγάθυμος, μεγαλήτωρ, ἥρως*⁹⁶, and in

85 Cf. Miller (2012) 1–3.

86 Cf. Miller (2012) 16–18.

87 Cf. Miller (2012) 30–31, 89–91.

88 Cf. Miller (2012) 324.

89 Cf. Miller (2012) 75–76, 83.

90 Cf. Miller (2012) 247–251.

91 Miller (2012) 176, 178, 184, 192, 197, 216, 236, 257, 292, 297.

92 Cf. Hom. Il. 17,670–72 ἐνηείης Πατροκλήος [...] μνησάσθω· πᾶσιν [...] ἐπίστατο μείλιχος εἶναι ζῶδς ἐών.

93 μείλιχον αἰεὶ, Hom. Il. 19,300.

94 Cf. Hom. Il. 19,287 Πάτροκλέ μοι [...] πλεῖστον κεχαρισμένε.

95 Cf. Hom. Il. 23,85–89.

96 Homer qtd. in Wüst (1949) 2281.

fact even ὄριστος Ἀχαιῶν⁹⁷ himself. By denying these qualities to her version of Patroclus, she amplifies the contrast between him and Achilles to such an extent that they appear as opposite ends of a heroic scale.

How far Miller, in doing so, departs from Homer becomes especially evident considering that Patroclus and Achilles have in fact been understood as “alter-egos, or better, ‘second-selves’ of each other”⁹⁸: the Homeric idea of Chiron’s tutorship, for instance, seems to be that the centaur was never responsible for the education of Patroclus, but for Achilles alone, and that the two comrades must have met at a later date. The medical competencies, which Miller’s Patroclus has acquired from Chiron in person and which she uses to set him apart from his lover, are in the *Iliad* part of an expertise which Achilles has passed on to him.⁹⁹ As the bearer of both Achilles’ medical knowledge and his armour, he functions as a representative of the hero whenever the plot does not allow him to be physically present himself. Along with parallel situations, like both figures’ similar bed routine, Patroclus is likely to be understood as Achilles’s mirror image rather than his antithesis.¹⁰⁰

This becomes also apparent in combat: even though a backstory, according to which his heroism in battle had led to his status as Achilles’s closest comrade, is only introduced in the *Cypria* and thus un-Homeric,¹⁰¹ Patroclus is a more than decent soldier in the *Iliad* too. When entering his final fight, he encourages his fellow Myrmidons to “be men”¹⁰² and to vigorously join battle.¹⁰³ Subsequently, he kills no less than 54 people, among them Sarpedon, a demigod and son of Zeus, and is stopped only by divine intervention before Hector can deliver the fatal blow.¹⁰⁴ This stands in direct contrast to Miller’s Patroclus, who is neither willing nor capable of fighting, and in fact, her reworking of this scene in particular may appear as one of the weak spots of *The Song of Achilles: Patroclus’*

97 Hom. Il. 17,689.

98 Fantuzzi (2012) 197.

99 Hom. Il. 11, 830–832.

100 Cf. Fantuzzi (2012) 197–198, 202–215.

101 Cf. Wüst (1949) 2277.

102 ἀνέρες ἔσθε, Hom. Il. 16,270.

103 Cf. Hom. Il. 16,269–274.

104 Cf. Hom. Il. 16,287–789; Wüst (1949) 2278.

sudden skilful handling of a spear is ascribed to “the armor, molding me [Patroclus]” and “the years of watching him [Achilles]”¹⁰⁵, the accuracy of his strikes to his anatomical knowledge.¹⁰⁶ Though certainly helpful in a fight, such supportive factors may evoke scepticism when claimed as substitutes for years of real combat experience, and the impression arises that Miller had difficulties substantiating her protagonist’s unexpected combative abilities.

The most striking characteristic, however, distinguishing Miller’s Patroclus from his Homeric namesake, is his status as an outsider: there is no model in the *Iliad* for the contempt Patroclus experiences at the hands of Achilles’ mother,¹⁰⁷ and given his qualities as a proper Homeric hero, there would be no reason to consider him an unworthy companion. Similarly, a dysfunctional relationship to his father, as it is characterised by Miller, is never indicated by Homer; in fact, Menotios even accompanies his son into exile in Phthia and is not only present when he leaves for Troy, but sends him to battle himself after giving him benevolent advice.¹⁰⁸ The fact that Achilles, when tearfully approached by Patroclus, instantly associates his friends’ agitation with possible news of his father’s death, additionally suggests a mutually rather appreciative attitude.¹⁰⁹

It goes without saying that the picture of Patroclus painted by Miller entirely corresponds to the demands of popular realist storytelling: he not only represents an embodiment of her philanthropic world view, but also a strong identificatory character to readers sharing this view and the corrective claim of 21st century mythological retellings: his gentle nature and dislike of violence oppose traditional – and potentially perceived toxic – notions of masculinity. That his social environment, in the form of his father and his divine mother-in-law Thetis, despises him for his unheroic nature let him appear treated unfairly and make it nearly obligatory to empathise with him. This, along with the novel’s first-person narrator, through which the thoughts and feelings of Miller’s protagonist are constantly accessible, ensures a degree of immersion very typical of popular realist storytelling: the world described and the perspective through which it is viewed merge together – an effect further emphasised by the novel’s

105 Miller (2012) 328.

106 Cf. Miller (2012) 330.

107 Cf. Miller (2012) 170, 264, 347.

108 Cf. Hom. Il. 11,765–789; 23,85.

109 Cf. Hom. Il. 16,13–14.

generally rather plain prose and easy readability. Miller's over-stylisation of Patroclus's characteristic gentleness by depriving him of his heroic qualities is particularly noteworthy in the light of her own remarks on Circe as a figure unfairly flattened in its reception history, and certainly seems like unexploited potential for interesting ambiguity. That it, beyond that, harbours problematic implications for the portrayal of homosexuality will be illustrated in the following discussion of Patroclus and Achilles' relationship.

Patroclus and Achilles – 'Ideal Lovers?'

"I think there have been many people who have taken them as close companions," says Miller, "but looking at the way Achilles mourns, how incredibly deeply and sensually – holding the dead body all night, wanting their ashes put together – that seems to say something beyond [friendship] to me".¹¹⁰

It is Achilles's emotional condition in reaction to Patroclus's death which prompts Miller to read them as lovers, as well as Patroclus's wish for their ashes to be united in burial. Her estimation that 'many people have taken them as close companions', i.e. comrades-in-arms without any sexual or amorous implications, clearly presents this reading as subordinate to a supposedly prevalent homosexual understanding of their relationship.¹¹¹ Along with her statements that scholarly literature has been denying or even suppressing an allegedly obvious love between the two Homeric characters, she not only levels serious charges against the entire field of classical studies, but once again paints an unreasonably oversimplified picture:

It is undeniably true that the interpretation of Patroclus and Achilles as engaged in an implied homosexual relationship was already in antiquity discussed and weighed up against the traditional understanding dismissed by Miller. Also, said interpretation certainly has more than once been the object of literary adoption, and any such reworking undoubtedly possesses an inherent literary value in its own right. Without denying any of this, it is still a valid and established scholarly observation to note that the portrayal of the relation-

¹¹⁰ E9, supplement in orig.

¹¹¹ Cf. also E12 55:08.

ship between Patroclus and Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* – examined individually – offers little reason in terms of reliable textual evidence to assume even remote suggestions of homosexual love or sexuality, as inferred by later interpreters: firstly, there are no terms whose connotations would openly indicate any kind of erotic overtone; secondly, both Achilles and Patroclus share their beds with female slaves;¹¹² thirdly, the motif of close, non-sexual male friendship is an established element of archaic epics known to feature quite similar plot points of loss and vengeance.¹¹³

This is also the conclusion reached by K. J. Dover, who has written perhaps the most comprehensive monograph¹¹⁴ on depictions of homosexuality in Ancient Greece. He not only states that “Homer [...] nowhere speaks of an erotic relationship between Achilles and Patroklos”¹¹⁵ and that “[w]e would reasonably attribute the poet’s silence to the absence of any erotic element from the relationship as he envisaged it”¹¹⁶, but continues with two essential arguments given by ancient interpreters arguing in favour of reading Patroclus’ and Achilles’ relationship as homosexual: “the extravagance of Achilles’ emotion when Patroklos is killed”¹¹⁷ as well as “the injunction of Patroklos that when Achilles too dies their ashes should be interred together”¹¹⁸. These are the exact textual clues referenced in Miller’s quote above, and although they certainly suggest exceptional affection, this need not have an erotic dimension to it. In fact, Dover makes it unmistakably clear that, in classical Greece, homosexual interpretations of

112 As Fantuzzi (2012) rightly notes, “the fact that both now sleep with women does not mean that they cannot sleep, or have never slept, with each other at other times. But it is telling that the *Iliad* gives no hint whatsoever of this latter possibility” (198). Also, if their relationship was poetically intended to be read as homosexual, it would have been quite misleading to insert a detail like this, just like it would have been distracting from the central theme of Miller’s novel if Patroclus freely enjoyed sexual intercourse with women.

113 Cf. Fantuzzi (2012) 190–193; Dover (1978) 53, 197; Choitz (2011) 108.

114 In E3 01:22, Miller presents Dover’s monograph as part of her private bookshelf, among her “important research materials”.

115 Dover (1978) 197.

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

Patroclus and Achilles originated from the idea of pederasty,¹¹⁹ a form of relationship, in which “[a] 12 to 18 year old ‘youth’ (παῖς/paîs) would be the ‘beloved’ (ἐρώμενος/erómenos) of a man older than 30, the ‘lover’ (ἐραστής/erastés), who would also educate him”¹²⁰. Fragments of Aeschylus’ *Myrmidons*, the earliest known instance of a notion of Patroclus and Achilles as lovers,¹²¹ refer not only to “frequent kisses”¹²², but also to intercrural intercourse¹²³, a sexual practice which was commonly associated with this type of erotic connection.¹²⁴ The clear rules of pederasty regarding the participants’ age and status, however, do not quite correspond to Homer’s portrayal: as evident from the disagreement between the dialogue partners in Plato’s *Symposium*, the difficulties experienced by Greeks of the classical period describing a pederastic relationship between Patroclus and Achilles as the socially accepted form of homosexuality by ascribing to them the labels of *erastes* and *eromenos* in retrospect were not least due to the fact that the Homeric original does not yield such a forced transfer.¹²⁵ Dover even adduces some arguments of the *Symposium* as examples of “how easily (in ancient and modern times alike) the evidence of texts can be bent”¹²⁶. Miller’s awareness of this becomes apparent when she addresses the issue of pederasty herself:

[W]hen Patroclus speaks to him [Achilles], [...] he speaks to him absolutely as an equal, as an emotional equal and [...] that was really what I wanted to honour, [...] and then the *erastes* – *eromenos* [...] takes us into this territory of inequality, but I didn’t want to go in that direction.¹²⁷

119 Cf. Dover (1978) 53, 197.

120 Hartmann (2006).

121 Cf. Wüst (1949) 2281.

122 πυκνῶν φιλημάτων, Aeschyl. *Myrmidones* fr. 135.

123 Cf. Aeschylus, *Myrmidones* fr. 135 σέβας [...] μηρῶν; fr. **136 μηρῶν [...] ὀμιλία.

124 Cf. Dover (1978) 70.

125 Cf. Dover (1978) 53, 197 and Hom. *Il.* 11,786–789.

126 Dover (2009) 95.

127 E22 19:32.

The essential characteristic which appears to have guided Miller in her portrayal of Patroclus and Achilles' relationship is that of mutual equality, with a particular emphasis on emotional equality, and since Patroclus alone manages to get through to Achilles in his anger¹²⁸, there is indeed a certain template for this in the *Iliad*. Between the ancient poles of interpreting Patroclus and Achilles in either a traditional Homeric (close friends and fellow soldiers at emotional eye-level) or a post-Homeric pederastic sense (erotically engaged conforming to later and asymmetrical social norms), Miller seems to take a third path, establishing their relation as erotic *and* (emotionally) equal. This indeed innovative approach may have shed a light of originality on her literary endeavour if made transparent; her chosen method, however, of instead confronting classical studies with undifferentiated accusations of homophobia and delicate claims, such as 'to set the record straight', indicates midcult rather than sincere engagement with the respective literary tradition. The following reader review illustrates how seriously such misrepresentation can damage public discourse:

Madeline Miller did what the movie producers of the film *Troy* (2004) were too cowardly to do; she stayed true to the homosexuality of Homer's *Iliad* rather than writing a censored version of the story which stank of homophobia. Achilles and Patroclus were passionately in love, which resulted in their respective destructions. They were not cousins or man at arms, but soul mates. The watering down of this in the film *Troy* was an insult to the LGBT community. Nothing more. Nothing less [...]. I'm so glad the author didn't deviate from the suggestions of homosexuality that were present in Homer's writing.¹²⁹

The quoted response belongs to a four-star rating, and the overall good assessment of *The Song of Achilles* suggests that most readers have been approving of Miller's way of addressing homosexuality. A deliberate look at less favourable reviews, however, reveals a substantial problem:

Both in classical antiquity and in modernity, the fact that they [Patroclus and Achilles] were equals makes them stand out. Miller could've taken this unique relationship and made something revolutionary and groundbreaking of it, but she chose not to. Instead, Patroclus is effeminate, innocent, campy, and squeamish about the

128 Cf. Hom. Il. 15,401–404; 16,7–19; 16,64–65.

129 Sean Barrs (2020).

blood and guts of war. He's a "healer" who stays in the tents while Achilles is off slaughtering men on the battlefield. He's soft-hearted and empathetic, crying while Achilles is emotionless [...]. The result of this, of course, is that Miller's portrayal of a gay relationship is basically just a heteronormative straight one. Patroclus could be replaced by a woman and it would change absolutely nothing about the story Miller has written. In essence, Miller has told the audience that queer relationships are fundamentally the same as heterosexual ones, and that makes them okay!... but with no apparent knowledge of or care as to how this might contribute to the perpetuation of homophobia in the real world. It's not an accurate portrayal of the characters she claims to love so much, and it's unintentionally homophobic at best.¹³⁰

Given Patroclus's overdrawn gentleness in contrast to Achilles's heroism, the natural conclusion indeed seems to be that Miller considered it necessary to differentiate her main characters on a binary conception of traditionally masculine and feminine traits for their amorous relation to appear convincing. *Goodreads* comments like "Seriously, can Patroclus be any more of a Bella?"¹³¹ – a direct reference to the *Twilight* series – demonstrate the parallels to young-adult fiction and its typical character dynamics of a strong and protective partner romantically engaged with a weaker one: indeed, Patroclus' survival strategy in the world of Miller's novel mainly consists in his affiliation with Achilles, and his repeated utterances that he "*will kill myself rather than miss it* [lying next to Achilles]"¹³² or "would follow [Achilles], even into death"¹³³ paint a problematically idealised, and certainly not equal, picture of love.

Not only do Miller's wish that her novel "might help to combat the homophobia that I see too often"¹³⁴ and her self-attested success in this respect¹³⁵ seem misplaced in this light; one could also discuss whether a depiction of homosexual love between two truly Homeric heroes might not have more genuinely challenged the reproduction of stereotypes and posed the rather 'revolutionary

130 saïd (2023).

131 Paz (2018).

132 Miller (2012) 183.

133 Miller (2012) 168.

134 E17.

135 Cf. E6 42:15.

and groundbreaking' reworking desired by the reviewer above. There may, perhaps, be no better starting point for asking more profound questions about implications of masculinity, homosexuality, or the compatibility of these concepts. Although arising occasionally¹³⁶, such questions pale in comparison to conventional patterns of romantic storytelling or erotic interludes:¹³⁷

Our mouths opened under each other, and the warmth of his sweetened throat poured into mine. I could not think, could not do anything but drink him in [...] He seemed to swell beneath my touch, to ripen. [...] He went still as I took him in my hand, soft as the delicate velvet of petals. [...] Our bodies cupped each other like hands. [...] There was a gathering inside me, a beat of blood against the movement of his hand. [...] The feeling gathered and gathered till a hoarse cry leapt from my throat, and the sharp flowering drove me, arching, against him [...]. My hand reached, found the place of his pleasure [...]. There was a rhythm he liked, I could feel it, the catch of his breath, the yearning [...]. His mouth opened in an inarticulate cry, and we were pressed so close that I felt the spurt of warmth against me.¹³⁸

According to Miller's anecdotes, she has been confronted with the accusation of "writing Homeric fan fiction"¹³⁹, and passages like this clearly demonstrate that this label is not entirely unreasonable. It may depend on personal taste whether such patterns represent an appropriate treatment of classical matters – the novel was statedly intended as a love story, after all. Miller's attempts to legitimise this approach by reference to Virgil's *Aeneid* as the "the original fan fiction"¹⁴⁰, however, once more testifies to confusingly simplified representations of the ancient tradition.

136 Cf. Miller (2012) 103–104, 176.

137 Cf. Miller (2012) 99–102, 104–05, 118, 134–136, 167–69, 182–83.

138 Miller (2012) 100–101.

139 E15.

140 E23 25:00.

Circe – from Side Character to Protagonist

Looking at Miller's second novel, it once again seems that its narrative framework is, in the bigger picture, thoroughly modelled on Circe's appearances in ancient mythology: apart from Homer's *Odyssey*, Miller recalls having resorted to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, to Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* and to the surviving summary of the *Telegony*.¹⁴¹ Again, encyclopaedic information proves these works to contain the most essential tales surrounding the enchantress, and the way they appear in Miller's novel corresponds, despite minor deviations, to their classical templates.

When introducing the figure of Circe and the information about her in ancient mythology, Miller most often initially declares that she is "most famous for turning Odysseus's men to pigs"¹⁴² in Homer's *Odyssey*, where she is referred to as the "dread goddess who speaks like a human"¹⁴³. She adds that Homer mentions Aiaia as the name of the island she lives on, as well as her descent from Helios, her father and the Greek god of the sun, who is said to have taken her to Aiaia on his chariot.¹⁴⁴ Miller points out that Circe's attractive outward appearance is regularly emphasised,¹⁴⁵ and that Homer presents her as weaving on the loom, as beautifully singing and surrounded by wild animals as pets. Although the detail of Circe's arrival on Aiaia is not mentioned by Homer, but in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*,¹⁴⁶ this is a minor flaw in an overall quite accurate overview: the Homeric Circe lives on an island of this name and is introduced as a daughter of Helios¹⁴⁷ as well as a δεινὴ θεὸς ἀυδήεσσα¹⁴⁸. Her description as "beautifully braided"¹⁴⁹ indeed refers to a certain degree of beauty, as does the mentioning of

141 Cf. E12 17:39.

142 E10 02:15.

143 E24 27:21.

144 Cf. E24 46:39.

145 Cf. E13 08:30.

146 Cf. Hes. cat. fr. 46.

147 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,138.

148 Hom. Od. 10,136, "terrible goddess speaking with human voice".

149 ἐυπλόκαμος and καλλιπλοκάμοιο, respectively, Hom. Od. 10,136; 10,220; 10,310; 11,8; 12,150.

her elegant clothing¹⁵⁰. She is portrayed as accompanied by domesticated wild animals¹⁵¹, as “singing with a beautiful voice”¹⁵², and as “working on a big immortal loom”¹⁵³.

As Miller’s treatment of Patroclus has shown, a character cannot only be shaped by the details retrieved from Homer, but also by those deliberately withheld. When looking for such evidence regarding *Circe*, however, one will quickly realise that the information provided is indeed complete. Even when Miller establishes Circe’s human traits as the origin of an outsider status among the gods, or presents Aiaia as a place of exile, neither of which is attested in the ancient sources, she certainly reinterprets and supplements in creative ways, but never misappropriates essential information.

That said, Miller’s statements regarding her inspiration for *Circe* certainly represent valid observations: although Homer’s Circe is an ambiguous figure whose “fascination lies in the multi-faceted nature of her character: daemonic and threatening on the one hand; on the other, offering aid and protection”¹⁵⁴, she remained rather one-dimensional in post-Homeric reception.¹⁵⁵ But even in the *Odyssey*, there is – apart from the hardly informative remarks about the enchantress “pondering evils in her mind”¹⁵⁶ and drugging her visitors’ food “so that they would entirely forget their homeland”¹⁵⁷ – no motivational indication whatsoever as to why Circe would wish to keep Odysseus and his crew on her island, or why she would transform them to achieve this, let alone to pigs.¹⁵⁸ That

150 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,543–545.

151 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,212–219.

152 ἀειδούσης ὅπι καλῆ, Hom. Od. 10,221; cf. 10,254.

153 ἰστὸν ἐποιχομένης μέγαν ἄμβροτον, Hom. Od. 10,222; cf. 10,254.

154 Heubeck (1989) 51; cf. Segal (1968).

155 In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the sorceress is not more than a “furious goddess” (cf. 7,19 *dea saeva*), but her brief appearance by mere mentioning does simply not leave room for an elaborate characterisation. Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*, generally treats her as a figure in a more or less permanent state of unhappy love; his reworking of particularly the episode at hand, however, does not give any specific reason for her doings either (cf. 14,242–307). See also Segal (1968).

156 κακὰ φρονέουσ’ ἐνὶ θυμῷ, Hom. Od. 10,317. See also Circe’s equally obscure “malign plans” (ὀλοφώϊα δήνεα) in 10,289.

157 ἵνα πάγχυ λαθοῖατο πατρίδος αἴης, Hom. Od. 10,236.

158 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,230–243.

Homer's Odysseus indeed overcomes Circe by simply intimidating her using his sword,¹⁵⁹ and that she straightforwardly offers him to accompany her to bed subsequently,¹⁶⁰ also confirms Miller's estimation regarding the sudden sexually violent turn of the Homeric narrative: the power Circe wields in the *Odyssey* was certainly perceived as a reversal of normative patriarchal standards, and there is no doubt that, in archaic times, this battle of the sexes could only be won, as an act of restoring order, by the traditional male hero resorting to traditionally heroic means. Considering, however, that Odysseus usually "comes particularly to the fore among the Greek leaders with intellectual solutions to problems and their implementation via words"¹⁶¹, Miller's expectation of a 'battle of wits' as well as her disappointment over the – from today's perspective – rather primitive resolution of their conflict is not entirely unfounded. In the light of this apparent contradiction, the questions left unanswered by Homer, and Circe's subsequent flattened representation, it seems that Miller this time made a perfectly valid choice of advocating for a previously underdeveloped and unfairly treated female character.

***Circe* – a 'Feminist Project'?**

When attempting to determine how Miller's stated aim of a female epic is implemented, the first thing to note is that she "ignored [...] depictions that struck her as silly or sexist"¹⁶². The most striking example may be Miller's treatment of the *Telegony*, the cyclic poem about Telegonus, Circe's son with Odysseus: its ending saw Telegonus return from Ithaca to Aiaia, along with Penelope and Telemachus; there, not only a double wedding takes place, between Circe and Telemachus on the one hand, and Penelope and Telegonus on the other hand, but Circe even bestows immortality on all of them – a "second-rate Greek epic's equivalent of 'they all lived happily ever after'"¹⁶³.

159 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,321–324.

160 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,333–335.

161 Visser and Bähler (2006).

162 Ei.

163 Davies (1989) 90.

Along with the strange detail of “a spear barbed with the spine of a sting-ray”¹⁶⁴ as the weapon causing Odysseus’ death and the rather minor importance of this work to the canon, there would have been enough reason to reject it as a template. The excitement, however, “knowing that Penelope was waiting for me in the last quarter of the novel”¹⁶⁵ seems to have been a decisive factor to take up on it anyway, as it harboured the opportunity to bring another interesting female figure to Aiaia and give her the ending that she, according to Miller, deserved: after the “constant talk in the *Odyssey* about what man Penelope is attached to”¹⁶⁶, Miller eventually allows her to remain independent, to learn about Circe’s witchcraft, and even to become the new witch of Aiaia.¹⁶⁷ The potential for ridicule that comes with the aforementioned weapon is confidently countered by Miller when she has Circe retrieve it from the tail of Trygon, a divine creature she invents for this purpose.¹⁶⁸ Given the lack of serious alternatives in existing mythology,¹⁶⁹ this supplement appears to almost repair a mythological weak spot, and in contrast to her first novel, Miller usually documents her modifications accurately.¹⁷⁰

With Circe’s sister Pasiphae terrorising her husband Minos, Medea keeping Jason under her spell, Athena as the antagonist of the novel’s last third, and Scylla reappearing as the infamous man-eating monster, Miller seizes every opportunity to establish further strong female characters in an interestingly broad moral range. The prominent role of genuinely female topics like childbirth, single motherhood, as well as sexism and sexual violence¹⁷¹ certainly contributes to

164 Davies (1989) 90.

165 E23 35:51.

166 E21 44:51.

167 Cf. Miller (2019) 329.

168 Cf. Miller (2019) 242–48.

169 Cf. West (2013) 310 who notes that, according to Aeschylus, “a heron flying overhead would one day defecate onto Odysseus, and its droppings would contain the (obviously much reduced and degraded) barb of a fish that would poison his aged, balding scalp”.

170 Cf. e.g. E13 37:50 for the adjustment of the novel’s ending or E21 37:36 for the invention of Trygon.

171 Cf. chapters 10 and 18–19, which contain extensive scenes of pregnancy, birth, and single parenting, as well as chapter 14, in which the sexual violence towards Circe reaches its point of escalation.

Miller's aim, and it almost seems like a revenge on traditionally male storytelling that the author reports to have deliberately confined Odysseus's appearance to two chapters only.¹⁷² This latter notion is additionally supported by her reflections on narrative technique in the *Odyssey*:

[M]ost of the *Odyssey* is told by the poet, but that section is Odysseus [...] getting hospitality from some people and telling them about his adventures to try and impress them, and [...] I started to realise, 'Hmm, actually, why are we believing anything Odysseus has to say?' He is the great liar of ancient literature, and so once you start realising 'Oh, this is Odysseus trying to impress people,' the Circe episode starts to look a little bit different, right? 'There was this, oh, terrifying witch and she totally got the jump on my men, but then I tamed her, and she threw herself at me, and she was super-hot,' uhm, which is pretty much what he says over and over and over again, and what you realise is: every time he's talking about how mysterious and beautiful Circe is, what he's really saying is, 'Look how great I am,' and so the whole episode serves as a way to, uhm, burnish Odysseus's own legend. So I came at the project from this perspective of 'Okay, Odysseus has had three thousand years of self-aggrandising, let's put him out of the way and imagine how this might look to someone else.'¹⁷³

In principle, Miller's observation is right, as Circe's appearance in the *Odyssey* is embedded into Odysseus's own account of his previous wanderings when hosted by the Phaeacians. The picture Miller paints here is, of course, exaggerated: in scholarly terms, there is little reason to believe that the hero is poetically intended to assume the role of an unreliable narrator.¹⁷⁴ Also, although the hero undeniably uses terms denoting an appealing outward appearance when referring to Circe, these designations are relatively rare and never as trivial as 'super-hot'. Working under the creative license, however, there could hardly be any textual foundation more suited for questioning the established Homeric narrative than a report given by a hero known for repeatedly taking on con-

172 Cf. E10 31:30.

173 E5 12:16.

174 Cf. Grethlein (2017) 108–109.

trived identities and invented backstories.¹⁷⁵ With regards to Circe's hair, Miller even specifies this interpretation:

[I] talked about how Odysseus is always saying how hot Circe is in the *Odyssey*, and one of the things he [...] keeps saying about her is he describes her as having this [...] super fancy hairdo, it's often translated as [...] 'Circe of the beautiful braids' [...], as if [...] his portrait of her is that 'here she is [...] in her prom hair waiting for someone to show up on her island, doing nothing, just lounging around with her lions' [...]. That's a totally [...] objectified, absurd fantasy of what women are doing when men are not there, and so part of what I wanted to do was [...] take that detail of Circe's braids and transform it. So in my version, Circe does braid her hair, but she braids her hair because she spends all her time tramping through the woods, hanging out with lions, you know, digging up plants, working in her garden, and she would braid her hair. That's how she keeps it out of her face, so, you know, I tried to [...] take even little moments [...] and change it so that Circe has the agency.¹⁷⁶

Miller clearly imputes a male gaze to the Homeric narrative, assuming that anything Circe is doing is done with the intention to be appealing to possible male visitors. Her braids, however, are never indicated to be the result of extensive preparations, as Miller's comparison with 'prom hair' suggests, and they may simply testify to Circe's given beauty as a divine being, after all. Also, the terms at hand – ἐϋπλόκαμος/καλλιπλόκαμος – are by far not reserved for Circe, let alone used by Odysseus only. Rather to the contrary, they are attributed to many other divine and mortal female side characters throughout the *Iliad* as well as the *Odyssey*, regardless of whether they are employed by the omniscient narrator or put in the mouths of characters.¹⁷⁷ Their frequency suggests that they are, as epithets, part of epic standard vocabulary whose original purpose consisted in facilitating the spontaneous completion of verses. As simple verse constituents, such epithets are often enough reduced in meaning or even incomprehensible. Especially in the case of female side characters, one may gain the impression

¹⁷⁵ One need only think of Odysseus' way of confronting Polyphemus under the name of "Nobody" (Οὔτις) in Hom. Od. 9,364–367, or of reaching out to his people on Ithaca in the disguise of a beggar from book 14 onwards.

¹⁷⁶ E5 38:42.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. TLG s.v. ἐϋπλόκαμος; καλλιπλόκαμος.

that, if a poet did not know what else to append to them, he was inclined to resort to the domain of beauty. This is surely problematic in its own right, but the significance Miller attributes to said labels is probably overestimated.

In view of this misogynist assumption, it is quite revealing how the information on Circe's outward appearance found its way into Miller's novel: her plaits are introduced as a measure ensuring that "it [Circe's hair] would not catch on every twig"¹⁷⁸ while gardening or exploring the woods, her garment – made on the loom that was gifted to her by Daedalus – is a sign of appreciation of this former acquaintance,¹⁷⁹ and her singing is "[o]nly for myself [Circe]"¹⁸⁰. It seems to have been important to Miller to clarify that the mentioned particulars have personal relevance to her version of Circe, and that she does not make herself dependent on male perception. But the impression of emancipation is not only evoked by the reinterpretation of Homeric particulars, but also by meta-commentaries on epic literature in general:

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 women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep.¹⁸¹

Quite reminiscent of the truly Odyssean feature of the hero being confronted with his own deeds in literarily processed form, Circe eventually learns how she has entered the canon of epic poetry. Whether the 'unskilled boy' is to be understood as Homer himself or not, Miller's protagonist claims to have observed how traditional epic literature deliberately distorts an imagined truth of Circe's actual experience in such a way that it fulfils the genuinely misogynist characteristics of a particularly male literary genre. It is at this point that *Circe's* first-person narrator becomes more than a typically popular realist mechanism of ensuring immersion: by means of direct intertextual reference, she poses a ques-

178 Miller (2019) 71.

179 Cf. Miller (2019) 131–32.

180 Miller (2019) 81; cf. 160.

181 Miller (2019) 181; see also 131, 209.

tion of trust and subverts Homer's authority much more fundamentally than only by giving a deviating account.

Circe and Odysseus – the 'Battle of Wits'

The most direct engagement with Homer in *Circe*, however, consists in the enchantress's prominent encounter with Odysseus, the original of which can be found in book 10 of Homer's *Odyssey*:¹⁸² Odysseus and his crew arrive on Aiaia, desperately disoriented and demoralised by previous casualties. After resting for two days and gaining orientation, Odysseus sends a vanguard, lead by Eurylochus, to the source of the smoke he saw arising from Circe's palace. When this group arrives there, they are greeted by tame wolves and lions, and they notice Circe singing as well as working on her loom. They call for her; she readily invites them in and provides them with poisoned food and drink before suddenly hitting them with her staff, transforming them into pigs and locking them up in her sty. Eurylochus, who had sensed the trap and observed everything from the outside, returns and reports to Odysseus, who makes his way to liberate them. Hermes steps into his path, warns him of Circe's evil intentions, and supplies him with a herb called moly, which would protect him against her magic. He instructs him to attack her as soon as she reaches for her staff, and to have her swear an oath to not do him any further harm when luring him into her bed.

Hermes withdraws, and Odysseus continues to also be welcomed and hosted by Circe. When offered the drugged wine, he drinks it, which prompts Circe to use her staff on him; the moly, however, prevents its transformative effect, and Odysseus can strike as advised. Circe instantly assumes a suppliant pose and invites him into her bed to gain trust in each other. Odysseus accepts on condition of the above-mentioned oath. It is only after being intimate, enjoying a bath at the hands of Circe's servants, as well as dinner preparations that Odysseus mentions his companions again: he declares it inappropriate to dine before the retrieval of his crew. Moved by his grief, the enchantress eventually retransforms them. Looking at Miller's reworking of this passage, it is striking how closely it resembles the structure of the Homeric original:

182 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,133–399.

A ship, the nymphs said. [...] The afternoon passed, and the sailors did not appear. My nymphs reported they were camped on the beach with fires burning. Another day went by, and at last on the third day came the knock. That painted ship of theirs was the finest thing about them. Their faces had lines like grandfathers. Their eyes were bloodshot and dead. They flinched from my animals. ‘Let me guess,’ I said. ‘You are lost? You are hungry and tired and sad?’ They ate well. They drank more. Their bodies were lumpish here and there with fat, though the muscles beneath were hard as trees. Their scars were long, ridged and slashing [...]. I did not wait any more for them to stand up and come at me. I raised my staff, I spoke the word. They went crying to their pen like all the rest.¹⁸³

Not only is the sailors’ miserable appearance consistent with the picture painted by Homer, but they also flinch from Circe’s cats, and the enchantress’s sudden strike seems similarly unmotivated. The quoted passage is, however, preceded by an explanatory backstory revealing a traumatic event: when the first crew of sailors had appeared on her island, Circe had welcomed them with hospitality. Astonished to find a woman living alone on an otherwise deserted island, they had interrogated her on possible male protectors. Having ensured that there was no one to interfere, their captain had walked up to her and, past violently stunning and silencing her, had raped her in front of his crew. As a safety measure, she had earlier mixed moly into the wine to be used as a sedative, if necessary, but was not able to voice the eliciting spell due to the oppression of her wind-pipe. When released, she takes revenge by resorting to the transformative effect of moly instead: the new appearance of her oppressors as pigs is motivated by noises reaching her from her sty at this very moment. Subsequent visitors and sexual assaults render it plausible that she would expect the same of Odysseus’ newly arrived companions.¹⁸⁴ Like in the *Odyssey*, the hero himself appears after having heard Eurylochus’ report:

¹⁸³ Miller (2019) 173.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Miller (2019) 160–165; 169–172. The scenes perfectly illustrate Miller’s thorough consultation of Homer: like in the *Odyssey*, it is the smoke arising from her palace and her singing which attract the attention of her visitors (cf. Hom. Od. 10,149–150; 196–197; 221; 226–228; 254–255; Miller 160). Their ambiguous perception of the enchantress as a goddess or a mortal woman has a clear model in the Homeric expression “ἢ θεὸς ἢ ἑ γυνή” (“either goddess or woman”, Od. 10,228; 255), and even the number of the “twenty men” matches that of Odysseus’ original vanguard (Miller 167; cf. Hom. Od. 10,208). When Odysseus later enters Circe’s house and “s[its] down in the silver chair I [Circe] indicated” (Miller 174), this

The nymphs [Circe's servants] were helping me set right the toppled benches and scrub away the wine stains when one of them glanced at the window. 'Mistress, another on the path.' I had thought the crew too small to man a full ship. Some of them must have waited on the beach, and now one had been sent to scout after his fellows. The nymphs set out new wine and slipped away.¹⁸⁵

What follows in Miller's novel, however, is the 'battle of wits' she claims to have been wishing for: as the faithful treatment of the Homeric narrative up to this point suggests, the underlying presumption of Odysseus and Circe's encounter is that both are aware of what had happened shortly before as well as each other's intentions. The dialogue between them is driven by an effort to, as for Circe's part, prolong the conversation until her guest would have consumed the drugged wine, whereas Odysseus' aim consists of signaling reason and reassurance while carefully figuring out how to help his companions. Nearly every of his moves or utterances fulfils a purpose: knowing what had happened shortly before in the room, the first thing he does is head for a chair which, left upended, may be the last indication of a previous conflict and straightens it up to test her reaction;¹⁸⁶ his next move of addressing Circe's weaving loom may even be a prime example of rhetorical skill:

He gestured with his cup. 'I have never seen a loom like that,' he said. 'Is it an Eastern design?' A thousand of his kind had passed through this room. They had catalogued every inch of gold and silver, but not one had ever noticed the loom. I hesitated for the briefest moment. 'Egyptian'. 'Ah. They make the best things, don't they' Clever to use a second beam instead of loom weights. So much more efficient to draw the weft down. I would love to have a sketch.' His voice was resonant, warm, with a pull to it that reminded me of ocean tides. 'My wife would be thrilled. Those weights used to drive her mad. She kept saying someone ought to

represents nearly an exact translation of Hom. Od. 10, 314 εἶσε δέ μ' εἰσαγαγοῦσα ἐπὶ θρόνου ἀργυροῦλου ("having led me inside, she made me sit on a silver-decorated chair"). The same is true for the phrases "I heard [...] that many find their trust in love" and "We did find some trust between us" (Miller 179 and 181, respectively), which closely resemble the Homeric wording ὄφρα [...] φιλότητι πεποιθομέν ἀλλήλοισιν ("until, through love, we have found trust to one another", Od. 10,334–335).

185 Miller (2019) 173.

186 Miller (2019) 174.

invent something better. Alas, I have not found the time to apply myself to it. One of my many husbandly failings.’¹⁸⁷

In terms of content, he uses a concrete object as a conversational starting point, organically repurposes it as a transition to mentioning his wife, and implicitly emphasises his appreciation for her as well as his awareness of responsible behaviour towards women. In ignoring the rich furnishings of the room, he presents himself as distinctly different from the ordinary plunderers Circe had been meeting beforehand, and his generally conciliating tone signals harmless intentions. It seems that Miller’s Odysseus very deliberately plays with the traditional persuasive means of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, and generally, reading this scene evokes the impression of witnessing a performance. In contrast to Homer’s Odysseus, who naively takes in the drugged wine and waits for Circe’s spell to fail, this becomes particularly evident in his handling of the drinking vessel:

He took the goblet and sat in the silver chair I indicated. [...] He gestured with his cup. [...] His goblet was lifted loosely in his hand, as if any moment he would drink. [...] I sipped my wine [...]. He gestured with his cup now here, now there, sloshing his wine a little, but never spilling it. And never once touching it to his lips.¹⁸⁸

Even when Circe grows impatient and directly addresses Odysseus’ reluctance to drink, he manages to evade and steer the conversation towards his own enquiries about the whereabouts of his men.¹⁸⁹ It is at this point that the illusion of hospitality turns into an openly addressed conflict. Where the Homeric Odysseus, however, would have straightforwardly attacked the enchantress, his namesake in *Circe* expresses his wish to “settle this with reason”¹⁹⁰ and only places his hand on the sword hilt as a precautionary measure; where Homer’s Circe would have been deeply intimidated by the hero’s blade, Miller’s protagonist simply remarks that “[w]eapons do not frighten me, nor the sight of my

187 Miller (2019) 174.

188 Miller (2019) 174–76.

189 Miller (2019) 177.

190 Miller (2019) 177.

own blood”¹⁹¹. When the enchantress eventually resolves this stalemate situation by openly making sexual advances, Circe acts, in contrast to her Homeric equivalent, of her own free will, and her erotic manoeuvre is not a last resort, but rather the result of a gradually rising and mutual sexual tension:

[T]here was something in him that nearly felt familiar [...]. His sword hilt was hacked from ten years of battles, his scarred body braced and ready. His legs were short but stiff with muscles. My skin prickled. He was handsome, I realized [...]. My name in his mouth. It sparked a feeling in me, sharp and eager [...]. He was smiling, inviting me to laugh, as if we were two mischievous children [...]. He reminded me a little of Daedalus [an earlier love affair], his evenness and wit. But beneath his ease I could feel a roil that Daedalus never had. I wanted to see it revealed [...]. His skin smelled of labour and the sea. He knew ten years of stories. I felt keen and hungry as a bear in spring.¹⁹²

It should have become obvious that Miller’s retelling of this passage in particular poses a skilful reworking of the original Homeric passage, as it not only follows its narrative structure, but improves on it in several ways: by introducing the painful experience of rape and a situational link to the animals kept by Circe, she motivates both her deeds and pigs as the chosen result of transformation. Beyond that, her version of Odysseus corresponds to the hero’s general reputation as an eloquent diplomat rather than Homer’s portrayal of him as a soldier pragmatically resorting to violence.

CONCLUSION

With Homeric side characters as protagonists as well as their respective agenda of advocating for homosexuality and female agency in traditionally heteronormative and patriarchal epic literature, Miller’s novels represent perfect examples of 21st century mythological retellings and their corrective claim. It is this claim, along with the classical matters they adopt, which makes such works vulnerable to accusations of a possible midcult, i.e. literature which pretends to, in

191 Miller (2019) 177.

192 Miller (2019) 175–79.

its original sense, represent high culture or art, or in its new sense, to address socially relevant topics, while not doing justice to either of these issues in their concrete literary realisation. It is particularly the new form of midcult, in which the discussion of these topics appears to be less relevant than an author's capacity to personally authenticate them, and to confirm readers in convictions they already share.

This pertains to Miller, who uses her status as a classical philologist to lend herself authority over ancient matters and present herself as a typical *poeta doctus* with good knowledge of her sources on the one hand, and as a philanthropist sharing the values of the new midcult on the other hand. Problems arise when she either projects these values into ancient texts and interprets them in questionable ways, or misrepresents ancient poetics to present herself in a better light. Especially the claim of her novels' 'oral presence' in the tradition of pre-literate epic performances appears untenable, just like her role as a rediscoverer of an allegedly suppressed homosexual reading of Patroclus and Achilles' relationship. The missionary effect she ascribes to her novels cannot be falsified, but certainly raises scepticism.

Although both novel's narrative framework is closely modelled on the respective mythological templates, a closer look reveals that different verdicts must be passed: since *The Song of Achilles*' agenda of an intimate perspective on the life of Achilles results in an over-stylisation of Patroclus' characteristic gentleness and a potentially problematic binary conception of homosexuality – which it was supposed to advocate for – it proves difficult to arrive at a final assessment other than to confirm the 'structural lie' of midcult in both the original and the new sense. It is all the more surprising that this does not hold true for *Circe*: with a variety of genuinely female topics and strong female characters, the novel certainly constitutes a 'feminist project', as intended by Miller. Meta-commentaries reflecting on the nature of (male) epic literature and the skilful reworking of especially Circe's encounter with Odysseus additionally indicate and encourage active intertextual dialogue rather than forced and predetermined interpretation.

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Cassandra in a Time of War: A Reading of Marcial Gala's *Llámenme Casandra* and Igiaba Scego's *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*

Abstract This article focuses on Marcial Gala's 2019 novel *Llámenme Casandra* and Igiaba Scego's 2023 novel *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* demonstrating how both texts feature the mythological prophetess Cassandra in order to thematize conflict and social stigma in relation to colonial/postcolonial contexts and intersectional identities. More in general, my argument contributes to mapping the growing relevance of Cassandra in world literature and the arts as a key character for problematizing issues of social marginalization.

My argument is divided into three sections. Section one provides an overview of the contemporary reception of Cassandra's myth aimed at showing that the two traits associated with this character (prophetic voice related to wars and social marginality) are the core elements driving such reception. Sections two and three focus on Scego's and Gala's novels. Gala's novel features a male soldier who identifies himself as a re-incarnation of Cassandra fighting during the Cuban Intervention in Angola (1970s), while in *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* the author herself identifies as Cassandra in narrating her family's experiences during the Somali Civil War (1990s) and the migration to Italy.

By examining these texts through the methodological lenses provided by Classical Reception Studies, Queer Studies and Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, I demonstrate how the two novels work as key sites for the exploration of the processes behind the construction of social identities.

Keywords Classical Reception, Classical Mythology, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Literature, Critical Race Studies

INTRODUCTION

In Greco-Latin literature, Cassandra – daughter of king Priam and queen Hecuba – is often mentioned in relation to her prophecies about the Trojan War, which are systematically ignored despite being true.¹ As Cassandra herself recounts in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the god Apollo gifted her with prophetic abilities; since she refused to lie with him, however, he cursed her with the inability to ever be believed.²

Cassandra's identity is defined by two essential traits. The first is related to war, as pointed out by Véronique Léonard-Roques and Philippe Mesnard in their introduction to the essay collection *Cassandra. Figure du témoignage*:

Car, dès l'Antiquité, la guerre de Troie offre un matériau symbolique pour penser les désastres guerriers, ancrer la réflexion politique et historique du présent. À ce conflit, l'Occident confère encore le statut symbolique de guerre à valeur originelle. Dans cet ensemble, Cassandre opère comme une figure privilégiée pour dire et interroger la destruction et le deuil.³

As a result, in the long “chain of receptions” theorized by Hans Robert Jauss⁴, many authors have referenced Cassandra to highlight or denounce a number of

1 Cassandra's prophecies mainly revolve around Paris and, as a result, around the fate of the city of Troy. The exploration of this theme begins with the epic cycle (in the *Iliad*, Cassandra is not described as a prophetess), moves on to Attic tragedy and lyric poetry and concludes with Latin literature (the Virgilian *Aeneid* in particular). Cassandra's prophecies outline the tragic outcomes resulting from Paris' return to Troy (after his recognition as the son of the king and queen of Troy), his journey to Sparta and, lastly, the introduction of the wooden horse into Troy.

2 Cf. Aeschyl. *Ag.* 1202–1212. Further evidence of this version of the myth can be found in Lycoph. *Alex.* 1454–57; Apollod. 3, 12, 5; Quint. Smyrn. 12, 526–28; Orph. *Lith.* 764–66; school. Eur. *Andr.* 296; Serv. *Aen.* 2, 247.

3 Léonard-Roques and Mesnard (2015) 13. “Since Antiquity, the Trojan War has provided symbolic material for reflecting on the catastrophes of war and for anchoring political and historical reflection in the present. In the West, this conflict still has the symbolic status of a war of primordial value. In this context, Cassandra functions as a privileged figure who speaks and questions destruction and mourning” (my translation).

4 Jauss (1982) 20. This article draws on the approach to the study of Classical Reception proposed by Carlà and Berti (2015): “the reception of antiquity never constitutes a one-to-

aspects related to conflicts and wars that often do not find the right space for representation.

Cassandra's second trait can be identified by looking at the classical texts, where Cassandra always finds herself in a somewhat marginal or marginalized position, in that she never manages to adapt her identity to any standard gendered norms, be they social or religious. On the one hand, by refusing Apollo's sexual demands, Cassandra does not conform to the norms that define the relationship between a prophetess and a god. As a result of Apollo's punishment, she will never be an "ordinary" prophetess like Pythia, whose prophecies are always believed. Cassandra is even considered insane because of her prophecies.

On the other hand, while women in the ancient Greek world are expected to become wives and mothers, Cassandra never⁵ succeeds in getting married or in establishing any long-lasting and socially approved relationship with a man.⁶ Most of her interactions with men take the form of rape, as in the case of Agamemnon or Ajax.⁷ This leaves Cassandra in a marginalized position; she becomes neither a fully-fledged prophetess nor a wife-mother.⁸ Thus, in consid-

one relationship between a "model" and a "recipient", but an unbroken chain of translations, adaptations and influences" (1).

⁵ This is true for virtually all versions of the myth, with the sole exception of Pausanias (Paus. 2.16.6). In his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias briefly mentions Teledamus and Pelops as Cassandra's twin sons. It is, however, a case that has almost no relevance in the long history of Cassandra's reception.

⁶ In the *Iliad*, Cassandra is compared to the goddess Aphrodite for her beauty. By virtue of her beauty, which makes her superior to her sisters (Hom. *Il.* 13, 365), Cassandra is sought after for marriage. Her father Priam arranges her to be married in exchange for alliances and gifts which would prove useful in the Trojan War. Her husband-to-be, Othryoneus, however, is killed by the Greek warrior Idomeneus (Hom. *Il.* 13, 263). In other literary sources, the name of her future husband is Corebus (cf. Mikra *Ilias* fr. 15 Bernabé ap. Paus. 10, 27, 1; Verg. *Aen.* 2, 341, 426) or Euripilus (cf. Dict. 4, 14).

⁷ In relation to Agamemnon, Cassandra is either taken as a concubine (Eur. *Tro.* 251) or enslaved (Aesch. *Ag.* 1035). As for Ajax, several sources narrate that, during the sack of Troy, Cassandra sought refuge as a supplicant in the temple of Athena, where she was pursued, seized, and raped by Ajax Oileus. This episode appears in the *Ilioupersis* attributed to Arctinus of Miletus (*Il. Pers.* I, 89, 15–18 Bernabé); in Alceus (fr. 298 Voigt); in Stesichorus' *Ilioupersis* (fr. 205 Davies); in Sophocles' *Ajax* (fr. 10 c Radt); in Euripides' *Trojan Women* (Eur. *Tro.* 69–71) and in Lycophron's *Alexandra* (Lycoph. *Alex.* 1089).

⁸ Léonard-Roques and Mesnard (2015) define Cassandra's identity as marked by a "féminité discordante" (12); Sabina Mazzoldi (2001) states that "Cassandra donna si trova [...], per

ering Cassandra's history in the classical world, it could be argued that she lives in a condition of double marginality. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, there is even a third form of marginalisation, since Cassandra is portrayed as a prophetess from a foreign land whose voice is defined as "barbaric".⁹ This makes her an ideal character for representing and problematizing issues of social marginalization in modern and contemporary receptions.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that these two traits of Cassandra's character (prophetic voice related to wars and social marginality) which are deeply interrelated since ancient literature, are still very much relevant and active today. More specifically, I would argue that they are particularly effective in thematizing conflict and social stigma in relation to colonial/postcolonial contexts and intersectional identities as exemplified by Marcial Gala's 2019 novel *Llámenme Casandra* and Igiaba Scego's 2023 novel *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*.

This article is divided into three sections. Section one provides an overview of the modern and contemporary reception of Cassandra's myth aimed at showing that the two traits mentioned above are the core elements driving such reception. Sections two and three focus on Gala's and Scego's novels, respectively, demonstrating how both texts feature the mythological prophetess Cassandra in order to articulate meanings and identities around gender and social marginalization in a time of war. I will pay particular attention to the study of how both novels represent Cassandra as the point of intersection between multiple planes of marginality. This, in turn, becomes the starting point for the critical deconstruction of the notion of marginality itself. By highlighting the mechanisms of control and repression at the heart of marginalization practices, both novels work as key sites for the exploration of the processes behind the construction of social identities.

certi aspetti, ad essere una non-donna" (30). "Cassandra, a woman, finds herself to be [...], in some respects, a non-woman" (my translation)

⁹ Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1051, 1062.

THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL-LITERARY PREMISES

Before analyzing how Cassandra's marginality has been portrayed in modern and contemporary receptions, it is necessary to define the concept of "marginality" itself. Drawing on the works of American sociologist Harvey Sacks and the concept of gender performance theorized by queer studies, social marginality can be described as a consequence of non-compliance with prescriptive social norms.

Harvey Sacks argues that society is divided into categories based on characteristics such as age, gender, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, and profession. For the purpose of this analysis, it is important to highlight two fundamental characteristics that Sacks attributes to the categories. Firstly, they are hierarchically organized: "man" is at a higher level than "woman"; "white woman" is higher than "black woman"; "heterosexual man" is higher than "homosexual man" and so on.¹⁰

Secondly, each category is closely linked to specific activities, which Sacks calls "category-bound activities".¹¹ The most important category is that of "Member", defined in opposition to a series of "boundary categories".¹² Boundary categories include individuals who do not perform the activities on which their categories depend; therefore, they are not considered full-fledged Members (with a capital M) of a social group. This results, in turn, in marginalization or even exclusion from said group.

Sacks's work suggests that identities are non-ontological, a concept that would later be developed in queer theory (particularly by Butler and Sedgwick) through the idea of performance.¹³ Queer Theory conceives of gender as arising from the repetition of a series of codified acts. In the words of Butler:

¹⁰ Sacks (1992) cites as an example of "positioned categories" the categories of "child, adolescent and adult" (I, 586–587), while Dell'Aversano (2018) points out that the fact that "the male/female categories in our culture are ordered in a rigid hierarchy is evident (at least...) from the absence of phrases like *'he has ovaries' or *'be a woman'" (57).

¹¹ Cf. Sacks (1992): "Let's introduce a term, which I'm going to call "category-bound activities". What I mean by that is, there are a great many activities which Members take it are done by some particular category of persons, or several categories of persons [...]" (I, 241).

¹² Cf. Sacks (1992) I, 71.

¹³ Judith Butler (2006) acknowledges the central role of the idea of performance in her and other queer theorists' work (xiv). Moreover, in one of her early articles, she cites Goffman (cf.

In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. [...] There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame – an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject.¹⁴

This methodological framework allows us to re-read ancient Greco-Latin works in a different key, thus a deeper understanding of Cassandra's reception. It can be argued that Cassandra's double marginality results from the incorrect or incomplete performance of *multiple* gendered social norms. As a consequence, Cassandra has become an ideal character for thematizing *intersectional* forms of social marginalization.

Mary Romero (2003) defines intersectionality (a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to define a critical approach aimed at uncovering interrelated systems of discrimination) as a “methodology [that] requires examining the dynamics of individual and group identities as they intersect within the axes of power that comprise a structural level of analysis” (6). In order to provide a critical analysis of Cassandra's marginality and its reception, it is crucial to combine the methods provided by Sacks, Queer Theory, and studies in intersectionality.

Given this methodological framework, it is necessary to frame the two novels by Scego and Gala from a historical-literary perspective. French Renaissance tragedies such as Nicolas Filleul's *Achille* (1563) already depict Cassandra in the context of the civil disasters and religious conflicts that occurred in France between 1562 and 1598. During the Enlightenment, Cassandra is once again as-

Butler 1988, 528). See also Dell'Aversano (2018): “if the definition of “queer” I proposed above is accepted, and if queer is accepted to have (as any other descriptive term in the humanities and social sciences) both a historical and theoretical meaning, then Sacks's work on categorization processes is the first known instance of queer theory. Of course, given the complete lack of contact, up to this moment, between Sacks's theory of social categories and queer theory, the import of my claim is not genealogical or historical but exclusively chronological” (46). Dell'Aversano (2018) highlights the link between Sacks's and Butler's work, not only in terms of identity performance but also in understanding the operation of categories and the potential to de-ontologize them.

14 Butler (2006) 191.

sociated with political discourse. Louis-Népomucène Lamercier, who shared revolutionary ideals but was hostile to the Terror, features Cassandra and the Trojan War in his play *Agamemnon* (1797) as a means to describe and understand his time. In Ugo Foscolo's poem *Dei Sepolcri* (1807), Cassandra is once again associated with a civil issue, namely the French occupation of Italian territories. In the poem, Cassandra's voice leads her young compatriots in front of the tombs of fallen warriors. This symbolizes the importance of preserving cultural identity and memory beyond historical and political divisions. The poem *À Cassandre*, dedicated by Osip Mandelstam to Anna Akhmatova, evokes Cassandra in the context of the political tensions in Russia during the winter of 1917–1918. Similarly, in two of Giraudoux's works (*La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, 1935 and *Électre*, 1937), Cassandra is employed as a means to warn against the dangers of fascism.

Besides featuring war themes, many contemporary retellings of the Cassandra myth also focus on her social marginalization. For instance, in Christa Wolf's works, such as the novel *Kassandra* (1983) and the essay *Voraussetzungen einer Erzählung. Kassandra* (1983), the author uses Cassandra to both condemn the arms race of the 1980s and give voice to feminist claims. Wolf's writings portray Cassandra as having a strong sense of agency and speaking for herself, unlike other women who are subject to patriarchal law. According to Véronique Léonard-Roques (2015), Cassandra is an ideal character for reflecting on women's marginality in a patriarchal society because she is "une figure discordante en termes de genre (gender)".¹⁵ Inspired by Christa Wolf's *Kassandra*, the Indian artist Nalini Malani, portrays Cassandra not only as a prophetess criticizing the consequences of India's partition into two nations (India and Pakistan), but also as a symbol of the marginal role of women in a patriarchal society.¹⁶ The play *Kassandra*, written by French-Uruguayan Sergio Blanco in 2015, portrays the

¹⁵ Véronique Léonard-Roques (2015) 204: "an ambiguous figure with regard to gender" (my translation).

¹⁶ The importance that the character of Cassandra has for this artist is clearly shown by *The Rebellion of the Dead* (2018–2019), the second part of a retrospective organized by the Centre Pompidou in Paris and Rivoli Castle in Italy. In fact, in the second part of the retrospective in Italy, Cassandra is the main character that drives the narrative. In the very first pages of the catalog of this retrospective, there is a text in which Malani herself explains what the character of Cassandra represents for her: "Cassandra also implies what has been denied to women. Her insights are ignored and considered heretical. She symbolises the unfinished business of the women's revolution – a woman's thoughts and premonitions are not under-

mythological prophetess as a reporter of the war atrocities during the repressive Uruguayan military regime of 1973–1985. The play also problematizes multiple levels of marginalization, as the protagonist Cassandra is stigmatized for being a woman, a migrant, a sex worker, and a transgender person.¹⁷

With this brief overview, it is easy to see the growing relevance of Cassandra in world literature and the arts as a key character for articulating meanings and identities around social marginalization in a time of war.

Two contemporary novels that fit perfectly into this framework are the 2019 novel by Marcial Gala, *Llámenme Casandra*, and the 2023 novel by Igiaba Scego, *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*.

As the title of both novels already makes clear, Cassandra is the true semiotic centre of these narratives. Gala's novel features a male soldier who identifies himself as a reincarnation of Cassandra. He fights during the Cuban intervention in Angola in the 1970s and recounts his experience as a soldier from his focalized point of view. *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*, on the other hand, is a non-fictional account of Scego's (who strongly identifies with Cassandra) and her family's experiences during the Somali civil war in the 1990s and their subsequent migration to Italy.

WAR AND MARGINALISATION IN IGIABA SCEGO'S *CASSANDRA A MOGADISCIO*

Cassandra as war witness

Igiaba Scego, the first Italian Afro-descendant nominated for Italy's prestigious Strega Prize, wrote *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* (2023) as a memoir addressed to her niece Soraya. Throughout the novel, the references to Cassandra are both nu-

stood and taken cognisance of. That is what Cassandra teaches us [...]. It is the moment to consider this myth because it works on two levels. On the one hand denying truths, on the other hand not giving women their rightful position" (Beccaria 2018).

¹⁷ For an in-depth exploration of these works, see the essays collected in Léonard-Roques and Mesnard (2015), with particular attention to Karsenti (2015) 69–90; Giboux (2015) 70–91; Racine (2015) 121–142; Aucouturier (2015) 167–178; Besnard (2015) 179–194; Urdician (2015) 299–320.

merous and a powerful source of meaning. The book begins and ends with a reference to the Trojan prophetess: there is a quotation from Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* in the exergue¹⁸ and Cassandra is thanked in the acknowledgments section that closes the volume: "E naturalmente ringrazio Cassandra, figlia di Ecuba e Priamo. Che aveva ragione. Su tutto. Queste pagine sono anche per lei: perché la storia può toglierci la casa, ma non la voce; può accecare i nostri occhi, ma mai, mai la nostra memoria¹⁹" (364). Furthermore, Scego establishes a strong connection with Euripides's *Trojan Women*, as *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* contains many direct quotes (in Italian) from the tragedy.

Cassandra a Mogadiscio recounts the history of Somalia, with a particular focus on the city of Mogadiscio, from the early 1900s. The book also follows the experiences of Scego's family, whose experiences have been heavily influenced by post-traumatic stress disorder, to which Scego refers using the Somali word "jirro", which literally means "illness".²⁰ Scego's family history spans multiple wars and colonial domains, tracing back to the Italian colonialism in Somalia from 1909 to 1945. During this time, Scego's grandfather, Omar, worked for General Rodolfo Graziani.²¹ Many Somalis were also forced to take up arms and were used as 'black cannon fodder' (my translation)²² during the war against Ethiopia declared by Mussolini. If Scego's grandfather lived and worked under

18 "Tutto questo, la Troia della mia infanzia, esiste ancora nella mia testa soltanto. Qui dentro, finché ho tempo, la voglio riedificare, non voglio dimenticare nessuna pietra, nessuna lama di luce, nessuna risata, nessun grido. Anche se per breve tempo; voglio custodirla in me fedelmente. Ora posso vedere quello che non c'è, con quanta fatica l'ho imparato" (5–6). "All this, the Troy of my childhood, still exists only in my mind. In here, while I still have time, I want to rebuild it, I don't want to forget a single stone, a single blade of light, a single laugh, a single cry. Even if only for a short time, I want to keep it faithfully in me. Now I can see what is not there; how hard was it to understand!" (my translation)

19 "And of course I thank Cassandra, daughter of Hecuba and Priam. Who was right. About everything. These pages are for her, too: because history can take away our home, but not our voice; it can blind our eyes, but never, never our memory" (my translation)

20 There are accounts of the illnesses of various family members, including vomiting/bulimia that affects Scego's body during conflicts when her mother is away from home, as well as numerous cases of cancer among family members.

21 Rodolfo Graziani was an Italian general who was appointed governor of Somalia when fascist Italy decided to attack Ethiopia in 1935.

22 "carne ne(g)ra da cannone" (84)

Italian colonial rule, her father, Ali Omar Scego, experienced the transition to British rule. The British took over at the end of the Second World War and remained in control until November '49, when the United Nations declared that Somalia should be led to democracy by the whites and placed it under Italian trusteeship until 1960. In Somalia, changes in rulers and colonizers also led to changes in language. Scego's grandfather was Graziani's interpreter, while her father taught himself English using an abandoned book. This enabled him to secure employment under the British and gradually build a successful career. Eventually, he became the first governor of Mogadishu, as well as an ambassador and minister of finance after Somalia's independence in 1960.

In 1970, the story of Scego's family shifted from Somalia to Italy. Her parents were expelled by dictator Siad Barre and migrated to Rome, leaving their children in Somalia with their maternal aunt. Igiaba, their only child born outside of the African continent, was born in Rome in 1974. Scego's family history became entangled with wars and clashes in Somalia once again when the charges against her mother (and only her mother) were dropped and she decided to travel to Mogadishu. On 31 December 1990, Scego and her father were alone in their Roman home when the television announced clashes in Mogadishu²³. This marked the beginning of a prolonged period of conflict, and as a consequence all contacts with Scego's mother were lost for two years.

Throughout the narrative, Scego's family is consistently portrayed as a 'Cassandra family'. However, whereas the mythological Cassandra is not trusted by the members of her community, in the case of Scego the family members themselves do not believe their own (correct) predictions, which usually take the form of "visions" of catastrophes. This ultimately leads them to not believe their own eyes once their predictions are realized: "Come se la realtà, troppo brutale, ci rendesse improvvisamente ciechi" (141).²⁴ Most of the visions experienced by Scego's family are connected to war and the Somali civil war that began in 1991 following Siad Barre's overthrow is central to the narrative. Scego suggests that not only herself, her father, and her entire family can be considered Cassandra, but also anyone who, foretelling conflict and catastrophe, tries to warn her/his

23 The conflicts that erupted in Somalia between late 1990 and 1991 were linked to the desire to remove, from the Somali political scene, Siad Barre, who had seized power in Somalia on 21 October 1969. However, after Siad Barre's ousting, internal struggles emerged in Somalia among various tribal groups vying for power and control over the resource-rich territory.

24 "As if reality, too brutal, suddenly made us blind" (my translation).

people to no avail.²⁵ Therefore, it would be appropriate to adopt the plural form and speak of “Cassandras” in Mogadishu.

The novel draws a parallel between Scego’s father and Cassandra twice. Firstly, Scego writes that when the war broke out in Somalia in 1990, her father understood that the city of Mogadishu where he grew up was destined to be reduced to rubble; however, like Cassandra, he did not want to believe this (95). In a later section of the novel, the author recounts her father’s visit to West Germany in the mid-1960s as part of a Somali delegation. The delegation’s visit to the Berlin Wall is documented in a video available on YouTube. In the video, Scego notes her father’s uneasy expression. She interprets her father’s expression as a sign that he is predicting a future of wars and bloodshed for Somalia, much like Cassandra’s war-related prophetic visions in Greco-Roman literature.²⁶

After comparing her father in the video to Cassandra, Scego questions whether it is actually herself and not her father who is afraid and should be compared to the mythological Cassandra, punished by Apollo and condemned to see without being heard: “E io? Da chi sono stata punita e maledetta? Come mai? E aabo?” (336)²⁷ (n.b. “aabo” is the Somali term for father). Scego had asked a similar question earlier in the novel: “La vedo seduta [Mogadiscio] accanto a una Troia sanguinante, mentre Cassandra, la figlia di Ecuba e Priamo, ne osserva le cicatrici. E le sue lacrime diventano polvere. E se quella Cassandra fossi io, Soraya? Una Cassandra che vede il Jirro sovrastare i continenti. Non più figlia di Ecuba e Priamo, ma di Chadigia e Ali. Una Cassandra a Mogadiscio” (119–120).²⁸ In other parts of the novel, the parallelism between Scego and Cassandra becomes even

25 “Cassandra, perché c’è sempre una Cassandra in ogni luogo, aveva avvertito il popolo somalo della tragedia imminente. [...] Ma nessuno voleva credere a Cassandra” (104). “Cassandra, because there is always a Cassandra everywhere, warned the Somali people of the impending tragedy. [...] But no one wanted to believe Cassandra” (my translation).

26 A few pages later, the author reinforces the parallelism between her father and Cassandra: “Come Cassandra aabo avrebbe voluto avvertire noi abitanti del futuro e anche la delegazione politica con cui condivideva quel viaggio. Ma chi gli avrebbe mai creduto? Chi crederebbe a Cassandra?” (336). “Like Cassandra, Aabo would have wanted to warn us inhabitants of the future, and also the political delegation with whom he shared that journey. But who would have believed him? Who would believe Cassandra?” (my translation).

27 “And me? By whom was I punished and cursed? How come? And aabo?” (my translation).

28 “I see her [Mogadishu] sitting next to a bleeding Troy while Cassandra, the daughter of Hecuba and Priam, looks at her scars. And her tears turn to dust. What if that Cassandra were me, Soraya? A Cassandra who sees Jirro towering over the continents. No longer the

more pronounced. Scego refers to herself as a child, as a “piccola Cassandra confusa che frequentava ancora le medie” (239).²⁹ She also describes how her body shudders upon hearing news of the 1990s clashes in Somalia on television, much like Cassandra who sensed the approaching disaster in front of the wooden horse.³⁰ These expressions of distress cease abruptly upon her mother’s return to Rome after surviving two years of conflict in Somalia.³¹

Scego feels a strong sense of urgency to write this novel in order to tell the story of Somalia and draw attention to the issue, because Somalia has been largely ignored in Italy³², and the war destroyed all the archives in Somalia. For this reason, passing along an oral memory, in this case that of Scego’s mother, is invaluable (362) and the reference to the mythological figure of Cassandra should also be read in the light of the testimonial value of memory, a theme already strong in Wolf’s *Kassandra*³³. It is also important to note that this narrative is specifi-

daughter of Hecuba and Priam, but of Chadigia and Ali. A Cassandra in Mogadishu” (my translation).

29 “a confused little Cassandra still in secondary school” (my translation).

30 “Cosa stava succedendo nel mio paese di origine? Il mio corpo era percorso da brividi. Mi sentivo come Cassandra, la figlia di Priamo, quando vide il maledetto cavallo di legno davanti alle mura della sua città. Il cavallo con dentro gli Achei che avrebbero distrutto Troia e la sua famiglia. Cassandra vedeva la sciagura approssimarsi. E anch’io vedevo la sciagura mentre roteavo la testa con Stevie Wonder che da uno stereo mi dettava il ritmo” (29). “What was happening in my home country? My body was shivering. I felt like Cassandra, the daughter of Priam, when she saw the damned wooden horse in front of the walls of her city. The horse with the Achaeans inside who would destroy Troy and her family. Cassandra saw doom approaching. And I too saw doom as I swivelled my head with Stevie Wonder setting the rhythm from a stereo” (my translation).

31 “Non più visioni. Non più divinazioni. Non più pianti che nessuno ascolta” (351). “No more visions. No more divinations. No more cries that no one listens to” (my translation).

32 “Di solito la televisione non si occupava di noi. Un po’ come adesso. Anche adesso non si occupa di noi” (24). “Television was uninterested in us. A bit like now. Even now it doesn’t care about us” (my translation). Moreover, in the novel, Scego recounts that when her parents went to talk to her teachers, they were surprised by the teachers’ lack of knowledge about Somalia’s colonial history. The teachers, on the other hand, were impressed by her parents’ knowledge of Italian, demonstrating a shocking lack of knowledge about Somalia’s history. For a more in-depth exploration of this topic, see Scego and Ziolkowski (2023): “In our books for middle-schoolers and teenagers in Italy, no one speaks about colonialism” (387).

33 Cf. Véronique Léonard-Roques (2015): “La Cassandre de Wolf, promue au rang d’héroïne éponyme et de narratrice dans la fiction, est caractérisée par son obsession de la transmis-

cally addressed to Soraya, Scego's niece, creating an all-female triangle between Scego's mother as the oral witness, Soraya as the addressee, and Scego as the translator (19). Scego, who is childless and unmarried (like the mythological Cassandra), is described by her mother, in the novel, as being "married to literature" (my translation).³⁴ This makes her the perfect intermediary between a grandmother and granddaughter who belong to a diasporic family scattered across three continents due to wars, and who do not share a common language (133).

War and conflict are not, however, the only elements that lead Scego to identify with Cassandra. In the next section, I will explore how the presence of the Trojan prophetess in *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* also transmits meaning related to social marginality.

Cassandra's marginality in Scego's novel

The first form of marginality thematized in *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* through the figure of the Trojan prophetess is the one experienced by women in a patriarchal society.

The many stories that Scego recounts in *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* are consistently haunted by the ghostly presence of violence against women, pervasive yet socially invisible. Moreover, the violence of war is so closely linked to the violence on women's bodies that Italian, the language of the colonizers, becomes for Scego (my translation) "the language of rules and savagery. Language of violated vaginas and denied education" (178).³⁵ Given the centrality of women's issues in the architecture of the novel, the choice of the niece as the recipient of the novel/memoir seems anything but accidental. Unsurprisingly, Scego cites Bell Hooks (the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins) as a source of inspiration in

sion" (202). "Wolf's Cassandra, elevated to the rank of eponymous heroine and narrator, is characterised by her obsession with transmission" (my translation).

34 "sposata con le lettere e le parole" (144).

35 "Lingua di regole e ferocia. Lingua di vagine violate e scolarizzazione negata" (178). "Language of rules and cruelty. Language of violated vaginas and denied education" (my translation). In the novel there is also mention of "Kurkurei" and "Shermutte", Somali women who sold their bodies to the Italian colonialists who wanted, according to Scego, to "colonizzare vagine con la forza del denaro e del potere" (179). "colonise vaginas with the force of money and power" (my translation).

the novel, stating that it was probably Bell Hooks' reflections on the political role of women's bodies that prompted her to write to her niece.³⁶

In Scego's narrative, patriarchy takes not only the form of domestic violence and lack of female education, but also that of infibulation. This is an issue that somehow links the grandmother and the granddaughter. The former experienced it on her own body, while the latter (Soraya Omar-Scego) found herself representing the practice on the big screen, as an actress in the film *Desert Flower* (2009), which tells the story of Waris Dirie, a naturalized Somali model from Austria, who is determined to defeat the practice of female genital mutilation. As Scego notes, she and Soraya are women liberated from the specific form of patriarchy that subjects women to infibulation.³⁷ Scego's mother, on the other hand, not only endured Somali patriarchy and its infibulation, but also experienced a medicalized form of patriarchal racism when giving birth to Igiaba in Italy: she found herself in a hospital room full of male doctors looking at her slit vagina and pointing at her missing clitoris.

The second marginalization thematized in the novel is directly dependent upon the category of "race" as described by Harvey Sacks (see above). Scego writes that the women of her family were often hit "like a bullet" by the "n-word" ("n" stands for "nero", Italian word for "black")³⁸ and insulted through a myriad of expressions: "Cioccolatino; Negrettina; Faccetta nera; Moretta; Cacao Mera-vigliao" (257). But racism also entered Scego's life in ways that went far beyond words. Because of her skin color, Scego was told that it would be difficult to treat her eyes (she suffers from low pressure glaucoma), because doctors were unable to accurately examine the eyes of a black woman. She was also discouraged

36 "Sorella, la nostra intimità è politica. Sorella, la nostra intimità è rivoluzione. Sorella, la nostra intimità è la vita che il Jirro non avrà mai. Forse inconsciamente è stata proprio Bell Hooks a spingermi a scriverti, nipote mia. Siamo donne. Io sono una donna matura che si affaccia al lato nascosto della luna. Tu sei una giovane donna che quella luna l'ha appena calpestate. Insieme siamo la Via Lattea" (37). "Sister, our intimacy is politics. Sister, our intimacy is revolution. Sister, our intimacy is the life that Jirro will never have. Perhaps unconsciously it was Bell Hooks who prompted me to write to you, my niece. We are women. I am a mature woman facing the hidden side of the moon. You are a young woman who has just walked on that moon. Together, we are the Milky Way" (my translation).

37 "donne liberate dal patriarcato che ha divorato le clitoridi delle donne" (42).

38 "È la parola con la N che non smette di tormentarla. Le è successo tante volte di essere colpita da quella parola come una pallottola" (257).

to attempt a career in Academia, being told by university professionals that her knowledge and skin would never find a place there (259).³⁹

This colonial system of strict separation between whites and blacks was experienced not only by Scego in Italy, but also by her father in Somalia under both the Italians and the British, as the invading Europeans regarded Somalis as subordinate bodies to be marginalized and exploited, so much so that her father and other Somalis were subjected to insults such as (my translation) ‘savages; barbarians; monkeys’.⁴⁰ Reclaiming Bell Hooks’ intersectional approach to feminism, Scego connects the two boundary categories of “woman” and “black person”; while it is true that patriarchy oppresses women’s bodies, it is also true that it oppresses black women’s bodies with double force. For example, Scego mentions a podcast by Omisade Burney-Scott, an Afro-descendant woman from North Carolina, which addresses the issue of the female body approaching the end of fertility. The podcast explains that “for Afro-descendants, the symptomology of premenopause/menopause is likely to last longer because of the stress of being a black body among white people” (my translation).⁴¹

The third marginal category represented in Scego’s novel concerns her Muslim religion. She writes that she never told her classmates that her religion included five prayers a day and foot-washing, because they were all either Christians or atheists. She was ashamed to tell her classmates that she washed her feet in the sink at home because she knew they would think it was “unhygienic”.⁴² She also discusses how the word “normal” has been a burden to her over the years, particularly as a student. On the one hand, she wanted to be seen as a “normal” girl who liked white boys (345). On the other hand, she became infatuated with a boy with a darker complexion than her other classmates, precisely because she was looking for a difference to add to her own, so as not to feel like an exception: “Per

39 In the interview with Ziolkowski, Scego states that “Society is more open [...] The problem is in the intelligentsia, publishers, and the media system, we have a lack of representation. It is quite difficult to find literature published by different people, Black, brown, or by people with other origins, say Chinese, instead it is all white. Our environment is all white” (Scego & Ziolkowski 2023, 389).

40 “selvaggi; barbari; scimmie” (331).

41 “per le afrodiscendenti la sintomatologia della premenopausa/menopausa rischia di durare di più a causa dello stress di essere un corpo nero tra bianchi” (249).

42 “antigienico. Forestiero. Pericoloso. Indecoroso. Primitivo” (835) “Unhygienic. Foreign. Dangerous. Unseemly. Primitive” (my translation).

non sentirmi la solita eccezione. L'unica. La nera. La musulmana. La testa crespa. Madawga kaliya ee ku nool aduunka. Inseguivo così ogni diversità" (27).⁴³ All of these interconnected levels of marginality are made explicit by Scego herself in the interview conducted by Saskia Ziolkowski and published in *The Palgrave Handbook of European Migration in Literature and Culture*:

The problem is not only our skin or our religion but also our class. You have these interconnections of race and class. I am a daughter of a refugee. My father and mother were rich in Somalia, but they lost all their money, possessions, and connections as refugees. [...] As a refugee, everything disappears. When I was a child and teenager I was so poor. When I say poor, I mean for real. My mom and I went to Caritas, a charity, to find something to eat, pasta, or clothes. I remember that was quite hard. Then it changed a little bit. The only thing that I had was public school.⁴⁴

Moreover, in the same interview, when she defines herself as straddling two worlds (Europe and Africa), she specifies that she is not simply an Afro-European, that is, an African descendant in Europe, but an Afro-European *woman*: "My experience is being Black, being Muslim, being a woman in a patriarchal, mostly white society. This is what being an Afro-European woman means. Europe is a difficult concept" (391).⁴⁵

The next section will discuss Gala's novel, in which the character of Cassandra both resembles and differs from how it is portrayed in Scego's novel.

43 "Not to feel like the usual exception. The only one. The black one. The Muslim. The frizzy one. Madawga kaliya ee ku nool aduunka. I chased all diversity" (my translation).

44 Scego and Ziolkowski (2023) 389.

45 Scego and Ziolkowski (2023) 391.

A MARGINAL WAR AND THE WAR ON MARGINALITY IN MARCIAL GALA'S *LLÁMENME CASANDRA*⁴⁶

While Scego's novel is a non-fictional biographical account, Gala's novel is set in a supernatural context, where the gods of Greco-Latin and African mythology often appear in the form of visions in the protagonist's world. The novel's protagonist and narrator is Raúl Iriarte, a boy from Cienfuegos (Cuba), who claims to be a reincarnation of the mythological prophetess Cassandra and, as the novel's title implies, asks to be called Cassandra.⁴⁷

As in *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*, the identity of Gala's Cassandra is determined by experiencing, witnessing to, and denouncing war atrocities. Unlike the mythological prophetess, Raúl-Cassandra participates in the war not as a member of the besieged community, but as a besieger, dying in Angola as a soldier in the "Operación Carlota", to which I will get back in the next section. The narrative takes the form of a retrospective account of Raúl's experience, with the narrator-protagonist speaking from the grave by order of Zeus himself.⁴⁸ Whereas in Scego's *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* the text that connects the author to the mythological universe to which Cassandra belongs is Euripides's *Trojan Women*, in Gala's novel this "connective" function is taken by the *Iliad*. When Raúl was ten, Athena appeared to him, telling him that he was Cassandra and inviting him to buy the *Iliad*, which had just been published in Cuban translation.⁴⁹ The novel makes numerous references to the *Iliad*, with Raúl also recounting its con-

⁴⁶ I quote from the 2022 American edition *Call me Cassandra* in this article.

⁴⁷ See the following conversation between Raúl and the god Apollo: "Do you know who you are?' 'I'm Cassandra,' I replied. 'Or rather, I was Cassandra, and now I am just Raúl Iriarte.' 'You don't stop being who you are just because you have died,' Apollo replied, and I knew I was going to write a poem, unprompted, that I was an oracle" (637).

⁴⁸ "Zeus, you've come into the hole where I [Raul] lie, the tomb I dug so the captain could bury our secret, and under the assumed form of a welcome breeze cooling off my dead forehead, you've asked me to tell what I lived while I was a little tin soldier they called Marilyn Monroe. 'Tell it,' you said to me, and I obey you, my Zeus, how could I refuse? I'm weaving together my memories. I let them flow through my head that is nothing more than a bit of dust in the African earth" (1608–1611).

⁴⁹ "I'm Athena, and I was born dancing a warrior's dance...' 'Athena?' 'Take a good look at me, oh, Cassandra, don't you remember?' 'I'm Raúl.' 'No, you are Cassandra, lucid in divinations, go and tell your mother to buy The Iliad for you and you will understand and know who I am, and above all, you will know who you are'" (385–390).

tents to his fellow soldiers in Angola. After reading the *Iliad*, Raúl comes to the realization that he is indeed the reincarnation of Cassandra. This aspect is repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel, with Raul explicitly stating a number of times that he is Cassandra⁵⁰ and mentioning visions in which gods and creatures from Greco-Latin or African mythology address him as such. However, Gala's Cassandra is somewhat different from the one described in the *Iliad*. His novel mentions Apollo, Ajax, and Agamemnon, and includes mythological episodes that connect these characters to Cassandra (none of which are present in the *Iliad*), thus demonstrating that Gala draws more widely from Greek mythology in general. Raul shares with the mythological Cassandra the ability to make prophecies, as well as her being considered mad as a result of this very ability ("I [Raul] will again be Cassandra the mad" 1380), which is comparable to Euripides's description of Cassandra as a frenzied maenad in *The Trojan Women*.⁵¹ Throughout the novel, Raul makes numerous prophecies, some of which are reminiscent of the mythological Cassandra. At one point, for example, he predicts the mythological destruction of the city of Troy caused by the wooden horse, and his Sergeant dismisses him as a "madman" (583). Other prophecies relate to Raul's personal life, including his own death and those of his father, brother, as well as the fates of various soldiers in Angola. On a number of occasions, Raul does not share his prophecies, as he is perfectly aware that no one would believe him. However, they all come to the realization, thus demonstrating that no one can escape destiny and that Raúl-Cassandra's prediction do not possess the power to change the course of events.⁵²

50 "I'm Cassandra,' I once told them. 'Cassandra, reborn after five thousand years, when both Ilios and ancient Greece no longer exist. Cassandra, born on an island in the middle of the tropics, that's me. Cassandra, forever condemned to know the future and never be believed'" (130–138). "I don't want to be Raúl, I always knew that, ever since I was a child, I knew. I am not Raúl because I am Cassandra and Priam's blood runs through my veins. The gods told me so'" (270–271).

51 Cf. Mazzoldi (2001) 219–244.

52 "I know what's going to happen today but I can't avoid it, I'm Cassandra and if I tell anyone, they wouldn't believe me" (179–180).

Raúl-Cassandra and the war in Angola

In 1975, after gaining independence from Portugal, a civil war erupted in Angola between different factions. The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), led by the pro-communist Agostinho Neto, fought against The National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FLNA), which was inspired by conservatism and allied with the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), which was supported, in turn, by the Republic of South Africa. In response to the conflict's expansion and the South African army's southern offensive, Neto asked Cuba for help in the form of military intervention. Cuba accepted, motivating its intervention in Angola with the historical links existing between Cuba and Africa since the time of the slave trade and the belief that a connection to Africa was an essential element of Cuban nationality.⁵³ Furthermore, Cuba's involvement in Angola was motivated as a crucial contribution to the battle against apartheid. According to Cuba, if South Africa had succeeded in defeating the movement led by Agostinho Neto, it would have imposed its apartheid regime throughout Africa.⁵⁴ Therefore, this action was theoretically in line with the principles of the Cuban Revolution; in Gala's novel, a Cuban captain states: "We came here [to Angola] to sow Marxism-Leninism and to end colonial exploitation" (257).

However, *Llámenme Casandra* also uncovers the dark side of Cuba's intervention in Angola, showing how racism was still very much present behind all the theory and the proclamations. Cuban characters often talk about black people with contempt, and Raúl recounts that his maternal grandmother was disinherited after falling in love with "a white-passing mulatto named Eduardo Fonseca Escobar", who will become Raúl's grandfather (119). Due to the presence of a mulatto (her father Eduardo) in her family tree, one day Raúl's mother tells her husband, a white Cuban: "I don't know how you caught my eye. I have never liked short men, but you tricked me, you were the only white man who knew how to dance like a Black one. I wanted to improve my genes, but not to marry some

53 Magdalena López (2018) recalls that in a speech in 1975, Fidel Castro affirmed that Cuba was not only a Latin American country, but also a Latin African one (2).

54 Magdalena López (2018) notes that "[d]esde sus inicios, la Revolución Cubana puso en marcha varias políticas dirigidas a reducir la desigualdad racial considerada, en aquel entonces, una remora del pasado neocolonial" (1) "Since its inception, the Cuban Revolution implemented several policies aimed at reducing racial inequality, which at the time was considered a remnant of the neo-colonial past" (my translation).

Spaniard with two left feet” (2141–2142). Raúl’s mother’s views are also held by his father, who does not like being ordered around by a black man at work, even if the latter is an engineer while the former is a simple mechanic (466–467). When Raúl’s brother José’s girlfriend recounts being kicked out of the Cuban National Ballet because of her race, Raúl’s mother agrees with the director’s decision: “‘She was right,’ my mother says from the kitchen. ‘Who’s ever seen a Black Giselle?’” (686). Raúl observes racism in Cienfuegos and later, as a soldier, in Angola; this is paradoxical, since most Cuban soldiers fighting in Angola are black. Sergeant Carlos, for example, is black, but this does not prevent him from making the following statement about Angolan women: “those Black women didn’t have to be raped, just be given it good and hard, because they were horny as could be thanks to the monkey meat they ate” (992–993). Raúl’s captain, a white man, refers to historical figures such as Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, and Julius Caesar as “tamers of Blacks” (191), despite the fact that many men in his unit are black or people of color. More in general, Cuban soldiers refer to the Angolans as “those fucking Blacks” (226) or “The Blacks”. Additionally, there is a belief among Cuban soldiers that they are disliked by Angolans: “The Angolans don’t like us although they say they do and smile and say that Cuba and Angola are one sole nation and one sole people and Fidel and Agostinho Neto lift their joined hands. They hate us, the captain thinks” (152–153).

Based on these examples, the novel represents the ideological justifications for the Cuban intervention in Angola as completely unfounded. From this perspective, *Llámenme Casandra* is part of a wider set of works that offer a critical view of the military expedition to Angola. According to Lopez (2008), this set also includes texts by Angel Santiesteban, Norberto Fuentes, and Emilio Comas Paret (2). Such works strongly thematize that most Cuban fighters in Angola were black and POC (people of color), sent there as cannon fodder. Additionally, they suggest that Cuban soldiers held a disphoric view of Africans, who were considered cannibals and, in wider terms, very different from the “civilized” Cubans.⁵⁵ Given this framework, the novel *Llámenme Casandra* presents further criticism of the Cuban expedition to Angola; Gala affirmed in an interview that

[t]he majority of the Cuban soldiers being sent to Angola were not professionals. They were poorly trained and very young recruits, often 16 or 17 years old. The experience for the Cuban veterans was terrible. [...] They received no homecoming,

55 Cf. Lopez (2008) 2.

no pensions, no psychological treatment, nothing. You couldn't say you weren't willing to go, because then you were subject to these acts of repudiation.⁵⁶

In Gala's novel, the very fact that Raúl was recruited perfectly exemplifies how the Cuban army selected the soldiers for the Angolan intervention: young, inexperienced, and physically weak, Raúl is not in any way suited for war. Raúl's unsuitability is recognized by Sergeant Carlos⁵⁷ and by Raúl himself, who states at one point: "They take me to Angola, I'm just another tin soldier, I'm cannon fodder" (346). *Llámenme Cassandra* also mentions a significant episode concerning one of the "acts of repudiation" to which Gala refers in his interview. The headmistress of the school that Raúl attended as a child refers to Roberto (Raúl's fellow student and best friend), and his family as "scum" because they don't show appreciation for the Revolution and the country; she also encourages the students to throw eggs at the house of Roberto's father.

While Raúl-Cassandra's account of the expedition to Angola enables us to deconstruct and criticize many aspects of the Angolan expedition that have often been concealed and withheld, the social interactions of the novel's protagonist allow (as it will be demonstrated in the subsequent section) for a broader reflection and critique not only of the Angolan expedition, but also of the entire ideological apparatus behind the figure of the "good" socialist revolutionary, epitomized by the so-called "internationalist soldier" and the *hombre nuevo*.

The counter-revolutionary marginality of Raúl-Cassandra

Although the previous section discussed the significance of Raúl-Cassandra's voice during times of war, this section will demonstrate that Gala's Cassandra (just like Scego's) not only serves as a means of conveying the voice of a witness that denounces the atrocities of war, but also embodies various forms of social marginality. Through the representation of marginalities, as well as of the social mechanisms that control and repress them, *Llámenme Cassandra* offers a powerful deconstruction of the very notion of authoritarian political power.

⁵⁶ Cf. Goldstein (2022).

⁵⁷ "This one [Raul] doesn't know how to fight,' Carlos says. 'These Blacks are going to put a rocket up his ass when they get him, they're gonna use him as their bitch'" (537-538).

As Patricia Valladares-Ruiz points out in her article *Transgenerismo y denuncia social en Llámenme Casandra, de Marcial Gala*: “En esta novela, el/la protagonista transgénero (Raúl/Casandra) vehicula una crítica del llamado “hombre nuevo” y denuncia la persistencia del racismo, sexismo, homofobia y transfobia en la sociedad cubana” through the representation of “mecanismos sociales e institucionales de vigilancia que reclaman la corrección de cualquier posible infracción del modelo hipermasculino e hiperheterosexual del buen revolucionario”.⁵⁸ Raúl-Cassandra possesses physical characteristics and attitudes that place him in marginal categories (Sacks’s “boundary categories”), preventing him from achieving full membership as the New Socialist Man who embodies all the ideals of the “good revolutionary”. A prime example of the New Man is Sergeant Carlos, described in the novel as the ideal “internationalist soldier” (1372) and New Man, because “everything he does is for the benefit of the fatherland” (1990). Marvin Leiner explains the connection between the “New Man” and *macho* rhetoric in 1960s-70s’ Cuba as follows:

the “new man” was to be not only a person of high morals but a strong and virile revolutionary, in contrast to the “weak” homosexual. It appears that at no time did social scientists or educators consider homosexuality as anything other than “feminine” behavior by males, in accordance with the common cultural stereotype. [...] [H]omophobia and the oppression of gays in Cuba and elsewhere is closely tied to the devaluation of women. For if the country’s strength is tied to masculine virility [...] and homosexuals are identified with women, the logical conclusion founded on this devaluation of women is that male homosexuals are seen as subversive.⁵⁹

Raúl does not conform to the stereotypes of *machismo*. He has an androgynous body and can convincingly pass as a woman when dressed accordingly; he has had a passion for women’s clothing since childhood and recalls enjoying going into his aunt Nancy’s room (who was blond and blue-eyed like him) and trying on her clothes and make-up. Raúl’s lack of virility is first pinpointed by his

⁵⁸ Valladares-Ruiz (2022), 328–329. “In this novel, the transgender protagonist (Raúl/Cassandra) critiques the so-called ‘new man’ and denounces the ‘persistence of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia in Cuban society’ by depicting ‘social and institutional mechanisms of surveillance that demand the correction of any possible violation of the hypermasculine and hyperheterosexual model of the good revolutionary’” (my translation)

⁵⁹ Leiner (2019), 34.

teachers, who ask to speak to his mother: “‘You have to take him to a psychologist,’ [...] ‘He’s very effeminate and a crybaby. If he goes on like this, he’ll have a lot of problems’” (398). Interestingly, Raúl’s mother rebuts by invoking the figure of the *macho* revolutionary: “‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ my mother yells at her [the teacher]. ‘My son is very macho, yes, ma’am, make no mistake, his father’s brothers are martyrs who fought in the Sierra Maestra and his father was a national gymnastics champion’” (400). During Raúl’s days in Angola, his fellow soldiers often refer to him as Marilyn Monroe and dress him up as a woman. His captain sexually abuses him and dresses him in expensive women’s clothing, thus further acknowledging Raúl’s femininity: “‘You’re so small, so fragile, how did they let you in?’ he [the captain] says. ‘You look like a young girl’” (750). Before penetrating Raúl, the captain often orders him to dress up and apply make-up to resemble his wife. At other times, he asks Raúl to sing like *Grease*’s star Olivia Newton John. Given Raúl’s connection to Cassandra, it might be interesting to note at this point that the two characters have strikingly similar experiences with (and attitudes towards) sex. Cassandra is assaulted and abused by Ajax, and Raúl is assaulted and abused by his captain. Not dissimilarly from his mythological counterpart, Raúl is portrayed as sexually passive, that is, as a body deprived of agency and abused by others. Even more importantly (and, perhaps, not surprisingly) Raúl does not feel any sexual desire: “‘I didn’t feel anything, I’ve never felt anything. I don’t know what sexual desire is’” (851–852).

Due to his manifested femininity, Raúl is also often identified as a homosexual. His mother and brother, first, and the Captain and Sergeant Carlos later refer to him as a “fag” or “fairy”.⁶⁰ Raúl is painfully aware that being a homosexual in 1970s Cuba is not only incompatible with the figure of the “good” revolutionary and soldier, but can also lead to dramatic consequences. As a schoolboy, he is harassed by his Spanish teacher, who lends him forbidden books and overtly confesses his homosexuality: “‘He [the Spanish teacher] told me all of this before putting his hand on my thigh and looking into my eyes and confessing he went ‘the other way’: ‘This is the first time I’ve told anyone, and it’s very dangerous. If you tell anyone else, Rauli, you could get me into a lot of trouble. I could get thrown out of the party and of school’” (890–897). In the end, Raúl dies as a result of someone else being exposed as a homosexual and accused of sodomy.

⁶⁰ Cf. Gala (2022) 463, 169–170, 1817.

When the captain's sexual violence against Raúl is discovered, the captain kills Raúl in an attempt to protect his own reputation.⁶¹

In the macho-revolutionary culture in which Raúl was raised, homosexuality is not only connected to femininity, but also to intellectualism. Lillian Guerra (2010) notes that spokespersons of the Young Communist League (the youth organization of the Communist Party of Cuba) "identified a spectrum of anti-social behavior they related to homosexuality, including intellectualism, discussionism, egoism, autonomism, trotskyism and reunionism [the habit of holding repeated meetings in order to talk about state goals rather than act on them]" (283). Guerra also highlights that "professor of anthropology and long-time Communist, Samuel Feijo, published an editorial in *El Mundo* that soon became an indispensable reference point for discerning the relationship between sexual and intellectual dissidence" (281).

It may be worth noting, in conclusion, that the complex, intersectional web of the marginal position that Raúl embodies (not *macho*, effeminate, perceived as homosexual, and sceptical about revolutionary ideologies) emerges in all its subversive potential with his relationship to literature. As a schoolboy, he is accused of being "a counterrevolutionary" by his classmates, who tell his teacher that he "was reading a forbidden book" (1388). When participating in a literature workshop, Raúl reads a poem he has written and receives the following comment from his professor: "That poem isn't realistic, it's metaphysical and decadent. It reminds me of Cavafy. Where did you copy it from?" (658–659). The poem is radically different from those of Raúl's comrades, as it is not dedicated to their parents nor to the socialist homeland. As a result, the professor brings Raúl to the principal, who advises caution: "be careful with what you copy, Raúlín. I have enough problems at this school without falling into ideological diversionism" (671–672). At the age of 15, a similar incident occurs when he uses the term "angel" in one of his poems: "when the chemistry teacher read that, they took me straight to the principal's office and the principal said, 'Ideological diversionism.' 'He's suffering from ideological diversionism,' they tell my father. 'Be careful, this could ruin the future of such an intelligent young man'" (1827–1829).

⁶¹ To gain a better understanding of the persecution of homosexuality, it is important to explore the role of the Cuban UMAPS Camps (Military Units to Aid Production). One of the reasons homosexuality was persecuted is that, as Leiner (2019) states: "In general, homosexuality was understood as a remnant of capitalist society because of its association with pre-revolutionary criminal activity, especially gambling, prostitution, and drug addiction" (37).

These examples show how *Llámenme Casandra* has the power to create a meta-reflexive web that ultimately connects Raúl-Cassandra, his/her account and testimony from the grave, his/her prophetic voice, and literature itself.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to demonstrate that it is not by coincidence that the protagonists of both Gala's and Scego's novels are defined through a strong relation with Cassandra, rather than with any other mythical figure, as this allows both narratives to recover two specific characteristics of the mythical Cassandra in her new postcolonial-intersectional embodiments. The first characteristic concerns the ability to make predictions and the importance assumed in this context by the prophetess's voice, which acquires a fundamental testimonial value.⁶² The second trait pertains to the intersectional marginality that defines the mythological Cassandra in the face of her social group.⁶³

To ensure the clarity of my argument, these two traits have been analysed separately. However, it is crucial to remember that they are strongly interrelated.

I have argued that adopting a methodology that sits at the crossroads of Classical Adaptation Studies, Queer Theory and Sociology offers two major advantages. Firstly, it allows to re-read Greco-Latin works in a different key, showing that the practices of marginalisation and (sexual) violence to which Cassandra is subjected are an inherent part of this character's identity since ancient literature and not just an innovation brought about by contemporary receptions. At the same time, the aesthetic effects generated by contemporary receptions of Cassandra prove to be particularly powerful when they tap into the identity conflicts and contradictions that were already present in Cassandra's ancient representations. Secondly, this interdisciplinary methodology allows to critically deconstruct the very notion of marginality.

In conclusion, I hope to have demonstrated that such a hermeneutic stance could be fruitfully applied beyond the two case studies presented here in order to explore more contemporary reworkings of Cassandra's myth. This would

⁶² See above, section 2, on the role played by the prophetic voice in Christa Wolf.

⁶³ See above, section 2, for a discussion of marginality from the perspective of Harvey Sacks's sociology.

highlight not only their aesthetic and cultural value but also their ability to reveal the mechanisms of control and repression at the heart of every marginalisation practice.

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“Where normal people see Romans and Gauls, you see Ustashe and Partisans”

Rome in contemporary Croatian novel

Abstract The article employs critical discourse analysis to explore the portrayal of Rome and contemporary Croatian society in a novel set within the historic confines of Diocletian’s Palace in Split, Croatia. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Baudrillard and Debord, the study investigates themes of historical authenticity, cultural commodification, and societal critique. While the novel presents Rome as a multifaceted symbol embodying themes of fascination, commodification, and political resonance, its depiction often veers towards clichéd stereotypes and shallow commodification. Similarly, the critique of contemporary Croatian society, while ostensibly critical, often lacks depth, resorting to superficial caricatures. Despite its attempt to provoke introspection, the novel risks oversimplifying complex socio-political issues, offering limited substantive critique.

Keywords Rome, Diocletian, Split, novel, discourse

INTRODUCTION

The article studies the novel “Tomorrow is the new lunch” by Ivica Ivanišević, a well-known and very popular Croatian journalist, columnist, editor, and novelist.

The main goal of the research is to determine the way in which Rome is presented in the novel, and its reception in Croatian society today. Therefore, the main research questions are: How does Rome appear in the novel, that is, how is Rome presented by the author, what meanings are associated with Rome in the novel, and, how is contemporary Croatian society presented in the novel. The research method used to achieve the research goal is discourse analysis, or as Fairclough calls it critical discourse analysis.¹ The main dataset used for the analysis is obviously the text of the novel itself. However, besides this main text, I also analyze the cover of the novel, and I consider book reviews, and three roughly 50-minutes-long interviews that the author gave, in which he talks about his work and about the topics he addresses in this novel.

The novel starts with a description of a ‘Roman’ reenactor’s dead body and garment laying in the *decumanus* of the Diocletian’s palace in today’s Split, Croatia. The main theme of the book is a police investigation of three murders committed throughout the novel in the center of Diocletian’s Palace, which are peculiar because all the victims are dressed in costumes: the first in the costume of a Roman legionnaire, the second in the uniform of an Ustasha soldier from the Second World War, and the third in the uniform of a member of the French Foreign Legion. Another seemingly important topic is tasty and unhealthy food, which the protagonist, inspector Nalis, is almost obsessed with and thinks about almost constantly. However, in the subtexts, through his characters, the author talks about various aspects of use of Roman history today and about various characteristics and problems of Croatian society.

1 Gee (2011), Fairclough (2010)

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ROME AS A TOURIST SPECTACLE

The novel starts with a prologue titled in Latin, “incipit prologus”, followed by a description of a Roman reenactor’s dead body and garment laying on the floor of a street that once served as the *decumanus* of Diocletian’s palace. While describing the reenactor’s clothing and equipment, as well as the place where the body is situated, the author uses Latin terms: *cassis*, *lorica segmentata*, *scutum*, *gladius*, *pugio*, *pilum*, *caligae*, *Porta occidentalis*, *Decumanus*. However, he declines Latin terms in Croatian cases and adds suffixes to them not in Latin but in Croatian, so the reenactor is not lying dead 15 meters *a porta occidentali*, but 15 meters “*od Porte occidentalis*” which is not correct according to the rules of any of the two languages. Later in the novel the protagonist also passes through “*Portu septemtrionalis*”.² This blending of Latin terms with grammatical rules of Croatian language does not seem to be a deliberate choice, a certain kind of character perspective, creative expression, symbolism or subtle commentary, but an oversight, a result of the author’s lack of a formal educational background in literature or linguistics. The author seems unaware of the linguistic inaccuracies or the incorrect usage of Latin and Croatian language elements, even if he is a renowned journalist and fiction writer.

The protagonists and the narrator describe the Roman location as scenic, however, throughout the novel the author does not provide much historical information about the archeological site where the plot takes place. How he understands the site the reader learns after the first crime, when inspector Nalis thinks about new possible murders and suspects that the murderer may take a new victim’s body to “the shithole”.³ He explains to his young out-of-town colleague that the term refers to a “colorful folk name for the southeast quadrant of Diocletian’s Palace. It looks nice now, but not so long ago it looked awful, hence the comparison with a toilet”.⁴ Even if with the crude and satirical tone and his word-choice he may seem to mock the archeological site, he is not completely wrong. The site unfortunately was favored among drug dealers, addicts and squatters for decades and it had been vandalized by graffiti and garbage. A major restoration campaign has been a strategic, decades-long project of the Ministry of Culture’s conservation department in Split. Therefore, inspector Nalis’ de-

2 Ivanišević (2020) 45

3 All translations from Croatian to English are my own.

4 Ivanišević (2020) 167

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scription provides a local perspective on the site. This colloquial expression is still often used by some people familiar with the area, emphasizing its historical struggles with neglect, decay, and social problems.

In the beginning of the second chapter, at the crime scene we meet a young police officer Nina Krajač that comes from the north of the country, from the capital Zagreb, and she is immediately struck with the location. As the narrator tells us, “For hours she didn’t think about anything else but her new job, which seemed to her to be the best in the world. The crime scene resembled a Hollywood movie set.”⁵ Nina Krajač’s perception of the crime scene as resembling a Hollywood movie set points to Baudrillard and his concept of hyperreality.⁶ In this context the distinction between Roman history, its representation in Hollywood films, its reception through those films, and the actual place where the crime happens is blurred. The crime scene, resembling a Hollywood set, suggests that the experience of the Roman palace and the reenactor’s body is mediated through films, or more generally, through pop-cultural representations. The immediate association with a movie set highlights how Roman history is often filtered through simulated and idealized representations, creating a hyperreal, fictional environment. At another place in the novel the author is even more explicit:

“But more than anything else, [inspector Nalis] was troubled by the following question: why was the victim dressed as if he had stepped out of one of those Christmas movies in which Christ speaks Italian with a Roman accent, and the Romans speak little, but that’s why they beat the Son of God a lot? Was [the victim] dressed as a legionnaire even before the execution and, if so, why? If, however, they subsequently costumed him, what did they want to convey? Yes, that’s what it was about. Such grotesquely ritualized death implied some message. The trouble was that Nalis knew nothing about the content of the message, nor about the identity of the person to whom it was addressed.”⁷

The victim’s costume, resembling a legionnaire from Rome, becomes a Baudrillardian simulacrum – a representation that has lost its connection to an original reality. The dressing of the victim in this manner transforms the crime scene

5 Ivanišević (2020) 17

6 Baudrillard (1981)

7 Ivanišević (2020) 67

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into a staged event, where symbols and signs take precedence over any direct connection to historical or authentic references. The characters ask themselves what this all means, why is the victim dressed like this. Inspector Nalis’s struggle with understanding the message behind the victim’s costume and the ritualized death aligns with Baudrillard’s notion of the “unreadable”. In a hyperreal environment, signs and symbols may circulate, but their meaning becomes increasingly elusive and difficult to decipher.⁸ What is more, simulacrum comprises, not only the body, but also the surroundings. And the whole context, as the author sets it, is Debordian: the officer Krajač perceives the crime scene and the murder itself as a sort of a spectacle.⁹ This was suggested already by her first quotation above, but soon becomes even more explicit:

“The narrow street that connected the Iron Gate of Diocletian’s Palace with the Peristyle was, of course, closed to citizens. But the murmur of the people, locals and tourists, pressed behind the yellow ribbon stretched by the inspection team, and of the privileged spectators from the windows and balconies overlooking the former Decumanus and today’s Krešimirova Street, made it difficult for Nina to communicate with her colleagues. The noise created by the voices of the curious may have complicated the investigative routine, but it created a seductive impression that everyone gathered – pathologist, forensics, criminologists, police officers – was engaged in a fatefully important job. Of whom only Nina’s was more important, because it was to her, a young, graceful newcomer, that the chief entrusted the investigation into the death of a young man dressed as a Roman legionnaire. She couldn’t even dream of such a first working day.”¹⁰

The atmosphere is “seductive”, and Nina is overwhelmed with the crime scene and its surroundings. It is a filmic dream-come-true situation for the protagonist. The seductive impression created by the spectacle, where everyone appears to be engaged in a fatefully important job. Even though the reality of the crime scene is tragic, the mediated experience makes it alluring and captivating. All the above quotations directly point to the perception of Rome as a spectacle,

8 Baudrillard (1995), (1981) 125

9 Debord (1967). When citing Debord’s seminal work, *La Société du spectacle*, I do not cite pages in the book, because I do not find this citing style precise enough. Instead, I directly cite Debord’s axioms according to their original numbers.

10 Ivanišević (2020) 17–18

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one received through Hollywood films. The closed street, restricted to citizens, becomes a stage for the spectacle. So, the crime scene is not only a physical location but also a staged event. The crime scene, with the gathered crowd behind the yellow ribbon, symbolizes the separation between the spectacle and the everyday life of the city. This aligns with Debord’s idea that in a society dominated by the spectacle, reality is mediated and separated from direct experience.¹¹ The noise and murmur of the people behind the ribbon aligns with Debord’s concept of alienation through images, where the seductive spectacle draws individuals into a mediated experience, creating a detachment from the real, unmediated world.¹² The crowd’s fascination, the separation from everyday life, and the importance attributed to the investigation all contribute to a Debordian interpretation of the scene as a spectacle within a society dominated by images and representations.¹³

Moreover, the first conversation that Nina and her superior, detective Nalis, have in a tavern just after her seeing the crime scene, tells us that the low-quality simulacrum of ‘Roman’ reenactment is a project that happens during the tourist season, and is sponsored by the Croatian National Theatre in Split, and the local Tourist board. “You heard, I presume,” tells Nalis to Nina, “that here in the season [...] the city is full of young people dressed as Romans. Tourists like to take pictures with them. Even adults, let alone kids, who could understand it.” The author distances himself from this practice, and disapproves its authenticity, by having Nalis calling the costumes the reenactors wear “quasi-historical uniforms”. Later Nalis asks himself “why did the killer dress the victim in a cretin costume of a legionnaire?”¹⁴ Nina also explains that “A Roman sword is not the same as a pistol or an automatic rifle. It can be bought without any problems at a million places in Italy, they are probably imported from China, and you don’t have to register it anywhere. And not to mention the skirt, helmet, or armor.”¹⁵ The mention of Roman swords being easily bought without registration, possibly

11 Debord (1967) 7: “La séparation fait elle-même partie de l’unité du monde, de la praxis sociale globale qui s’est scindée en réalité et en image”; 25: “La séparation est l’alpha et l’oméga du spectacle.”

12 Debord (1967) 30, 31

13 Debord (1967) 37

14 Ivanišević (2020) 76

15 Ivanišević (2020) 19

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imported from China, reflects a critique of consumer culture. The commodification of historical artifacts and symbols contributes to a culture where objects lose their original meaning and become part of a market-driven spectacle. The author here refers to a project called “Changing of the Guard and Diocletian’s Salutation”, developed by the Croatian National Theater in Split and the local Tourist board, that despite its shortages, after years became one of the most prominent tourist products of the two institutions, that also makes a lot of profit. Already when the spectacle starts, only by hearing the music one can perceive it as a spillover of sword-and-sandal Hollywood films:

The bells of the nearby cathedral ring and let people know that it is noon. After the church bells stop, music from *Ben Hur* starts playing loudly on a small square, composed of Roman pillars, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque, as well as XIX century and XX century buildings. On the balcony of the nearby 15th century palace, ‘Roman soldiers’ pretend to play the Roman *cornu* horn, even if most of them do not move their lips at all. People approach the wooden construction on which two by two, young men dressed as Roman soldiers start appearing from the former *vestibulum* of the palace as in military walk-rhythm. First appear two ‘*aquilifers*’. They obviously have no military experience whatsoever. The ‘emperor’ enters holding a hand of the ‘empress’ who is dressed in blanket-like clothes. He seriously looks at the crowd and raises his hand in a form of a salute, as if he was in a Hollywood film, while the ‘empress’ simply waves like anybody may do today. As *Ben Hur* music comes to an end, the ‘emperor’, like a bad comedian, signals the end with a hand gesture. He gestures and mimics to the audience that he wants their applause for the ‘musicians’.

He shouts *Ave*, the audience responds *Ave*. He is not satisfied so he just waves aside. Then he salutes them in Latin. He tells them that he is happy to welcome them in his palace, and that the door of the palace are open for them. At that point he shows the wrong passage. The script of the performance expects that the whole audience does not understand what he says, so he tells it again in English. As a concluding gesture, he shouts *Ave*, the audience responds, but he is not satisfied so again he waves aside. He looks at the ‘empress’ and points his finger down as an emperor would do in gladiator fights in Hollywood films (*pollice verso*), which makes the audience laugh. For one more time he repeats *Ave* and soldiers repeat the same, leaving the stage. Music from *Ben Hur* starts again to mark the end of the performance.¹⁶

16 They play *Panem et circenes* by Miklós Rózsa from the film *Ben Hur*, Stegic (2016)

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This lowbrow reenactment that the author takes as the lite motif for his novel represents a form of Baudrillardian simulation and simulacra. It is a simulated version of Roman life that lacks historical authenticity and does not distinguish between a Roman emperor's *Adventus* and a change of the guard. Diocletian, to whom this performance refers to, was not an Emperor at the moment he moved to his palace in Split. The only Roman thing in the reenactment and in the novel is the stage. Diocletian's palace in Split, Roman monument protected since 1979 by UNESCO is promoted as a unique example of an antique imperial palace that evolved into a city. Due to a tourist boom which occurred in Croatia and Split in particular in the 21st century, the local branch of the Croatian Tourism Board hired low quality centurion impersonators to imitate Diocletian's imperial guard and to perform this very commodified quasi-theatrical show on the Peristyle of the palace. They also hired other Roman-soldier-impersonators to stand like theme park mascots and take pictures with tourists at the Golden gate of the palace and at other venues in the historical center, such as the fortification bastion Cornaro. The music from Ben Hur contributes to an exaggerated version of Rome. This example from Split, as well as consequences and relations it establishes in society, does not correspond to examples from other cities. For instance, centurion impersonators in Rome have become a public and media problem in regard to their inauthenticity, aggressivity and alleged relations with organized crime.¹⁷ In Split, on the other hand, this project has resulted in new reenactment projects funded and promoted by public bodies and institutions.

The novel in question does not analyze the phenomenon in depth but criticizes it only superficially. Even if Rome is not the only theme of the novel, the way the author presents it and chooses to engage it only superficially by repeating pop-culture stereotypes and not going in any depth, results in a portrayal and understanding of Roman culture and history very close to that of Hollywood films and low-quality reenactment spectacles intended for mass audiences. That is why two problems in this performance are transferred to the novel: the problem of historical inauthenticity accompanied by interference with popular imaging. The reenactment itself does not recognize that honor guards are historical formations with military and ceremonial roles; they take part in every regulated military and political system. Amongst more prominent honor guards is indubitably the Papal Swiss guard, which retained its original function until today and did not degrade into a commodified product. In addition, in popular

17 La Repubblica (2022)

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culture and Hollywood films especially, Roman soldiers have been presented as strong figures.¹⁸ In this context it is worth mentioning that Split became famous as a tourist destination after having been selected as a film location for TV series *Game of Thrones*, when substructions of Diocletian’s palace (just below the ‘set’ of the reenactment) served as Daenerys Targaryen’s throne room and a place to keep the dragons. This culture seems to have influenced not only the creation, but also the reception of the popular reenactment on the Peristyle of Diocletian’s palace.

The entire scene exemplifies the society of the spectacle, where the reenactment is not just a representation, but a spectacular event staged for the consumption of a mass audience. The performative elements, such as the ‘emperor’ mimicking Hollywood gestures, contribute to the constructed nature of the spectacle. By looking at the word choice and explanations the author gives, films seem to have also influenced the novelist’s perception of Rome. Both historical inauthenticity and interference of popular imaging are products of the culture commodified for profit in the society subject to tourism. They are made suitable for tourists’ consumption and oversimplified at the expense of authenticity. The detachment of the audience is evident as the ‘emperor’ signals for applause, and the audience responds mechanically. This reflects Debord’s idea of alienation in a society dominated by images, where genuine participation and engagement are replaced by passive consumption.¹⁹ In addition, a high-ranking employee of the renowned cultural institution, the Croatian National Theatre in Split, created the performance, the Theatre officially produces it, and another wealthy institution – the tourist board – financially supports it. Despite all of that, the performance does not have the permit issued by the Ministry of Culture’s conservation department. Since the Diocletian’s palace is protected by the Ministry of Culture as cultural heritage of highest national importance, conservation department in Split issues permits for manifestations within the palace, and even if the organizers of the event after several years eventually submitted a request for the permit, their request was refused, among other things, with a remark that it is necessary to create a scientific study of the manifestation itself, that is,

18 For instance, in Riddley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000), Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* (2004), William Wyler’s *Ben Hur* (1959), Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960), Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Marvin Leroy’s *Quo Vadis* (1951) or the TV series *Rome* (2005–2007).

19 Debord (1967) 12

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to harmonize the manifestation with historical facts related to Diocletian’s stay and public appearances in the palace in Split.²⁰ In combining Baudrillardian and Debordian perspectives, the scene portrays a hyperreal, spectacular event that is detached from historical authenticity, emphasizing the performative nature of the spectacle, its ties to consumer culture, and the role of authority in constructing and profiting from the simulated experience.

On a similar note, towards the end of the novel the author states that during the tourist season, that lasts for a greater part of the year, he thinks of the old town as a kind of amusement park. This is in accordance with the historical reenactment as emblematic of that commodification. However, this may not be only a critique of the commodification of the city for tourist consumption and an understanding of Diocletian’s palace as a kind of theme park, but it may also be indicative of a possible underlying racism:

“For six or maybe even seven months of the year, the city center looked as if the authorities had leased it in its entirety, along with the streets and squares, to interested bidders from all over the world. As if in some kind of anthropological amusement park, the curious, comfortably reclining on the restaurant or bar terrace with an obscenely expensive glass of cocktail, could see the entire range represented by the phrase ‘human race’, all colors, all shapes, all ages of colorful species look around at its beautiful and ugly specimens united by the desire to have a good time with the faith that Split will enable them to do so. To Nalis’ great surprise, it seems that this faith has been serious, because year after year the number of tourists only grew. That amusement park was bypassed by the locals, except, of course, those who served the needs of the hungry and thirsty multitude of nomads.”²¹

The author does not appreciate the multiculturalism that happened in Split as a tourist destination. This also does not seem to be an evocation of multiculturalism of the Roman Empire. The author’s view on the “‘human race’, all colors, all shapes, all ages of colorful species, [...] its beautiful and ugly specimens” is controversial, and it is not clear what the author wants to say. The phrase raises questions about how the author perceives and presents the diversity of people visiting Split. The reference to “its beautiful and ugly specimens” is highly charged and could be interpreted as objectifying and devaluing individ-

²⁰ Conservation Department in Split (2023) 2

²¹ Ivanišević (2020) 204

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uals based on their appearance. The term “species” may be dehumanizing, emphasizing a problematic objectification. Also, who are the “curious” that gaze the people passing by? The viewers are obviously very wealthy, as they are drinking “an obscenely expensive glass of cocktail.” This adds a layer of privilege to the imagery, reinforcing potential power imbalances. It suggests a socio-economic disparity between the observers and the observed. This could imply a power dynamic reminiscent of colonial exhibitions or a human version of zoological parks, where people were imprisoned as slaves and exhibited as exotic animals for the astonishment of wealthy Western Europeans, which is an abhorrent reference. On a similar note, in an interview with a university history professor and public intellectual Dragan Markovina, the author complains that Croatia is a chauvinist country, even if paradoxically in the same interview he points out that he has a “controlled ancestry for 500 years, on every side, in Split”. Also, when referring to people with different opinions, cultural backgrounds, and such, he often uses the term “krvna grupa”, that means “blood type”.²² This also instigates controversial xenophobic associations. Shocking controversies like these are not isolated incidents in the author’s expression. For instance, during an interview at a book fair in Croatia, while commenting on his constant surprise at negative social phenomena, crime, war profiteering and the like, Ivanišević said that he “surprises himself every morning, like a retarded child he wonders how this is possible and it pretty much embarrasses him”.²³ The use of the phrase “retarded child” is not only politically incorrect, but more importantly it is insensitive and uncivilized due to its derogatory nature towards individuals and small children with intellectual disabilities. Such language goes against basic principles of humanity, inclusivity, respect, and dignity and contributes to the stigmatization of a very vulnerable part of the community. Writers, especially those in the public eye, have a social and ethical responsibility to use language that does not perpetuate discrimination or harm. Here, Ivanišević’s language unfortunately creates an opposite result, he thinks he is funny and by using this offensive language he normalizes discriminatory attitudes in public discourse and contributes to a divisive social environment.

Together with this disturbing paragraph, one needs to address the title of the novel itself. “Sutra je novi ručak” equals “Tomorrow is another lunch”. This is a straight-forward reference to Scarlett O’Hara’s line from *Gone with the Wind*,

22 Oslobođenje (2022) 18’

23 Sajam knjige (2021) 18’50”

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“Tomorrow is another day”, regardless of the source that Ivanišević cites, be it the original Margaret Mitchell’s novel from 1936 or Victor Fleming’s film adaptation from 1939. Since Ivanišević does not engage with the controversial aspects of the source material, it could be seen as a lack of critical awareness regarding the racial and historical implications of *Gone with the Wind*. His paraphrase is only a parody of the original sentence. Ivanišević only thinks about the food and does not take the responsibility for the association this phrase or the sources may encourage. Food is one of the main themes of the novel. The protagonist, inspector Nalis, thinks all the time about what he could eat next. In fact, in the beginning of the novel we meet him at a doctor’s office, he is thinking about food voraciously while waiting for the diagnosis after the tests performed during his stay in the hospital. He is almost obsessed with food, at one point he dreams about a luxurious buffet all for himself.²⁴ Again, like the amusement park, food is not an innocent remark, but a means to ridicule religion. When describing inspector Nalis eating, the narrator states that “the first bite imbued him with the kind of bliss that, the blasphemous unbeliever suspected, a baptized soul would feel at the moment of Communion. Each subsequent one only emphasized that sensation for the palate”.²⁵ On the same note, while looking at another person eating in a restaurant, Nalis was “moved by the sight; the man was really melting with love as he brought each morsel to his mouth, he wasn’t actually having dinner, he was taking Communion”.²⁶ Also, at one point Nina Krajač states that food is Nalis’ favourite topic, one he contemplates “with pious admiration”.²⁷

A DEAD ‘ROMAN’ ON THE COVER

The cover of the novel features a photograph or photomontage created through human manipulation or the use of artificial intelligence. The use of a photomontage, especially one manipulated through human intervention or artificial intelligence, aligns with Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality. The image on the

24 Ivanišević (2020) 83

25 Ivanišević (2020) 108

26 Ivanišević (2020) 125

27 Ivanišević (2020) 174

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cover does not represent a direct reality but a simulation, emphasizing the idea that the cover serves as a hyperreal representation of what is popularly understood as ‘ancient’ Rome, either republican or imperial Rome. In the lower right corner, there is a small logo of the publishing house. On this cover, at the top, the author’s full name is printed in white color. Below, in the same font and color, the title of the book is printed in bold letters, almost double the size, in three lines. The background is quite dark, while most of the light is concentrated in the middle, both on the cover and in the foreground, where a man (or a puppet) dressed in what appears to be the costume or a uniform of a Roman soldier-legionnaire from Hollywood films is placed. The figure is shown lying on the ground in a narrow street. The representation of a Roman ‘soldier’ in a dramatic pose and the play of light draw attention, turning the cover into a visual spectacle for potential readers. The deliberate choice of ‘ancient’ Rome as a motif for recognition aligns with the commodification of historical and cultural symbols. Rome, often romanticized and popularized in the media, becomes a marketable and recognizable image to attract potential buyers of the book. The book cover, by selecting this specific motif and presenting it in a visually striking way, participates in and repeats the commodification of Roman imagery for market appeal. Most of the soldier’s body is visible, while the head is obscured by a container with a green plant. It is not entirely clear what street is depicted; it cannot be confidently identified as one of the alleyways in Diocletian’s Palace or the remains of medieval Split. By appearance, it certainly resembles a street in a Mediterranean city, especially those in the center of Venice, Italy, implying it may be a stock photograph bought on an online platform. Parts of the facades of the surrounding houses are quite dilapidated, as is the case with many in Split and even more so in Venice. There are no details about the cover or the used photograph in the book. This motif could be characterized as an old city, a historical core. However, to an uninformed reader, it might be challenging to recognize architectural layers and the historical period of the venue, even if Roman setting is suggested. The intentional ambiguity regarding the specific location and architectural layers relates to Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum. The blending of potentially different historical periods and locations creates a simulation that challenges straightforward identification.

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ROME AND FAR-RIGHT POLITICS

Another motif from popular culture that embodies Rome in the novel are Asterix and Obelix. On her first official workday, inspector Nalis showed his young colleague Nina an A4 drawing with the two characters that welcomed him at his office door. Nina recognized them remotely from a cartoon, but Nalis explained (perhaps even mansplained) to her that they were “originally comic-book heroes, and only later they moved to cartoons and feature films.” Nina doesn’t understand why they are relevant, and Nalis explains that “he, the fat guy, is Obelix, and she, the tiny one, is Asterix, and they are dealing with a corpse that is, uh, a Roman”.²⁸ This is an interference of the author’s biography into the text of the novel, since he is a big fan of comic books or graphic novels. In fact, the first book he published as the sole author was dedicated specifically to graphic novels.

But the comic book reference is not just an example of a pop-culture intertextuality or a blending of high and low culture. A colleague that must have stuck the Asterix-and-Obelix paper on Nalis’ door, saluted Nalis and Nina with his right-arm raised in a Fascist style, the so called ‘Roman salute’ and a greeting “Ave, Gauls!”. The author does not recognize the fact that the ‘Roman salute’ is not associated with the Gauls, but, as (neo-)fascists like to believe, with Romans. Nalis accused his colleague of being Fascist again, but the colleague replied that “where normal people see Gauls and Romans, he sees Ustashes and Partisanas”.²⁹ This was not a passing comment, because the second murder victim that appeared in the novel was wearing a black uniform of the so-called Black Legion, an elite unit of the far-right Ustasha movement and the army of the Independent State of Croatia that existed between 1941 and 1945. Young Nina asks somewhat naively where one can find an Ustasha uniform, and Nalis tells her bluntly that one could find it “in grandfather’s wardrobe, in the archives of theater and film companies, in antique stores... It’s not a big problem. We did not import the Ustashe, it is our own, originally Croatian product. And they were not few. After all, they are not few even today”. The author’s portrayal of obtaining Ustasha uniforms from places like a grandfather’s wardrobe, archives of theater and film companies, and antique stores adds a satirical tone, and satire is one of the most important elements of all his writings. This approach forms a kind of cultural critique typical for Ivanišević, where the author uses satire to question socie-

²⁸ Ivanišević (2020) 29

²⁹ Ivanišević (2020) 33

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tal norms and values. It critiques the casual and almost banal accessibility of symbols associated with the dark period in history. So satire serves as a form of political commentary. The author seems to be making a statement about the fragility of societal attitudes towards historical events and the potential for political ideologies to resurface.

While thinking aloud about the potential next murder, Nina perpetuates her boss's words and states that “a Roman legionnaire's uniform is easy to get, an Ustasha uniform is even easier because you don't have to buy it, you just have to take it down from your grandfather's attic or borrow it from your first neighbor”.³⁰ The ease with which one can find such uniforms in various places, as mentioned by Nalis and Nina, suggests that these symbols have not disappeared from the cultural landscape. In this way, they strengthen the idea of a part of Croatia being nationalist. The author plays on this imagery and a few pages later one of the characters states that if the news about a person killed in Ustasha uniform reaches the newspaper, “[they] are done! Even before noon, the whole country will be trumpeting about Split, which has once again become a problem city, in which the spirits of Nazism come to life”.³¹ Here one needs to point to the fact that according to the author's historical and political comments, he does not recognize the layers of political, military and historical complexity when it comes to Roman period. In other words, he doesn't seem to see anything problematic about the relationship of the Romans to the Gauls. Instead, he reinforces a simplistic narrative. On the other hand, he rightfully condemns the Ustashe regime.

The author plays further on with this Ustashe imagery in the novel. First, inspector Nalis finds another photocopy stuck on the door of his office. This time it was not Asterix and Obelix but portraits of Jure Francetić and Rafel Boban, two prominent Ustashe commanders during the Second World War. Nina thought this was funny, but Nalis replied that he would rather be “a fat Gaul, than a fat Croat”. Nalis was furious, and while they were leaving the office immediately after that, “a whistle was heard from somewhere to the tune of a song that heralded the dawn, and with it the arrival of two mass murderers”, that is Boban and Francetić.³² Here he refers to a marching song of the Ustashe from the Second World War called “Evo zore evo dana”, in English “Here comes the dawn,

30 Ivanišević (2020) 86, 87

31 Ivanišević (2020) 90

32 Ivanišević (2020) 91, 93

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here comes the day”. Even if Nina suggests that the colleague that stuck the joke on the door may even not be Fascist, the scene still suggests that a part of Croatia may be Fascist today. In addition, even if it might not be a conscious author’s choice and a direct comparison, the decision to put the two victims in a ‘Roman’ and a Fascist uniform coincides with the frequent fascination with Rome by the supporters and protagonists of far-right politics. For instance, in 2018 the extremist Italian political party, CasaPound, put posters depicting a Roman soldier on the walls of Rome to commemorate Alberto Giaquinto, a seventeen-year old militant of the Youth Front of the Italian Social Movement. He was killed by a police officer during the riots at the first anniversary of the never-resolved assassination of three other young militants from the same organization on January 7th, 1978, in front of their headquarters in the street Acca Larentia in Rome. Italian Social Movement was a political party born after WWII that followed many of the controversial political beliefs of Mussolini. Also, the Italian court of cassation in a process against the commemorators performing the Roman salute several years ago ruled in January 2024 that the related ‘Roman salute’ is not a crime, unless its goal is to reestablish the Fascist regime.³³

Read in this context, Ivanišević’s choice of the uniforms of his victims may be understood as another, more subtle critique of the far-right politics.

Furthermore, in accordance with the critique of the far-right Croatian government during the Second World War, the author mocks another character, commander Akrap and his critique of the former Communist Yugoslavia. Akrap defines Yugoslavia as a “community where citizens were under continuous police monitoring” recalling sarcastically his life in “a harsh socialist order that afforded them many and insurmountable traumas”. Inspector Nalis doesn’t share his opinion and with his body language he somewhat indirectly expresses his dissent, but Akrap reinforces his condemnation of the Communist system when nobody else supports him. Also, when talking to Nina later, Nalis mocks Akrap’s understanding of Yugoslavia as a country of “Goddless Communism” against today’s democratic Croatia. He mocks the idea of the Communist regime as “dark forces of the past”.³⁴ Indirectly the author also criticizes Akrap’s view: Nalis recalls the intellectual, cultural, and political movement for the independence of Croatia from Communist Yugoslavia and stating that in that mass movement, “he firmly believed that the quantity will not yield quality”, and between the

³³ Giuffrida (2024)

³⁴ 172, 174

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lines he suggests that he was not wrong.³⁵ At another place the author, again by using Nalis’ voice, is even more explicit, he states that people who criticized Socialism were basically not thinking with their head:

“Most of the people Nalis knew spoke with disgust of the socialism they had lived through in their youth or had only heard about it from the stories of their elders. Those he didn’t know were even more resolute in that sense; for years, maybe even decades, he has not heard anyone on television loudly, clearly and unreservedly defending the socialist order or, God forbid, advocating for its return. It was obviously very important, even crucial, for everyone to enjoy the right to freedom of opinion. Then again, only rare acquaintances of Nalis actually consumed that right. The rest, the overwhelming majority, were just waiting for someone to think for them and tell them what they themselves should think.”³⁶

It is noteworthy that he downplays the fact that it was not any kind of socialist order in question, but the one strictly controlled by the Communist regime.

FROM ROME TO CROATIA: A CRITIQUE OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

There is a sense of nostalgia for the life under the former Communist regime that one can read throughout the novel. What is more, this is also reiterated in the description, or more precisely, in the official book review that the reader can find on the back cover of the novel: “nostalgia for a fairer world and a more authentic Split; a lucid critique of the devastation of moral and social values. There is still a lot of beauty and kindness, unwavering love for the local”. The unnamed reviewer seems to share a lot of Ivanišević’s worldview: “With his first crime novel, Ivica Ivanišević wrote an insightful analysis of the anxious time in which we all suddenly feel a little redundant”.³⁷ He seems to be of similar generation, because there is no other cue for deciphering who could be the “we” that “feel a little redundant” today. The review is more a part of the publisher’s marketing

35 187

36 Ivanišević (2020) 147

37 Ivanišević (2020) back cover

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strategy and an ode to the novel, than an objective evaluation of the book. There is an underlying synchrony between nostalgia for the Communist political system and his negative opinion of today’s Croatia. What is more, while speaking about literature, Ivanišević indirectly admits his own escapist tendencies and describes his writing process as an attempt to escape from reality: “We who write are doubly blessed, because you can escape from your life in two ways, by reading about other lives or writing other lives. A relatively healthy way of escaping from reality”.³⁸ Later in the same interview he again stresses that he would most rather close himself in a book which he is writing, that the most important thing is that he writes books in order to escape from the world he is surrounded by.³⁹ He frames it as his own coping or defense mechanism. In that sense the author implies that his writing is not a way to critically engage the reality, but to the contrary, to disengage it. Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, where representations become detached from reality, can be linked to escapism in literature. In creating alternative worlds through writing, authors construct hyperrealities that serve as simulated escapes.

So, the question is, what kind of country and society he lives in today, how he depicts it besides the partial survival of the remains of Fascism and Nazism? The question becomes particularly important when one considers the fact that the author has a degree in Sociology, and that his other works, especially those in prestigious Croatian newspapers, almost border with a kind of satirical and sociological reviews of different situations and phenomena in Croatian society and politics. Marinko Krmpotić of Croatian newspaper *Novi list* recognizes that the novel “has an obvious tendency to highlight the negative aspects of contemporary Croatian society”.⁴⁰ Later in his review he delineates what he sees in the novel as a critique of today’s Croatia:

“The journalist Mile Gunjača is a symbol of all that is bad in journalism, the newly rich Željko Čikeš symbolizes all the numerous Croatian billionaires who emerged from economic transition and privatization, and the lawyer Kranjčević is a clear representation of the connection between crime and the justice system.

Of course, the author turns to criticism not only through descriptions of these characters and their activities, but also through direct messages, so one can, for ex-

³⁸ Sajam knjige (2021) 29'40"

³⁹ Sajam knjige (2021) 49'

⁴⁰ Krmpotić (2021)

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ample, read that the mentioned characters are ‘morally at the bottom, but enjoy the reputation of exemplary citizens’, that is, how we live ‘in the country in which the Čikeš make up a large part of the social and business elite’ or how ‘No one has ever managed to build a career on measurable results, but on immeasurable obedience to some political authority’.”⁴¹

Krmpotić succeeds at defining this representation of contemporary Croatia only partially, because he fails to recognize other layers that emerge from the analysis of the novel. Firstly, he criticizes the very existence of the Croatian language at different places in the book. In an inner monologue Nalis complains about another character, the lawyer Kranjčević, that used the standard Croatian language even as a child: “In their home, only the language that Nalis considered artificial was spoken, because he had never before heard a living person speak it.” Immediately after that he emphasizes that “even today, he was not quite sure whether Croatian is really a living language or just a relatively useful social convention.”⁴² This is in contrast with the current government’s law on the Croatian language, a kind of law many other European countries already have, such as France, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia, Switzerland and Belgium.⁴³ This law, passed by the Croatian Parliament in early 2024, provides a legal framework for encouraging and raising the level of literacy and language expression, standardizing the quality of the use of the language by public institutions and in public space, and, among other things, a stronger institutional support for the descendants of Croatian emigrants who live abroad, and want to develop the culture they inherit. As the Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stated, “The aim of this law is to preserve the precious value of the language as a heritage through which the identity, history and culture of the people speak, and at the same time to ensure its development in line with the needs of the modern world, because the language is alive”.⁴⁴ The Croatian language has gone through a particular ordeal in the last hundred years under the auspices of Yugoslav communities, pressured by oppressive Serbian political influences, and like the Croatian nation in general, it could not establish its cultural, intellectual and

41 Krmpotić (2021)

42 Ivanišević (2020) 60–61

43 Plenković (2023)

44 Plenković (2023)

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political independence. In his critique of the draft of the new law, a renowned Croatian publisher, Ante Žužul, admits that “after the collapse of our national revival – the Croatian Spring – fierce repression of language and books began, and political decisions were made to burn books”, obviously the books in Croatian language.⁴⁵ In parallel with the passing of the law on the Croatian language, the Croatian government declared the year 2024 as the year dedicated to Marko Marulić (in connection with the five hundredth anniversary of his death), considered in Croatia the father of Croatian literature, a great Croatian Renaissance humanist respected in high Renaissance cultural and intellectual circles throughout Europe, who wrote his works in the Croatian language (albeit in Latin and Italian) and was already translated into other major world languages in his own time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this inquiry, drawing on theories of Baudrillard and Debord and employing critical discourse analysis as its methodological backbone, revealed layers of complexity surrounding notions of historical authenticity, cultural commodification, and societal critique. The novel portrays Rome as a multifaceted symbol, embodying themes of historical fascination, economic commodification, and political resonance. The author’s portrayal of Rome evokes a blend of nostalgia, romanticization, and critique, mirroring societal attitudes towards both ancient history and contemporary politics. The author’s depiction of Rome often veers towards clichéd stereotypes and shallow commodification. Rome is depicted as a spectacle, commodified for market appeal, yet also imbued with layers of symbolic meaning, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics. The novel offers a critical lens on contemporary Croatian society, highlighting issues of nationalism, far-right politics, and societal values. However, this treatment of contemporary Croatian society, while ostensibly critical, often falls short of deeper analysis, resorting instead to superficial caricatures and polemical gestures. In its attempt to provoke introspection, the novel ultimately risks oversimplifying complex socio-political issues, offering little in the way of substantive critique or meaningful engagement with its subject matter.

⁴⁵ Žužul (2023)

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Teodora: Un'odierna lettura romanzata in Italia

Abstract This paper examines two Italian novels by Mariangela Galatea Vaglio, a historian, novelist, and blogger. The novels, published in 2018 and 2022, are titled *Teodora. La figlia del circo* and *Teodora. I demoni del potere*. In my analysis, I will focus on a few key aspects that are, in my opinion, essential to the novels. First, I will briefly analyze the techniques used to represent the cultural situation of the time. Secondly, the focus will be on Vaglio's characterization of Theodora and Justinian as complementary examples of 'nonconformist' femininity and masculinity. In particular, I will consider the Nika revolt of 532 CE, which is presented in *I demoni del potere* as a crucial moment in the empress's path. To highlight the unique aspects of Vaglio's narrative, a comparison will be made between her depiction of Theodora's famous speech during the revolt and Procopius' narrative in his *History of the Wars*, as well as Stella Duffy's description of the event in her novel *The Purple Shroud*. Finally, the author herself briefly explains the reasons for reexamining the figure of Theodora today in a short interview.

Keywords Theodora, Justinian, Procopius of Caesarea, Galatea Vaglio, Stella Duffy

INTRODUZIONE

All'inizio dell'ultimo capitolo della sua monografia dedicata a Teodora (* c. 500–† 28 giugno 548), moglie di Giustiniano e imperatrice di Bisanzio, David Potter sostiene che «nessuna imperatrice lasciò un'impronta così profonda sull'immaginazione dei suoi sudditi come Teodora.»¹ Potter prosegue ricostruendo per sommi capi la tradizione storica e letteraria sull'imperatrice in Oriente e in Occidente ed evidenzia, a ragione, come l'immaginario occidentale – sia in ambito storico, sia in ambito artistico-letterario – sia stato pesantemente influenzato dalla testimonianza di Procopio di Cesarea.² Se fino alla scoperta e pubblicazione nel 1623 ad opera di Nicolò Alemanni delle *Storie segrete* (Ἀνέκδοτα, *Anekdotota, Historia Arcana*), l'influenza di Procopio era riconducibile anzitutto alle sue *Storie delle Guerre* (Ἐπὲρ τῶν πολέμων λόγοι, *Hypèr tôn polemôn logoi, De bellis*, o Ἱστορίαι, *Historiai, Historiae*) e allo scritto *Sugli Edifici* (Περὶ κτισμάτων, *Peri ktismatôn, De aedificiis*), la rappresentazione di Teodora come donna lussuriosa e spietata calcolatrice è dovuta soprattutto al carattere diffamatorio degli *Anekdotota*, vero e proprio guazzabuglio di pettegolezzi sull'imperatrice.³ Gli *Anekdotota*, del resto, possono in generale anche essere interpretati *lato sensu* come esempio di narrazione all'impronta di un tradizionalissimo ed esacerbato *male gaze*.⁴

Non stupisce pertanto, se specialmente a partire dalla fine degli anni ottanta del ventesimo secolo, e in misura maggiore nei primi decenni del ventunesimo, si sono moltiplicate riscritture della vicenda di Teodora che «piuttosto che echeggiare, rispondono a quella di Procopio.»⁵ Nel 1987 la scrittrice britannica

1 Potter (2015) 205 (traduzione mia).

2 Potter (2015) 205–214; cfr. anche Ravegnani (2016) 180–192.

3 Beck (1986) 9–15.

4 Accentuo volutamente a dismisura e in modo alquanto adulterante quanto espresso da Pratsch (2011) 14 a proposito degli *Anekdotota*: «Es richtet sich im Grunde genommen generell gegen alle Frauen, denen Prokop einen negativen Einfluss auf ihre Männer unterstellt.» Per un'analisi più dettagliata della rappresentazione dei sessi (*gender*) nelle altre opere di Procopio mi permetto di rinviare a Stewart (2020).

5 Potter (2015) 212 (traduzione mia). In realtà, una certa rivalutazione della figura di Teodora è già presente nella cultura europea all'inizio del (e poi durante il) ventesimo secolo. Ispirata anche da un rinnovato interesse scientifico per la figura dell'imperatrice, la ricezione cerca di liberarsi della lettura prettamente «maschilista» offerta da Procopio e dagli autori che a lui s'ispirano. Su questo punto rinvio soprattutto a Carlà (2015), che offre un'analisi appropfon-

Gillian Bradshaw pubblicava *The Bearkeeper's Daughter* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), in cui la voce narrante era affidata a un fittizio figlio di Teodora, Giovanni. La giallista e narratrice storica tedesca Tessa Korber dava alle stampe la propria versione romanzata della vita dell'imperatrice nel 2000 (*Die Kaiserin*, München: Droemer Knaur). All'incirca nello stesso periodo veniva pubblicato in Francia il romanzo *Théodora, courtisane et impératrice* della filosofa ed esperta di scienze del cinema Odile Weulersse (Paris: Flammarion 2002). Tra il 2010 e il 2012 i due romanzi della britannica Stella Duffy *Theodora: Actress, Empress, Whore* (London: Virago Press) e *The Purple Shroud* (London: Virago Press) hanno ottenuto gran successo di pubblico.⁶ Anche in Italia la figura di Teodora è stata recentemente fatta oggetto di rivisitazioni romanzate: Nel 2004 la classicista e storica dell'arte Aida Stoppa ha pubblicato in una raccolta il racconto «Teodora e il potere» (*Sette universi di passione*, Colledara: Andromeda, 36–62). Nel 2019 Francesca Minguzzi – anche lei esperta di Storia del Diritto Romano – ha dato alle stampe il romanzo *Io, Teodora. Memoria di una imperatrice* (Milano: Enciclopedia delle donne). Infine, Mariangela Galatea Vaglio, autrice di numerose opere di carattere storico dedicate all'antichità greco-romana, insegnante e divulgatrice storica sui social media,⁷ ha iniziato la pubblicazione di una trilogia di romanzi sulla vicenda di Teodora e Giustiniano nel 2018, proseguita con il secondo volume nel 2022.

Proprio questi due romanzi, intitolati *Teodora. La figlia del circo* (Venezia: Sonzogno 2018) e *Teodora. I demoni del potere* (Milano: Piemme 2022) costitui-

dita (ma, come da lui stesso affermato, non esaustiva) di alcuni esempi della ricezione della figura di Teodora nella cultura europea tra il diciannovesimo e il ventesimo secolo. Carlà si sofferma in particolare sulla cultura francese – e.g. la *pièce* teatrale *Théodora* di Victorien Sardou (1884) – e italiana – per esempio il film *Teodora, Imperatrice di Bisanzio* di Riccardo Freda (1954) e il «fumetti erotici» Milo Manara *Bolero* (1999) e *Il pittore e la modella* (2002).

⁶ Cfr. per esempio la recensione di Tom Holland per *The Guardian* di sabato 17 luglio 2010 (*Theodora: Actress, Empress, Whore* by Stella Duffy | Fiction | The Guardian, consultato da ultimo il 21 ottobre 2024).

⁷ Vaglio (2018) 1; Vaglio (2022) 6; cfr. anche Il nuovo mondo di Galatea – Diario ironico dal mitico nordest (galateavaglio.com) e <https://www.facebook.com/PillolediStoriaGalateaVaglio>. Tra le opere di Vaglio dedicate alla storia e alla cultura greco-romana mi limito a menzionare: *Didone, per esempio. Nuove storie dal passato* (2014); *Socrate, per esempio. Altre storie dal passato* (2015); *Cesare. L'uomo che ha reso grande Roma* (2020) e *I lupi di Roma. Antonio contro Ottaviano* (2022), *Afrodite. La verità della dea* (2024).

scono l'oggetto principale dell'analisi nel presente contributo.⁸ In particolare è mia intenzione concentrarmi su alcuni aspetti a mio parere essenziali dei due romanzi: Dopo una brevissima disamina degli eventi storici in essi narrati e delle tecniche narrative utilizzate per rappresentare la situazione culturale dell'epoca, rivolgerò la mia attenzione a quegli elementi usati per costruire le figure di Teodora e Giustiniano come illustrazioni complementari di femminilità e mascolinità anticonformiste. In una successiva sezione esaminerò poi più da vicino l'episodio della rivolta di Nika del 532 d.C. presentato in *I demoni del potere* come momento cruciale della parabola dell'imperatrice. Al fine di meglio evidenziare le peculiarità della narrazione della Vaglio svolgerò in questa sezione un confronto con la narrazione di Procopio nelle *Storie delle Guerre* e con il romanzo *The Purple Shroud* di Stella Duffy. In una sezione conclusiva l'analisi sarà integrata da una brevissima intervista con l'autrice volta a indagare le ragioni che invitano a riesaminare oggi la figura di Teodora.

UN AFFRESCO DELL'IMPERO NEL 6° SECOLO

Sebbene entrambi intitolati in primo luogo a Teodora, i romanzi di Galatea Vaglio non sono semplicemente un *retelling* della storia dell'imperatrice, ma piuttosto – come lascia intravedere il titolo della progettata trilogia (*La Saga di Bisanzio*) – una rivisitazione della vicenda dell'Impero Romano d'Oriente nella prima metà del sesto secolo d.C. Le vicende narrate – perlomeno sino alla chiusa del secondo romanzo – coprono il periodo che va dal 497 al 535 d.C. e si soffermano geograficamente su almeno tre regioni: Bisanzio (ovviamente), la Cirenaica e l'Egitto, dove Teodora trascorse alcuni anni,⁹ e, specialmente nel secondo romanzo, l'Italia ostrogota, anche se sono presenti nel primo romanzo brevi episodi al confine con l'impero Sasanide.¹⁰ I romanzi ripercorrono, quindi, gli ultimi vent'anni del regno di Anastasio I Dicoro (imperatore dal 491 al 518 d.C.), com-

⁸ I due romanzi *Teodora. La figlia del circo* e *Teodora. I demoni del potere* sono stati letti e consultati in formato Ebook, per cui riferimenti a capitoli e a numeri di pagina saranno in questo contributo sempre da riferire alla Kindle-Version.

⁹ Così Procop. Arc. 12.30.

¹⁰ Per esempio i capitoli 10–12 di *La figlia del circo*, che descrivono i preparativi e la battaglia di Sifrion durante la guerra romano-persiana negli anni 502–506 d.C.

prese la guerra romano-persiana negli anni 502–506 e la rivolta di Vitaliano degli anni 514–515, l'ascesa al trono e l'impero di Giustino I (518–527 d.C.), e i primi anni di regno di Giustiniano, ponendo particolare interesse, in *I demoni del potere*, ai rapporti con il re ostrogoto Teodorico prima e con sua figlia Amalasantha, reggente in nome del figlio Atalarico, poi. Vaglio offre, del resto, un vero e proprio affresco della situazione sociale, culturale e teologica di Costantinopoli e dell'Italia in questo periodo. Di questo affresco è possibile evidenziare, a livello esemplificativo, tre elementi, a mio parere particolarmente significativi: anzitutto la precisione nella descrizione di luoghi e spazi; poi la vividezza con cui è presentata sia la pervasività delle dispute teologiche in ogni ambito della vita e della società bizantina sia la convivenza di cultura greco-romana e cristiana; e, infine, la visione di metodo sottesa all'esperienza romanzesca. Tutti questi aspetti contribuiscono a favorire un'immersione quasi totale del lettore nel sistema culturale in cui sono situate le vicende narrate.

(1) La precisione descrittiva è esemplificata soprattutto in quei passaggi dei romanzi in cui sono utilizzate tecniche espositive dalla conclamata *enargeia*, quali l'*ekphrasis*.¹¹ L'esempio più evidente di questo è, probabilmente, la descrizione commentata dei mosaici del palazzo imperiale di Costantinopoli che occupa quasi la metà di un capitolo (il sedicesimo) in *I demoni del potere*. Ecclesio, vescovo di Ravenna e membro della spedizione guidata da Papa Giovanni I e inviata da Teodorico a Costantinopoli per richiedere il ritiro dell'editto promulgato nel 523 d.C. da Costantino contro l'arianesimo, percorre il tragitto che porta alla sala delle udienze e osserva i mosaici che ornano il pavimento, traendone conclusioni dal carattere quasi esistenzialista. La visione focalizzata di Ecclesio si sofferma anzitutto sulla figura centrale – il combattimento tra Bellerofonte e la chimera¹² –, unico mosaico non calpestato dagli inservienti nel loro via vai per i corridoi, per poi estendersi all'intero percorso del peristilio, evidenziando i vari motivi rappresentati che, negli occhi di Ecclesio, sono «una sorta di grande ri-

¹¹ Sul valore cognitivo di *enargeia* ed *ekphrasis* già per la letteratura greco-romana vd., *inter alia*, Huitink (2019).

¹² Vaglio (2022) 179: «La chimera è lì, ai suoi piedi, in tutta la sua scattante e terribile bellezza. Gli artigli da grifone, il corpo di leone, la criniera ritta, la testa di capra innestata sul dorso e le fauci spalancate per vomitare dalle sue due teste belluine fiamme sull'aggressore. L'eroe Bellerofonte si avventa su di lei, maestoso sul suo cavallo alato, la lancia che punta dritta contro il mostro, la mano ferma per colpirla.»

assunto dell'impero.»¹³ Ogni mosaico presenta scene di vita delle varie province imperiali e l'insieme risulta un'accrezione nata dall'intento dei regnanti succeduti a Costantino di «arricchirne» il progetto originario, cioè di usare i mosaici del palazzo come simbolo della grandezza dell'impero e del potere dell'imperatore. Ecclesio poi ritorna – Vaglio fa propria qui la tecnica della *ring composition* – sul mosaico centrale, da cui la descrizione è partita, e interpreta quindi il simbolismo di Bellerofonte:

Finché non si arriva a lui, Bellerofonte, il prescelto dal fato, che con il suo giovanile entusiasmo trionfa sui mostri, sui pirati, sulle amazzoni, sulla chimera, su tutto ciò che emana dal caos e rischia di compromettere l'ordine divino.¹⁴

Ma è proprio quest'ordine ad essere messo continuamente in discussione dagli avvenimenti narrati, *in primis* dalle dispute teologiche, prima tra monofisiti e calcedoniani, poi dalle richieste dell'ariano Teodorico.

(2) Il trattamento delle questioni religiose è un po' diverso nei due romanzi, ma nella sostanza simile. In *I demoni del potere* il divario tra ariani e cattolici assume anche in parte i caratteri di un conflitto etnico in cui gli Ostrogoti di Teodorico divengono gli avvocati dell'arianesimo e il «cattolicissimo» Giustino viene in qualche modo dipinto come dogmatico intollerante. In *La figlia del circo*, invece, il conflitto religioso è interno alla corte stessa in cui sono presenti «calcedoniani» – fedeli al credo sancito dal Concilio di Calcedonia (451 d.C.) secondo il quale in Cristo sono presenti due nature, quella umana e quella divina – come Giustino e monofisiti – sostenitori della posizione che in Cristo sia presente una sola natura, quella divina – come lo stesso imperatore Anastasio. Non manca, tuttavia, una buona dose di pragmatico realismo, come quando il vescovo Sidorio di Apollonia in Cirenaica, poco prima di inviare Teodora ad Alessandria d'Egitto evidenzia l'inutilità delle dispute teologiche sul piano umano e sociale:

Il vescovo sorride e scuote la testa: «Hai ragione. Ma vedi, io in fondo sono un barbaro e un ex soldato. Vengo dalla Britannia, e se devo essere onesto molte di queste controversie mi annoiano terribilmente. Alle volte mi sembra che, più che per capire meglio la religione, siano fatte perché questo o quel teologo vuole dimostrare

13 Vaglio (2022) 179.

14 Vaglio (2022) 180–181.

di avere la testa più fina dei suoi concorrenti. Mi sanno di intelligenza sprecata. Io guardo alle cose che fanno gli uomini e a come si comportano. Se poi vogliono credere che Cristo abbia una o due nature, lo trovo secondario. Ecebolo forse è un monofisita convinto, ma ti ha riempito di botte. Credo che questo Dio lo tenga più in conto di tutte le professioni di fede. Forse sarà una cosa un po' eretica, da dire, ma per me contano i fatti e se si è delle brave persone.»¹⁵

Sicuramente, in questo modo, si instaura un legame anche con la modernità e, più precisamente, con la situazione politico-religiosa attuale: *mutatis mutandis* Vaglio presenta sia il conflitto «perenne» tra varie forme di radicalismo religioso sia la tolleranza che caratterizza l'agire concreto di molti (forse della maggior parte) degli attori politico-religiosi di ogni tempo. Le dispute tra monofisiti e calcedoniani, tra ariani e «ortodossi» non sono, del resto, l'unico esempio di contrasto religioso presente nei romanzi. Anzi, proprio *La figlia del circo* si apre con un rimando agli antichi dèi della tradizione greco-romana, giacché la strega Rodope, interpellata da Eutichia, madre di Teodora, riguardo al futuro della primogenita Comitò, si offre di fare un vaticinio sicuramente peccaminoso dal punto di vista cristiano.¹⁶

(3) In entrambi i romanzi, infine, Vaglio si premura di evidenziare l'aspetto fittizio, ma ispirato da fatti reali, della sua narrazione. In due dettagliate «Note dell'autrice», sono ribaditi, infatti, i principi guida del processo narrativo. Se in una brevissima indicazione paratestuale di *I demoni del potere* è affermato che ci si trova dinanzi a un' «opera di fantasia», in cui «i fatti storici narrati sono liberamente interpretati dall'autrice»,¹⁷ nelle «Note» l'autrice dichiara senza mezzi termini, sì di aver rimaneggiato qua e là le notizie storiche, ma che, in linea di massima, i fatti narrati, le biografie dei personaggi – maggiori e minori – corrispondono a quanto riportato dalle fonti antiche.¹⁸ Tra le fonti citate da Vaglio spicca, ovviamente Procopio di Cesarea, ma vengono menzionati anche Pietro Patrizio, Giovanni Lido, Costantino Porfirogenito, Giovanni di Nikiu, Evagrio Scolastico, Teofane il Confessore, la *Collectio Avellana*, Giovanni Malala,

¹⁵ Vaglio (2018) 297–298.

¹⁶ Vaglio (2018) 14.

¹⁷ Vaglio (2022) 9.

¹⁸ Vaglio (2018) 414–416; Vaglio (2022) 359–360.

Agazia, il *Chronicon Paschale* nonché, per finire, il *Liber Pontificalis* di Agnello Ravennate.¹⁹ La dichiarata fedeltà alle fonti contribuisce pienamente alla costruzione di una «fiction»²⁰ in sé coerente e coesa, anzi, le precisazioni di Vaglio, che nelle «Note» addirittura elenca quali aspetti storici siano stati da lei rimaneggiati, guida il lettore desideroso di approfondimenti a ritornare alla storia con un atteggiamento più critico e puntualizzante.

Sui contorni di questo preciso e variegato affresco si stagliano, ovviamente, le figure di Giustiniano e Teodora, protagonisti assoluti delle vicende descritte. Alla loro caratterizzazione mi dedicherò nelle prossime pagine.

LA CARATTERIZZAZIONE DI GIUSTINIANO E TEODORA

Il legame tra Giustiniano e Teodora è presentato, fin dall'inizio della Saga come qualcosa di voluto dal destino. Nel prologo a *La figlia del circo*, cui si è già accennato prima, la strega Rodope non solo predice il futuro di Comitò, sorella maggiore di Teodora, ma cade anche, dopo aver toccato la piccola Teodora, in una *trance* che inorridisce tutte le astanti. Alla strega vengono così messe in bocca le parole di Procopio nelle *Storie Segrete* e il legame di Teodora con Giustiniano è da subito connotato come un'unione con il «re dei demoni».²¹ La fatalità del legame

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Vaglio (2022) 359.

²¹ Vaglio (2018) 15–16: «La fattucchiera sembra impietrita. Immobile, il suo dito adunco sfiora la pelle della piccola Teodora. Il braccio è teso, gli occhi vuoti e spalancati, la bocca si muove come se tentasse di far uscire suoni strappandoli all'anima. «Comitò, presto, aiutami!» ordina Eutichia. «Il Circo... il re dei demoni... il sangue...» Comitò è spaventatissima, non riesce a muoversi. Eutichia, china su Rodope, cerca di soccorrerla come può, tenendole la testa ferma mentre dei potenti brividi scuotono il corpo dell'indovina. Teodora invece, che la madre ha appoggiato per terra nel trambusto, resta ferma, senza piangere e senza proferire suono. Poi d'un tratto si avvicina gattonando a Rodope, e con la manina le tocca il volto rugoso, per farle una carezza. Gli occhi vuoti della fattucchiera si rianimano, guizza in loro di nuovo la scintilla della consapevolezza. La vecchia fissa la piccola con un'espressione atterrita, poi si volta verso Eutichia, le afferra il polso e lo stringe, ansimando: «La bambina... la bambina... Il re dei demoni la prenderà in sposa!» Eutichia per un attimo sembra smarrita. La sua bimba è lì, accanto, le guance paffute, gli occhi allegri. Tenta di toccare ancora il volto della vecchia, mentre quella si ritrae, sempre più terrorizzata, come se avesse di fronte un mostro. D'improvviso l'antro della fattucchiera le appare per ciò che è, un tugurio sporco che puzza di mi-

tra i due protagonisti dei romanzi è richiamata più volte all'attenzione del lettore,²² e il fatto che il momento dell'incoronazione di Giustiniano come coreggente dell'impero con Giustino, dell'incoronazione di Teodora come augusta e del matrimonio tra i due siano costruiti in *I demoni del potere* come un dittico conferma anche sul piano narrativo quanto Teodora stessa sembra pensare di se stessa.²³ In particolare, proprio la scena del matrimonio pare accentuare un aspetto presente anche nelle *Storie Segrete*, ossia la piena parità politica della coppia imperiale, se non addirittura una certa superiorità di Teodora rispetto a Giustiniano.²⁴

seria. Sente montare dentro di sé la rabbia per essersi fatta turlupinare da quella ciarlatana eretica e senza Dio, che pronostica disgrazie alla sua piccola.» Nelle narrazione di Procopio la caratterizzazione di Giustiniano come ὁ τῶν δαιμόνων ἄρχων compare per la prima volta alla fine del dodicesimo capitolo degli *Anekdotia*, dove si narra che un monaco, recatosi a Bisanzio per implorare l'aiuto imperiale, varcata la soglia della sala imperiale, subito si ritrasse spaventato nelle sue stanze, raccontando, a chi gli chiedeva spiegazioni per il suo comportamento di aver visto «seduto sul trono del Palazzo il Principe dei Demoni, con cui non avrebbe pensato di conversare o di chiedergli qualcosa» (Procop. Arc. 12.26: φάναι λέγουσιν αὐτὸν ἀντικρυς ὡς τῶν δαιμόνων τὸν ἄρχοντα ἐν τῷ Παλατίῳ ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου καθήμενον ἴδοι, ᾧ δὴ ξυγγενέσθαι ἢ τι παρ' αὐτοῦ αἰτεῖσθαι οὐκ ἂν ἀξιοίη, traduzione mia).

22 Per fare due esempi: in Vaglio (2018) 43–44 Teodora ancora bambina, dopo aver incontrato per la prima volta Giustiniano ventenne al circo, dichiara di volerlo sposare ed è redarguita dalla sorella che le ricorda come sia impossibile per un'attrice del circo sposare un nobile; in Vaglio (2018) 116, invece, Cirillo, amico, confidente e «coinquilino» di Teodora nonché una delle poche figure interamente fittizie nella serie, deride la giovane attrice per la sua convinzione in una fatalità del rapporto con il giovane («Sembra quasi che tu sia convinta che fra te e lui ci sia una sorta di legame del destino. Ma non è così, Teodora!»).

23 Vaglio (2022) 215: «Augusta, questa la sua carica da ora in avanti: un nome che significa che è pari per potere e dignità all'imperatore, e che insieme a lui rappresenta un binomio inscindibile. Non tutte le mogli degli imperatori ottengono quel titolo il giorno del matrimonio. Per alcune arriva con la nascita del primo figlio ed erede, per altre mai. Giustiniano, invece, ha preteso che fosse suo immediatamente, perché risultasse chiaro a tutti che loro sono più di una coppia, sono una cosa sola. Quella mattina le ha mostrato le monete che ha fatto coniare per celebrare il loro matrimonio e che da domani circoleranno in tutto l'impero. Hanno la legenda in latino e in greco: *Iustiniano Teodoraque concordia perpetua sit in deo, Theou Homonoia*, «Per Giustiniano e Teodora la concordia perpetua venga da Dio». Da un lato il ritratto di lui, e dall'altro quello suo, di Teodora: per sempre uniti, inscindibili, come appunto due facce della stessa medaglia.»

24 Ovviamente la questione del ruolo politico e dell'effettivo potere esercitato da Teodora nell'amministrazione dell'impero è molto discussa tra gli storici, visto che – sotto l'influsso di Procopio – molte fonti hanno dipinto Teodora come coreggente di Giustiniano. Sostanzial-

Infatti, Giustiniano viene presentato in questa sezione del romanzo come un personaggio «confuso...indifeso, nudo», dalla «mente...vuota»²⁵ ed è a Teodora che viene riservato il ruolo di vera e propria *leader* della coppia.²⁶

Anche le singole caratterizzazioni dei due personaggi ricalcano vagamente le descrizioni di Procopio, sebbene le sfumature apportate da Vaglio ne facciano due figure sfaccettate, certo molto determinate, ma anche non prive di dubbi. Comincerò, brevemente, con Giustiniano per poi passare alla sua consorte.

Giustiniano

Oltre alla denotazione di Giustiniano come «re dei demoni», i romanzi riprendono e sviluppano anche la spiegazione offerta da Procopio per questa caratterizzazione. Dopo aver riportato l'episodio del monaco che, atterrito alla vista di Giustiniano assiso in trono, si ritirò nelle sue stanze senza esporre le proprie richieste all'imperatore,²⁷ Procopio, infatti, pone la seguente domanda (retorica):

mente bisogna ricordare – come è già stato accennato *supra* (n. 4) che la rappresentazione femminile in Procopio è fortemente tendenziosa [su cui vd. oltre a quanto indicato in n. 4, anche Kaldellis (2004) 142–150; Goltz (2011)], ma anche che, probabilmente, il ruolo politico di Teodora non fu molto dissimile da quello di altre imperatrici (su cui vd. a titolo indicativo Leppin (2002).

25 Vaglio (2022) 212.

26 Vaglio (2022) 217: «Quando alza gli occhi verso Giustiniano, per la prima volta da quando lo conosce vi legge qualcosa che non vi ha mai visto in precedenza: insicurezza. Il *magister praesentialis* abituato a gestire l'impero, il nuovo imperatore, ha uno sguardo frastornato, smarrito, come se tutte le emozioni della giornata avessero preso il sopravvento e abbisognasse di un'ancora a cui aggrapparsi. La fissa come un bimbo che cerca l'approvazione della madre, come un cucciolo che chiede una guida del suo capobranco. Anche se è lui a porgerle la destra, per sancire la loro unione, è lei che gliela stringe, come per rassicurarlo, e trasmettergli attraverso il tocco delle sue dita che è lì, per lui, e per sempre. [...] Giustiniano segue tutte le mosse di Teodora, senza staccare gli occhi dai suoi, accosta le labbra alla coppa solo dopo che lei le ha accostate, come se volesse accertarsi di essere nel giusto e di non commettere errori, quasi temesse che perdendola un solo attimo di vista lei possa scomparire nel nulla, come Euridice con Orfeo, e lui ritrovarsi solo ad affrontare il mondo.»

27 Vd. *supra* n. 21.

πῶς δὲ οὐκ ἔμελλεν ὄδε ὁ ἀνὴρ δαίμων τις ἀλιτήριος εἶναι, ὅς γε ποτοῦ ἢ σιτίων ἢ ὕπνου εἰς κόρον οὐδέποτε ἦλθεν, ἀλλ' ἀμηγέπη τῶν παρατεθέντων ἀπογευσάμενος ἄωρὶ νύκτωρ περιήρχετο τὰ βασίλεια, καίπερ ἐς τὰ ἀφροδίσια δαιμονίως ἐσπουδακῶς.

Come del resto quest'uomo non poteva essere un demone peccaminoso, lui che mai prendeva a sazietà cibo, bevanda o sonno, ma spilluzzicava a caso quel che gli si imbandiva e setacciava in piena notte il palazzo reale, pur praticando sesso in modo demoniaco?²⁸

Anche in *La figlia del circo* Giustiniano è presentato più volte come un *workaholic* instancabile, ed è proprio questa sua etica lavorativa a procurargli il soprannome di «Demone». Ma la prospettiva è radicalmente diversa: Laddove per Procopio l'iperattività di Giustiniano è segno di vita peccaminosa, nella rilettura di Vaglio essa è simbolo di dedizione alla politica, considerata «la sua unica amante».²⁹ E il pronome «Demone» diviene nomignolo quasi affettivo a lui attribuito da suoi compagni per sottolinearne l'instancabile impegno e devozione allo studio, che anche Marino di Siria gli riconosce.³⁰

Quanto in Procopio è segno del maligno, diviene nella rilettura di Vaglio indizio della natura indagatrice di Giustiniano. In quest'ottica il rapporto di Giustiniano con la fede è, allora, centrale per la sua caratterizzazione. Nel passaggio de *I demoni del potere* in cui viene descritta l'incoronazione di Giustino per mano di papa Giovanni I, il tema viene presentato narrativamente con una mescolanza di focalizzazione zero e focalizzazione interna che per brevi istanti quasi assume la forma di un monologo interiore: La voce del narratore costruisce dapprima un contrasto tra la fede semplice e «granitica» di Giustino che si avvia all'altare e i continui dubbi che assillano Giustiniano. Poi si alternano commenti del narratore e pensieri di Giustiniano che delineano come il rapporto di Giustiniano con la fede sia complicatissimo e faticosissimo, un vero e proprio «sentiero che si snoda in perpetuo sul ciglio di un burrone». Tanto che la ricerca di Dio si è trasformata in «un'ossessione», che può essere lenita solo dalla politica, giacché solo in essa, seppur per brevissimi momenti, Giustiniano può sperimentare per «riflesso» qualcosa di simile alla preveggenza e onniscienza divina. Salvo poi ri-

²⁸ Procop. Arc. 12.27 (traduzione Paolo Cesaretti, lievemente modificata).

²⁹ Vaglio (2018) 347.

³⁰ Vaglio (2018) 257–258.

trovarsi «nel buio di se stesso, senza forze, svuotato, inutile, come un legno che è stato trascinato dal mare in tempesta fin sulla spiaggia e poi lasciato lì, a marcire sulla riva».³¹

Giustiniano, però, non è solo assalito da dubbi riguardanti la fede. Egli è anche un uomo che dinanzi all'immensità dell'impero e di Costantinopoli prova, talvolta, un senso di inadeguatezza. L'esempio più lampante è la descrizione della rivolta di Nika. Questo episodio, che – come vedremo più avanti – sancisce definitivamente il carattere imperiale di Teodora, è costruito in modo da enucleare i dubbi «esistenziali» di Giustiniano, presentato nel corso dei romanzi anche come *homo novus* fattosi (quasi) dal nulla. Anche in questo caso la linea di demarcazione tra focalizzazione zero e focalizzazione interna è labile: la definizione di Costantinopoli come prostituta, presentata come costruito anaforico arricchito da una *variatio* aggettivale,³² rispecchia con ogni probabilità il pensiero dell'imperatore alla prese con una gravissima crisi interna, che viene poi sviluppato con una serie di riflessioni tese a demarcare il conflittuale rapporto tra Giustiniano e la città fin dal loro primo incontro. Queste riflessioni sono intervallate da brevissime descrizioni «esterne», per esempio dell'atteggiamento di Giustiniano.³³ E – forse – la caratterizzazione di Costantinopoli come «meretrice» che «non si piega, mai, a nessuno»³⁴ e la conseguente introspezione di Giustiniano che si riconosce «un impostore, un bifolco venuto dal nulla» è anche una trasposizione metaforica del rapporto tra Giustiniano e Teodora, che appunto da attrice/meretrice indomita si è trasformata in vera imperatrice.

Eppure il cammino di Teodora per raggiungere quest'obiettivo, seppur percorso con caparbia, non è stato privo, a sua volta, di insicurezze e problematicità.

31 Vaglio (2022) 175–177.

32 Vaglio (2022) 282: «Costantinopoli. Quella maledetta puttana.»; Vaglio (2022) 283 «Costantinopoli, quella grandissima puttana.»

33 Vaglio (2022) 282: «Giustiniano serra la mascella, per impedire che il groppo che ha in gola si trasformi in un fiotto di lacrime di rabbia.»

34 *Ibidem*.

Teodora

Come abbiamo già avuto modo di vedere, Teodora è presentata sin dalle primissime pagine di *La figlia del circo* come fatalmente legata a Giustiniano (per lo meno per un lettore che già conosce il resoconto di Procopio di Cesarea). Anche dalle prime pagine del romanzo è evidente la sua natura di donna (anzi bambina, poi ragazza e, infine, donna) forte, capace di perseguire i propri obiettivi e non paragonabile ad altri esemplari del genere femminile. Il carattere deciso di Teodora si manifesta in tutte le età e in tutte le sue attività, da infante capace di far inorridire la strega Rodope,³⁵ a bambina in grado di sfidare l'impresario della fazione dei Verdi al circo,³⁶ a ragazzina pronta a tutto pur di ottenere il ruolo di «primadonna» negli spettacoli del circo.³⁷ Ma non solo: Teodora è una donna razionale che, diversamente dalle altre donne, preferisce farsi aiutare durante un parto difficile da un medico, anziché affidarsi alla preghiera;³⁸ è una donna indipendente che riconosce di essere stata sfruttata da sua madre a fini puramente economici, che pone la carriera e l'indipendenza economica davanti a tutto e che non riesce a provare alcuna forma di amore materno.³⁹ Solo Giustiniano riesce a farle perdere la sua sicurezza, sia prima dell'inizio della loro relazione permanente sia quando – già conviventi – stimola in lei una gelosia quasi troppo normale per una figura della sua caratura.⁴⁰

35 Vd. *supra* ## e n. 21.

36 Vaglio (2018) 26.

37 Vaglio (2018) 72–83.

38 Vaglio (2018) 160–161.

39 Vaglio (2018) 162–166.

40 Cfr. e.g. Vaglio (2018) 118–121; Vaglio (2022) 112–121 (in particolare 120–121, nuovamente in una sorta di monologo interiore: «Nella vita di Giustiniano non è il perno, è una variabile: la sua vera compagna è la politica, e lei è una figura di contorno che occupa i pochi spazi vuoti. E non le basta, non le basta più.»); Vaglio (2022) 140–144 e 150–153, dove Teodora riflette su come reagire alla proposta di matrimonio fatta dalla principessa Ostrogota Amalansunta a Giustiniano; e infine Vaglio (2022) 160, dove è quasi suggerito che con l'inizio della convivenza con Giustiniano è anche terminata (almeno in parte) l'indipendenza economica di Teodora.

Ovviamente, Teodora non è l'unica donna forte dei romanzi. Accanto a lei si possono nominare Anicia Giuliana, moglie di Areobindo e di stirpe imperiale,⁴¹ Amalasueta, figlia di Teodorico,⁴² e anche Antonina, moglie di Belisario.⁴³ Tuttavia, solo Teodora viene caratterizzata sul piano narrativo anche in modo contrastivo: Lei non è solo una donna forte, ma è anche, e forse soprattutto, una donna diversa sia dalle aspettative tradizionali sia dalle altre donne di potere nella famiglia di Giustiniano. Anche qui, tuttavia, il contrasto non è solo interno alla figure dei romanzi, ma anche tra la visione della donna forte interpretata negativamente da Procopio e la stessa visione che agli occhi del pubblico odierno, assai probabilmente, suscita simpatia e incita all'identificazione. Particolarmente illuminanti sono i confronti diretti con Lupicina/Eufemia, moglie di Giustino, e Vigilanzia, sorella di Giustiniano, o con la matrona Elia Marcella che con la nipote Marcellina accompagna Teodora, sotto mentite spoglie, dalla Cirenaica ad Alessandria.

Vigilanzia rispecchia, infatti, agli occhi di Lupicina/Eufemia l'ideale tradizionale di ragazza compita, semplice, ubbidiente agli uomini e non eccessivamente educata.⁴⁴ Nel corso di una funzione religiosa, a cui partecipa con la zia, Vigilanzia, incinta, si sente male ed è soccorsa proprio da Teodora, che Lupicina non riconosce e considera di primo acchito una ragazza «a modo», per poi disdegnarla e quasi insultarla non appena recepisce i bisbiglii delle altre astanti.⁴⁵ Sono proprio il contrasto con Vigilanzia – di cui nello stesso contesto la voce narrante dice che

41 Cfr. Vaglio (2018) 231–234, dove Giustiniano si rivolge a lei per ottenere l'elezione al soglio imperiale dello zio Giustino.

42 Cfr. Vaglio (2022) 307–314, dove Amalasueta complotta con Cassiodoro ed elimina i consiglieri Trigvila, Cipriano e Cunigasto, che aspirano al trono Ostrogoto dopo la morte di suo figlio Atalarico.

43 Cfr. Vaglio (2022) 43–45. Proprio ad Antonina sono messi in bocca una serie di *loci communes* sugli uomini, per esempio che sono facili da manipolare, paurosi e un po' ipocondriaci.

44 Vaglio (2018) 201–202.

45 Vaglio (2018) 203–204. In quest'occasione viene messo in scena anche un brevissimo incontro tra Anicia Giuliana e Teodora, che si chiude con un commento della voce narrante dal carattere dantesco: Anicia Giuliana, infatti, «passa avanti, senza curarsi di nessuno.» La frase richiama l'ormai proverbiale «non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa», di *Inferno* III, 51, dove è pronunciato da Virgilio per invitare Dante a non darsi cura dei vili «che visser senza 'nfamia e senza lodo» (*Inf.* III,36) e indica in questo contesto perfettamente quanto insignificante Teodora sia agli occhi delle donne «per bene» della società costantinopolitana dell'epoca.

essa appare agli occhi del fratello Giustiniano «stupida e noiosa» – e la discrepanza nella percezione che Lupicina ha di Teodora prima e dopo aver saputo di chi si tratta ad accentuare la posizione peculiare della protagonista del romanzo: Sebbene sia l'unica ad avere una sorta di *know-how* per aiutare Vigilanzia sulla base della propria esperienza di gravidanza, Teodora viene palesemente esclusa dalla comunità femminile presente alla situazione, cosa che – naturalmente – suscita in lei un'ondata di risentimento che addirittura la spinge ad accettare l'invito di Ecebolo a seguirla in Cirenaica, di cui è stato nominato governatore.⁴⁶

Il contrasto con la matrona Elia Marcella e sua nipote Marcellina si muove sulle stesse linee, ma evidenzia anche la forza «emancipatrice» (e non solo la natura emancipata) di Teodora. Anche Elia Marcella è «vittima» della bellezza di Teodora, che si muove verso Alessandria in incognito. Marcella paragona, in una sorta di monologo interiore, la propria nipote Marcellina con la bella Eunice (*alias* Teodora): Se Marcellina è brutta, incapace di attirare a sé un buon partito, ma pronta ad accettare come pretendente un giovane liberto innamorato di lei e, di conseguenza, costretta dalla zia ad entrare in convento, Eunice colpisce con la propria avvenenza fino a far credere a Marcella – in un illusorio capovolgimento della realtà – di essere una «cara bambina [che] non ha evidentemente alcuna esperienza del mondo, e possiede il naturale pudore di una vergine timorata». ⁴⁷ Su questa convinzione di Marcella, fondata su una percezione stereotipa delle apparenze, è costruita la rappresentazione «liberatrice» di Teodora, che dinanzi a Timoteo, patriarca di Alessandria, non solo rivela la propria identità, ma anche, nell'ordine, ottiene il permesso per Marcellina di sposare il suo giovane spasimante e trasforma la giovane in una sposa attraente.⁴⁸ Ma non solo: è la vicenda di Marcellina a far comprendere a Teodora la limitatezza dell'esistenza femminile nella società in cui vive:

Ma dalle lacrime di quella ragazza nobile e ricca aveva capito che la sua era un'illusione. Non c'è nessun posto al mondo dove una donna si possa considerare in salvo, nemmeno nelle *domus* opulente, nemmeno, forse, nella reggia dell'imperatore. Brutte o belle, puttane di strada o nobile progenie di consoli, come donne il loro destino è uguale: venire maritate a forza, monacate a forza, prese a forza dagli uomini e poi scacciate, con la complicità delle Elie Marcelle di turno o delle madri come la

⁴⁶ Descritto nel capitolo successivo: Vaglio (2018) 205–207.

⁴⁷ Vaglio (2018) 310–311.

⁴⁸ Vaglio (2018) 312–327.

sua, senza mai poter decidere davvero. Ed è questo ciò che la ferisce di più: il senso di impotenza, l'idea di essere intrappolata e non potersi opporre a quest'ingiustizia enorme e così palese, non solo per sé, ma anche per tutte le povere Marcelline, ancora più innocenti e indifese, ancora più vittime.⁴⁹

È proprio questo senso di «impotenza» femminile che Teodora infrange continuamente con la propria esistenza. E l'esempio più clamoroso è la sua famosa orazione durante la rivolta di Nika.

LA RIVOLTA DI NIKΑ: «LA PORPORA È UN MAGNIFICO SUDARIO»

Abbiamo già accennato sopra, discutendo della caratterizzazione di Giustiniano, di come la rappresentazione della rivolta di Nika possa anche essere parzialmente letta come una trasfigurazione in chiave politica del rapporto tra l'imperatore e la sua consorte. In effetti, se Giustiniano definisce Costantinopoli una «puttana» che non si lascia dominare da nessuno, questa sembra essere una descrizione applicabile anzitutto anche a Teodora, che proprio nella stessa occasione assume indiscutibilmente al ruolo di signora assoluta delle vicende imperiali. Già Procopio attribuiva a Teodora un ruolo centrale nella vicenda. Negli *Anek-dota* descrive la situazione in questi termini:

Οἱ δὲ ἀμφὶ τὸν βασιλέα ἐν βουλῇ ἦσαν, πότερα μένουσιν αὐτοῖς ἢ ταῖς ναυσὶν ἐς φυγὴν τρεπομένοις ἄμεινον ἔσται. καὶ λόγοι μὲν πολλοὶ ἐλέγοντο ἐς ἐκάτερα φέροντες. καὶ Θεοδώρα δὲ ἡ βασιλὶς ἔλεξε τοιάδε «Τὸ μὲν γυναῖκα ἐν ἀνδράσι μὴ χρῆναι τολμᾶν ἢ ἐν τοῖς ἀποκνοῦσι νεανιεῦσθαι, τὸν παρόντα οἶμαι καιρὸν ἤκιστα ἐφεῖναι διασκοπεῖσθαι, εἴτε ταύτη εἴτε ἄλλη πη νομιστέον. οἷς γὰρ τὰ πράγματα ἐς κίνδυνον τὸν μέγιστον ἤκει, οὐκ ἄλλο οὐδὲν εἶναι δοκεῖ ἄριστον ἢ τὰ ἐν ποσὶν ὡς ἄριστα θέσθαι. ἡγοῦμαι δὲ τὴν φυγὴν ἔγωγε, εἴπερ ποτὲ, καὶ νῦν, ἦν καὶ τὴν σωτηρίαν ἐπάγεται, ἀξύμφορον εἶναι. ἀνθρώπων μὲν γὰρ ἐς φῶς ἦκοντι τὸ μὴ οὐχὶ καὶ νεκρῶ γενέσθαι ἀδύνατον, τῷ δὲ βεβασιλευκότι τὸ φυγάδι εἶναι οὐκ ἀνεκτόν. μὴ γὰρ ἂν γενοίμην τῆς ἀλουργίδος ταύτης χωρὶς, μηδ' ἂν τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην βιώην, ἐν ἧ με δέσποιναν οἱ ἐντυχόντες οὐ προσεροῦσιν. εἰ μὲν οὖν σώζεσθαι

⁴⁹ Vaglio (2018) 314.

σοι βουλομένω ἐστίν, ὦ βασιλεῦ, οὐδὲν τοῦτο πρᾶγμα. χρήματα <γάρ> τε πολλὰ ἔστιν ἡμῖν, καὶ θάλασσα μὲν ἐκείνη, πλοῖα δὲ ταῦτα. σκόπει μέντοι μὴ διασωθέντι ξυμβήσεταιί σοι ἥδιστα ἂν τῆς σωτηρίας τὸν θάνατον ἀνταλλάξασθαι. ἐμὲ γάρ τις καὶ παλαιὸς ἀρέσκει λόγος, ὡς καλὸν ἐντάφιον ἢ βασιλεία ἐστί». τοσαῦτα τῆς βασιλίδος εἰπούσης, θάρσος τε τοῖς πᾶσιν ἐπεγένετο καὶ ἐς ἀλκὴν τραπόμενοι ἐν βουλῇ ἐποιοῦντο ἧ ἂν ἀμύνεσθαι δυνατοὶ γένοιτο, ἦν τις ἐπ' αὐτοὺς πολεμήσων ἴοι. οἱ μὲν οὖν στρατιῶται ξύμπαντες, οἳ τε ἄλλοι καὶ ὅσοι ἀμφὶ τὴν βασιλέως αὐλὴν ἐτετάχατο, οὔτε τῷ βασιλεῖ εὐνοικῶς εἶχον οὔτε ἐς τὸ ἐμφανὲς ἔργου ἔχεσθαι ἤθελον, ἀλλὰ τὸ μέλλον ἐκαραδόκουν ὅπη ἐκβήσεται.

Nel frattempo, coloro che erano a palazzo vicini all'imperatore stavano con lui discutendo quale di queste due soluzioni era meglio prendere: o rimanere lì in attesa degli eventi o mettersi in salvo con le navi. Quand'è ecco si presentò loro l'imperatrice Teodora e li ammonì con queste parole: «Lasciamo da parte il fatto che forse una donna non dovrebbe permettersi di dare consigli a uomini e mostrarsi coraggiosa in mezzo a gente che trema di paura: mi pare che in questo momento non sia il caso di sottilizzare quali siano o non siano le buone regole del comportamento. Allorché è evidente, come adesso, che si sta tutti correndo un gravissimo pericolo, penso che ognuno abbia il dovere di cercar di risolvere la situazione critica nel modo che gli sembra migliore. Quanto a me, il mio parere è che proprio in questo momento la fuga sia assolutamente inopportuna, anche se porta alla salvezza della vita. Ogni essere vivente è destinato prima o poi a morire, e chi è sul trono non può evitare la morte, abdicando vergognosamente. Che io non debba mai vedermi strappare di dosso questa porpora ed essere viva il giorno in cui quelli che incontrerò non mi chiameranno più regina! Ma se tu, imperatore, hai in mente di metterti in salvo, nulla te lo può impedire: abbiamo molte ricchezze, e laggiù c'è il mare, ci sono delle navi. Bada, però, se una volta al sicuro sarai veramente più felice o non preferirai essere morto piuttosto che salvo. Quanto a me, approvo il vecchio detto che la porpora è uno splendido sudario».

Le parole dell'imperatrice infusero coraggio in tutti. Abbracciata la decisione di rimanere lì in difensiva, si chiedevano però in che modo, se qualcuno fosse venuto ad aggredirli, avrebbero potuto respingerlo. In effetti, tutti i soldati, compresi quegli stessi che erano schierati attorno al palazzo, non erano ben disposti nei riguardi dell'imperatore e non volevano esporsi apertamente, ma stavano a vedere come si mettevano le cose.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Procop. Pers. 1.24.32–39, traduzione di Marcello Craveri.

Se tra gli storici sono dibattute sia la validità fattuale del resoconto di Procopio sia le intenzioni da lui perseguite nel delineare il carattere e il ruolo di Teodora durante la rivolta,⁵¹ è certo che questo episodio abbia svolto un ruolo preponderante nella ricezione della figura dell'imperatrice. Già il resoconto di Procopio è intriso di elementi letterari,⁵² che culminano con la citazione del detto «la porpora è uno splendido sudario».⁵³ Soprattutto, esso contribuisce a costruire l'immagine di una donna che consapevolmente supera il limite delle imposizioni sociali per dimostrarsi più coraggiosa degli uomini presenti nella sala, tanto da essere l'unica in grado di incoraggiarli all'azione e a demordere dai piani di fuga. Nelle rivisitazioni «odierne» questi aspetti vengono ulteriormente accentuati. Come annunciato nell'introduzione, mi limiterò qui a due esempi: la rivisitazione offertane da Stella Duffy e, naturalmente, quella di Mariangela Galatea Vaglio.

Ecco, per cominciare, la rivisitazione di Stella Duffy in *The Purple Shroud*:

Justinian looked at his wife, his rock, heartbroken. He saw his men bewildered; Belisarius all for action, Germanus still against. He turned, at last, to Narses for an answer and when, for once, he was offered none, the old eunuch as uncertain as the Emperor, Justinian made his decision.

«Call a boat, for the Empress and myself. For all of us. We'll go to the Augusta's estate in Bithynia. The people do not want us dead, they want change. We'll give them change. We will leave.»

He looked around at the shocked advisers, some relieved the August had finally made a choice, others horrified it was the choice to run, still others delighted, glad to finally get away. The Emperor clapped his hands and people sprang into action.

Action that stopped almost immediately. The Empress, speaking from the floor, from the mess of purple silk she twisted in her hands, lifted her head just high enough to say:

«We are going nowhere.»

51 Si vedano e.g. Meier (2004) che dubita della storicità dell'orazione e la interpreta come un accorgimento letterario di Procopio per fare insinuazioni sul carattere tirannico del regno di Giustiniano; Slootjes (2023) 90–95, che non si allinea con nessuna posizione interpretativa ma evidenzia come, in qualunque caso, Procopio sia il vero autore della caratterizzazione dell'imperatrice. Ai due articoli rinvio anche per ulteriore bibliografia.

52 Su cui vd. da ultimo Greatrex (2022) 352–355.

53 Già usato, e.g., in Isocr. or. 6.45, Plut. mor. 783d, Ael. VH 4.8, Diod. 14.8.5, 20.78.2.

Theodora pulled herself up, her women stumbling to their feet with her. Slowly she walked to Justinian, becoming steadier with every step. She pulled him close, far closer than they usually stood in public, and spoke quietly to him.

◁I apologise, sir. Do you remember, after the coronation, when we wept together? I promised you I would never show my distress so openly again. You told me we were August, that we must give the role its due respect, we agreed we would keep any fear, any upset, only for each other, you remember?▷

Justinian nodded.

◁You said then, Master, that the purple was bigger than either of us.▷

◁I did,▷ he agreed. ◁It is.▷

◁Then we cannot run from it.▷

Turning to the whole room, the Palace guards awaiting orders, the generals ready to fight or to flee, their only job to do the August's command, to Narses and Armeneus pushing the fearful servant from the room, and turning also to her women, who were still crying but more quietly now, Theodora spoke, specifically to Justinian, and through him to them all.

◁I am your Empress, sir. I stand in the purple beside you, here with your men, your advisers, your generals. I know it has been said that too often I speak where a woman should remain silent. It may be inappropriate, but this crisis does not call for what is appropriate, it calls for what is right.▷

Her voice was quiet and calm, and while they could plainly hear the growing chant of Nika outside, everyone in the room was drawn to Theodora's words. They moved closer and she went on.

◁I will give you my opinion → there were several raised eyebrows at this, but not a word to stop her, and she continued: ◁this is not the time to flee. Even if perfect safety were to welcome us with open arms on the other shore, we should not run. We know it is impossible for anyone living to escape death in the end. And we know it is impossible for an Emperor to become an exile.▷

She turned as she spoke, so that now she stood beside her husband, facing the generals and the guards who had come together, around their women, and she switched from Latin to a more impassioned Greek to add, ◁You've all listened to me before now, and trusted me – sometimes. I've helped you understand the people, and have been useful in that, I hope. But I am more than the young woman who came to the Palace eleven years ago. I am married, anointed, crowned. I wear the purple. And I will not be separated from it. I will never be called anything but Mistress.▷

She took her husband's hand, speaking quietly again, as if only to him, but turning out to the room, ensuring everyone could hear: ◁Master, if you truly mean to

leave, go to our harbour. We have gold, coin, there is a world that will receive you. But who will you be, if you go? There is an old saying – purple makes the perfect burial shroud.» Then Theodora turned back to stand before Justinian, whispering so that only he could hear her, «I intend to wear it until I die.»

The day turned on Theodora's speech.

Justinian agreed. His wife's words, flowing from Greek to Latin and back again convinced him. This was the way she spoke to him privately, the way they spoke to each other, using the language, the words, that best conveyed the deepest, clearest meaning. She rarely spoke this way in public: for years Theodora had schooled herself to show disagreement with her husband only when it was in both their interests to do so, when it was useful for the people to assume that one or other of the Imperial couple were on their side. If they could not have both, then most would be satisfied with August or Augusta speaking for them.

Theodora had missed the stage, but she had not missed its intrusions. Showing her private self here, in the very centre of government, was a huge risk. Justinian knew this, was grateful to her for it, and heard her words as the challenge they were. He stood beside her and now seemed to fill his purple robe where a moment before he had appeared diminished by it. Those men present who had, like their master, contemplated running away, were shamed into action. Those who had been aching to fight all day, Belisarius in particular, were grateful for the spur to begin final preparations.⁵⁴

Ed ecco la narrazione di Galatea Vaglio:

«Giustiniano, devi dare tu l'ordine di evacuazione.» È la voce di Pietro che lo richiama. Giustiniano si scuote, come se emergesse da un sogno lontano: «Sì, certo» dice con una voce che stenta a riconoscere come sua. «Prepariamo le navi, partiremo prima del tra...»

«Non partiremo affatto.»

La voce di Teodora risuona alle sue spalle, improvvisa. Ma quando si volta per guardarla, quella che Giustiniano vede sulla porta della sala, accompagnata da Narsete e Belisario, non è la moglie, ma l'imperatrice. Teodora indossa una lunga tunica bianca e, sopra, il manto di porpora ornato da una piccola *maniakis* tempestata di pietre preziose. Sul capo, i capelli sono trattenuti da una cuffia intessuta con perle, che sorreggono la corona. Ma lo scintillio dei gioielli è nulla rispetto a quello

54 Duffy (2012) ch. 14 & 15.

dei suoi occhi neri, che sono insieme freddi e pieni di passione, determinati e fieri come quelli di un'antica dea, una Pallade Atena o forse una delle Erinni.

Un brusio sommesso. I membri del concistoro, che già non avevano avuto il coraggio di parlare prima, ora sembrano del tutto confusi e tramortiti. Non capita spesso, per non dire mai, che un'imperatrice prenda parte a una delle riunioni: nei casi più gravi, al massimo, le auguste inviano uno dei loro silenziari per riferire un messaggio. Persino Pulcheria e Ariadne, che pure regnavano per diritto di sangue, e non di matrimonio, essendo figlie di imperatori, avevano evitato di comparire di persona lì dentro, affidando il loro volere a inviati. Di tutti i *sancta sanctorum* dell'impero, quello è il più impenetrabile da sempre a ogni presenza femminile. Ma ora Teodora è lì, di fronte a loro, con l'aria di chi non solo non pensa di essere entrata in un luogo a lei interdetto ma addirittura ha il piglio di chi in quel luogo si sente perfettamente a proprio agio, come se fosse suo. E proprio come una padrona fa scorrere il suo sguardo su ognuno di loro, a cominciare dal marito, fissandoli dritti negli occhi finché sono loro ad abbassarli, come fanno i bambini quando sanno di avere tradito le aspettative della madre e si sentono in colpa. Abbassano infatti il capo, vergognosi. Nessuno osa ribattere, finché Giustiniano stesso non decide di replicare: «Teodora,» inizia come per giustificarsi «qui dentro siamo in trappola, siamo spacciati. Non c'è alternativa, dobbiamo fuggire».

Teodora avanza, lenta, ritta, con l'incedere di una primadonna che calca la scena da gran signora del palco. Getta un'occhiata sprezzante agli altri membri del concistoro, poi guarda dritto negli occhi il marito e scandisce con voce fredda: «Bene, se volete andarvene, andate. Siete liberi di lasciare il palazzo e la città, non vi trattengo. Siete semplici uomini, dopo tutto: è umano che pensiate a salvare le vostre vite. Ma io non sono più una semplice donna, sono l'imperatrice. Questo mantello di porpora è il simbolo di ciò che sono diventata, ed è un cambiamento che nessuno può annullare e da cui non si torna indietro. Nulla o nessuno mi potrà togliere la porpora che indosso. Lascia Costantinopoli, se vuoi, Giustiniano. Io rimango. Per quello che mi riguarda, la porpora sarà il mio magnifico sudario».

Teodora tace. Come una primadonna che ha finito il suo monologo e ora attende l'applauso del pubblico. No, si dice Giustiniano: come uno degli antichi oratori di Roma, un Cicerone, un Catone, che salivano sui rostri del foro e da lì arringavano il popolo ricordandogli le antiche virtù e il dovere a cui erano chiamati tutti per salvare lo stato. E lui, al pari di quella antica plebe, è rimasto senza fiato. Come se vergogna e orgoglio si fossero fusi assieme. Vergogna per aver pensato di fuggire ai suoi doveri e al suo ruolo, e orgoglio per avere avuto l'onore di un richiamo così vibrante e nobile. Si sente travolgere da una strana onda calda, che prima lo affonda come se volesse annegarlo, ma poi, quando crede di essere spacciato, lo riporta in

alto, lo fa riemergere boccheggianti per respirare l'aria pura. E, respirandola, il suo pensiero si chiarisce, gli appare finalmente chiaro quale sia la via da seguire. Un'illuminazione divina che però non proviene dallo Spirito Santo o da qualche angelo messaggero, ma direttamente da Teodora, la sua dea. Non è mai riuscito a comprendere prima fino in fondo che tipo di magia eserciti quella donna su di lui. Ha il potere di sorprenderlo, spiazzarlo, stordirlo, affossarlo e innalzarlo, farlo sentire insieme il padrone del mondo e l'ultimo dei servi. Ha lo stesso potere, capisce ora, che esercita su di lui Costantinopoli. Perché lei è Costantinopoli: la più perfetta incarnazione dello spirito della città.

«*Domine*, non possiamo perdere altro tempo...» si inserisce Giovanni di Cappadocia, cercando di spezzare lo strano incantesimo che pare aver stregato la sala. Giustiniano però lo zittisce con un cenno imperioso della mano: «Non andiamo da nessuna parte» dice. «L'augusta ha ragione.»⁵⁵

I due passaggi presentano poche similarità e molte differenze. In entrambi i testi è stata mantenuta l'essenza del breve discorso di Teodora culminante nella sentenza che equipara potere regale e pericoli letali. In entrambi i testi, l'effetto che Teodora ha non solo sul pubblico, ma anche sull'atmosfera e sui luoghi è descritto dettagliatamente e in termini icastici. Ma la prospettiva è completamente differente.

Duffy accentua il carattere intimo della situazione. Già la contestualizzazione dell'episodio è incentrata su Teodora: nelle righe precedenti a quelle riportate si descrive come Teodora apprenda della morte durante la rivolta della sua amica di vecchia data Sophia la Nana⁵⁶ e si lasci andare al dolore, quasi originando in Giustiniano il desiderio di lasciare la città con il suo pianto.⁵⁷ La realizzazione della scena, poi, è incentrata sul rapporto tra i due coniugi: la breve orazione di Teodora è quasi trasformata in un dialogo con il marito, che risulta essere anche il principale destinatario delle sue parole. La reazione di Giustiniano – o più precisamente la rappresentazione del punto di vista di Giustiniano – conferma, infine il carattere intimo del momento: Teodora gli ha parlato alternando frasi

⁵⁵ Vaglio (2022) 284–286.

⁵⁶ Descritta per la prima volta in ch. 5 di Duffy (2010), dove di lei, descritta come *dwarf*, si dice che avesse una grandissima energia e presenza di palcoscenico (Teodora e Sophia si incontrano nel circo e sono anzitutto colleghe). Là di offre anche come nomignolo/nome d'arte del personaggio *Sophia-the-half-size*.

⁵⁷ Duffy (2012) ch. 14.

in greco e in latino «come quando parlavano in privato» e l'imperatore le è grato per aver mostrato – a proprio rischio e pericolo – la sua vera, privata natura in pubblico.

La resa di Vaglio, invece, mostra non una donna che lascia trasparire la propria essenza intima, ma quasi un'entità al di là delle limitazioni umane. Come abbiamo già accennato prima, la contestualizzazione qui è incentrata su Giustiniano che si ritrova a confrontare il proprio senso di inadeguatezza. Teodora, all'inizio non è nemmeno presente e irrompe – quasi *dea ex machina* – imperiosa nella stanza del concistoro. In sintonia con i *topoi* della tradizione classica, i suoi occhi sono l'elemento su cui la voce narrante si sofferma per evidenziare la natura «terribile» (nel senso dell'aggettivo greco *deinós*) dell'imperatrice. Le sue parole e il suo atteggiamento suscitano in Giustiniano non l'impressione di aver avuto un dialogo intimo tra coniugi, ma di aver assistito a un'arringa dei più famosi retori della tradizione. E la stessa Teodora emana un'aura da padrona assoluta delle stanze e dei luoghi in cui si muove, pienamente consapevole di aver valicato ogni possibile *glass ceiling* e quindi per nulla bisognosa di dover giustificare la propria presenza o le proprie parole.

Se accettiamo l'ipotesi di interpretazione offerta da alcuni storici che la rappresentazione procopiana di Teodora abbia precipuamente lo scopo di denotare negativamente il regno di Giustiniano e presentare lui e il suo *entourage* come uno stuolo di uomini che si lasciano guidare da emozioni prettamente femminili, sia la rivisitazione di Duffy sia quella di Vaglio ne modificano (o meglio, ribaltano) il significato in modi differenti: Duffy ne accentua il carattere emozionale e privato, Vaglio, invece, usa la scena per completare la trasformazione di Teodora, da donna indipendente e forte a vera e propria dominatrice delle vicende mondiali. Laddove Duffy, tuttavia, si allontana dal clima erudito della civiltà bizantina, Vaglio ne accentua i caratteri, evidenziando a livello formale come la cultura bizantina – cosa che è facilmente provabile leggendo testi originali dell'epoca – sia intrisa di allusioni, rimandi e citazioni tratti dalla classicità greco-romana.

CONCLUSIONI

Finora mi sono soffermato su pochi aspetti generali dei romanzi di Vaglio dedicati a Bisanzio e soprattutto, anche se solo per sommi capi, sulla caratterizzazione dei due protagonisti a) come figure che «fatalisticamente» si integrano e completano reciprocamente e b) come personaggi – e ciò vale specialmente per

Teodora – al di fuori degli schemi culturali e sociali dell'epoca in cui sono visuti. Naturalmente, per rendere ragione della complessità e della poliedricità dei romanzi, ci si sarebbe potuti concentrare su altri aspetti (per esempio la percezione dell'identità ostrogota avvocata dai consiglieri di Teodorico opposta alla percezione di Teodorico stesso e della sua famiglia come «romani») o approfondire elementi qui solo accennati. Ma è chiaro da quanto è stato detto, credo, che i romanzi di Mariangela Galatea Vaglio offrono un'interessante rivisitazione della vicenda di Teodora e Giustiniano, e delle vicende dell'Impero Romano d'Oriente nonché di tutta l'area del Mediterraneo nel primo terzo del sesto secolo d.C. Si tratta di una rivisitazione che si offre una ricostruzione fedele delle vicende e del clima socio-politico e culturale dell'epoca, ma che mostra anche la possibile attualità dei problemi e delle discussioni di quel periodo. Per questo, in fase conclusiva vorrei lasciare la parola direttamente all'autrice, riportando le sue risposte a tre domande che ho avuto il piacere di porle in una chat su Facebook.⁵⁸

1) Dottoressa Vaglio, cosa l'ha spinto, da un punto di vista diciamo personale, a scegliere Bisanzio – e Teodora in particolare – come vicenda da rileggere e raccontare di nuovo oggi?

«Di Teodora e della sua storia mi ha colpito in particolare la possibilità di usare questa vicenda personale per mandare in crisi alcuni stereotipi sul mondo antico: il fatto che le donne avessero poco potere e interesse per la politica, e che tutte coloro che hanno avuto ruoli di potere li abbiano ottenuti perché parte di famiglie già potenti. Teodora viene invece dal nulla e la sua provenienza e le vicissitudini della sua vita le renderebbero difficile accedere ad un ruolo di potere persino oggi. Una ex spogliarellista al limite del mondo del porno che diventa imperatrice!»

2) Quali pensa che siano i punti di contatto più notevoli tra le vicende di Teodora e Giustiniano e la situazione attuale dei suoi lettori?

«Sicuramente la Costantinopoli di Teodora e Giustiniano ha molti più punti in contatto con la New York di oggi o con Washington: metropoli dove si gestiscono le sorti del mondo e dove uomini e donne hanno carriere improvvise e altrettanto rapide cadute. Il mondo del Circo ha molte affinità con quello infiltrato dalla politica degli Ultras contemporanei, e la gestione di una società multietnica dove si incon-

58 Avvenuta il 26 marzo 2024.

trano gruppi di individui con culture e tradizioni diverse sono altri punti che oggi forse ci risultano più facili da comprendere di un tempo e che consentono ai lettori di immedesimarsi nella storia.»

3) Lei ha scritto anche altre opere dedicate all'antichità. E l'antichità greco-romana, nonostante il calo di iscrizioni ai licei classici e le politiche poco incoraggianti non solo in Italia, ma a livello mondiale, continua a riscuotere, nelle varie forme artistiche, un buon successo di pubblico. A cosa pensa che sia dovuto questo interesse?

«Penso che l'antichità continui ad esercitare fascino perché, paradossalmente, è un mondo molto vicino a noi. Una società globalizzata, che doveva affrontare problemi simili a quelli contemporanei: la gestione di popoli con etnie, culture, lingue e tradizioni diverse tra loro, l'integrazione di grandi masse di immigrati, il rapporto difficile con un Medioriente molto instabile e con confini dell'impero dove c'erano continue turbolenze, il problema di dover coniugare rispetto dei diritti dei cittadini con la necessità di reazioni politiche veloci, i limiti della democrazia. Gli antichi sono in fondo molto vicini a noi e in alcuni casi sono dei veri e propri specchi, o meglio dei fratelli maggiori che hanno dovuto affrontare circostanze abbastanza simili. Per questo, credo, continuano a parlarci e a solleticare la nostra curiosità.»

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‘Fanfiction’ and the Canon in Elodie Harper’s *The Wolf Den* Trilogy

Abstract This article examines how the idea of ‘fanfiction’ can help scholars of the ancient world create accessible and informative ways of introducing non-expert audiences to the ancient world, and show how Harper’s *The Wolf Den* trilogy is a good example. Harper uses a mix of material evidence and quotations from canonical texts to recreate the lives of ordinary Romans. The immersion in the ancient world created by this combination of material and literary evidence challenges the idea that the ancient world is exactly as represented by canonical literature. For example, Amara must alter her behavior many times to fit into the expectations of the upper class man she is acting as courtesan for as well as Pliny, who rents her for a week. In addition, rather than depicting Amara meekly accepting her fate, Harper shows how she and her fellow she-wolves strive to break the cycle of oppression.

Keywords Fanfiction, ordinary Romans, historical fiction, Roman literature, material culture

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, British author Elodie Harper released a historical fiction novel titled *The Wolf Den*. The book follows Amara, a Greek woman, the daughter of a doctor, who was sold into slavery when her family hit on hard times. When the novel begins, Amara has been purchased by Felix, the owner of Pompeii's *lupanar*, the brothel. Over the course of the book, Amara plots to try and change her status by finding a wealthy patron, while also finding friendship and support from her fellow she-wolves and other enslaved individuals. In the second book in the novel, *The House with the Golden Door* (2022), Amara navigates the life of a personal concubine while still striving to move higher up in Roman society. In the final book of the trilogy, *The Temple of Fortuna* (2023), Amara has relocated to Rome where she is engaged to an Imperial freedman, negotiating with members of the imperial household while worrying about her family back in Pompeii. She returns to Pompeii to check in with her family before getting married, just in time for Vesuvius to erupt.¹

During interviews for the release of *The Wolf Den*, Harper spoke about wanting to explore the varied experiences women would have in the ancient world,² while also realizing that they would not have had feminism or ideas of emancipation.³ This premise has been popular not only with classicists, but also general readers, as reviews on websites such as Goodreads and Reddit reveal. On Goodreads, Milas notes that "Harper's novel is a rich, fully grounded, and deeply engrossing retelling that gives a voice to precisely the sort of women who have

1 A note on editions: I personally own the UK hardcovers of *The Wolf Den* and *The House with the Golden Door*, and the US paperback version of *The Temple of Fortuna*. Given the different printing locations, quotes will follow the convention of the location where they were printed.

2 "So I wanted to try and – although the book is primarily about Amara, the central protagonist, and it's really almost like an adventure story of her journey to get out of the brothel to find her freedom – I wanted to reflect some of the different experiences that women were likely to have and the different reactions, the different ways that we all try to survive" Albert (2021). All podcast quotes are transcribed by myself, so I apologize for any errors.

3 "I think you know one of the balancing acts in writing ancient world fiction from the point of view of characters whose perspectives we don't have so much of is that you want to be true to that world, to the sort of psychological constraints that they would have faced so they wouldn't have had feminism they wouldn't have had you know notions of emancipation" Armstrong (2023).

never been allowed to speak for themselves before and whose stories have been left to languish on the sidelines of the history we prefer to remember.”⁴ Reddit user *plastertoed* notes that “I absolutely loved the setting being ancient Pompeii before the eruption. It drew me in as a reader because we knew a cataclysmic eruption was coming, but we didn’t know how it would impact each individual character.”⁵ Goodreads user *Jessica* states that “the best thing this book has going for it is its candidness. this does not shy away from the blunt, violent, explicit living conditions of a brothel slave. i think it would have done a disservice to the story and characters had it been sugarcoated. but in the midst of that brutal honesty, this is also a story about friendship and sisterhood, rising after hardships, the value of humanity and self-worth, and the price of freedom,” while another reviewer, *Margaret M.*, states that “The vivid descriptions of Pompeii conjured up the images of an era with so much mystery, mystic, and history, with its ancient walls and cobbled streets creating the perfect ambiance for a book of this nature.”⁶ As this short survey of reviews makes clear, the combination of evocative writing and images drawn from real life make these books a compelling read.

While I am a fan of the books as fiction, for this article I am exploring them as a scholar of ancient Rome. Specifically, given the huge influx of mythological retellings with a feminist twist that have hit bookshelves in the US and UK over the past few years, I want to explore how fictional novels impart knowledge about the ancient world. Specifically, I am interested in how historical ‘fanfiction’ can challenge or enhance the narratives put forth by canonical literature. For the purposes of this exploration, Harper’s *The Wolf Den* trilogy is a perfect test case. First of all, it is historical fiction, based on a real location, rather than mythology, like most other recent books set in the ancient world. Second, as I will discuss later, I believe that it can be categorized as ‘fanfiction’ of the ancient world. And third, it combines literary quotations and reference with material culture to immerse the audience in ancient Pompeii. By focalizing the ancient world through the viewpoint of an enslaved prostitute (*Amara*), Harper challenges the ‘common discourse’ put forward by the ‘storyworld’ found in canonical Latin texts.

4 *Milas* (2022).

5 https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/18cmovk/comment/kcdpbam/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button

6 https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/56563852-the-wolf-den?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=LCd6bpD4k8&rank=1

I will begin by examining how the idea of 'fanfiction' can help scholars of the ancient world create accessible and informative ways of introducing non-expert audiences to the ancient world, and show how Harper's books are a good example. Harper uses a mix of material evidence and quotations from canonical texts to recreate the lives of "ordinary Romans."⁷ The immersion in the ancient world created by this combination of material and literary evidence challenges the idea that the ancient world is exactly as represented by canonical literature. For example, Amara must alter her behavior many times to fit into the expectations of the upper class man she is acting as courtesan for as well as Pliny, who rents her for a week. In addition, rather than depicting Amara meekly accepting her fate, Harper shows how she and her fellow she-wolves strive to break the cycle of oppression.

The Wolf Den as Fanfiction

My argument in this chapter is based on the idea that Harper's trilogy is fanfiction of ancient Rome. To define fanfiction, I use Thomas' 2011 article "What is Fanfiction and Why are People Saying Such Nice Things About It?". In the introduction to this article, Thomas defines fanfiction as "fan-created narratives [that] often take the pre-existing storyworld in a new, sometimes bizarre direction."⁸ Similarly, Floegel has noted that fanfiction creates "information worlds that challenge common discourse."⁹ Later in her article, Thomas adds that these narratives are often "a transgressive force, offering a voice for marginalized groups and revealing the subversive potential of seemingly safe or familiar storyworlds."¹⁰ If we break this definition into its components, and compare it to what Harper has to say about her trilogy, it becomes clear that it is an accurate term to describe the books.

7 Knapp (2013), 3. Harper, as per Armstrong (2021), has noted that this book was one of the secondary sources she used to inform her depiction of non-elite lives in Pompeii, along with Beard (2009).

8 Thomas (2011), 1.

9 Floegel (2020), 785.

10 Thomas (2011), 7.

The first component is that fanfiction is a “fan-created narrative.” While Harper is familiar with ancient Rome through her studies, she notes in interviews that she studied both English and Classics at university,¹¹ but does not have the Latin skills anymore to read Latin texts. While I do not personally think knowledge of Latin is required to be considered a classicist, what this indicates is that Harper did not intend to be a Classicist for her career. And the biography at the back of her books confirms this, noting that “she is currently a reporter at ITV News, and before that worked as a producer for Channel 4 News.”¹² Thus, it is appropriate to call Harper a ‘fan’ of the ancient world.

Harper is also working within a “pre-established storyworld.” Ancient Rome (and Greece) have been the setting for many historical fiction novels. However, Harper takes it a step further and infuses her work with references to the Roman (and Greek) canon. Each of the chapters is introduced by an epigraph drawn from the ancient world. Across the three books of the trilogy, there are 120 epigraphs, and of these, 84 (or 70%) are quotations from canonical works, while the remaining 36 (or 30%) are inscriptions or graffiti.¹³ A table of the quotes used for these epigraphs can be found at the end of this article (Appendix, Table 1). Harper also notes in interviews that she was inspired by a few canonical works as well, including the ‘*cena Trimalchionis*’ of Petronius’ *Satyricon*, Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, Terence’s comedies, and Martial’s epigrams.¹⁴ Later I will examine

11 Albert (2021) and Armstrong (2023).

12 Harper (2021, 2022, 2023) back inside flap.

13 Included among “Literary Quotations” is one instance where a law digest is quoted.

14 “But really the actual original text, so Ovid’s ‘Art of love’ which is kind of – you know its very funny but it’s also a bit of a pickup artist manual as well, you know it’s a very deeply cynical attitude to love, it’s the sort of thing you might get of men are from Mars and women are from Venus type cliché of sexual relations but obviously there must be something in there in terms of how to manipulate people so I used that because obviously for Amara what she’s trying to do is find a patron who will have enough attachment for her that she can get out of where she is and also there’s a book called “The Satyricon” by Petronius which is set in that part of the world if not Pompeii, you know around there, and I sort of deliberately riffed on some of his set pieces like Trimalchio’s feast. But again that’s sort of making fun of this awful nouveau riche guy, Trimalchio, I mean it’s a brilliantly funny piece of writing but I wanted to think okay well, what if it’s not the freedmen who’s the butt of the joke? What if it’s the people laughing at him because he’s the freedman? How would Amara see that going into that environment as an entertainer, as an enslaved entertainer seeing how the guests are kind of laughing at the host up their sleeves. And I called him Zoilus and that’s also borrowed from a Latin text because Martial makes fun of a similar – a kind of stock Roman joke to

how Harper plays with the canon using these texts, but for now it is sufficient to say that Harper had a clear, canonical 'storyworld' in which she was working.

Thomas notes that fanfiction takes this storyworld in 'a new, sometimes bizarre direction,' and Floegel argues that it 'challenges common discourse.' As most scholars of the ancient world are aware, female perspectives in literature are rare. Harper cites this gap in information as an impetus for writing from Amara's perspective:

because the perspectives that were given on the ancient world are so kind of relentlessly male and generally you know elite so it is life seen through one very specific perspective and there were other perspectives and we get sort of fragments of them in graffiti or you know the odd letter or you know in some literature you know you get these kind of snippets and you can often read between the lines and imagine what it might have felt like from the other side.¹⁵

Thus, in choosing to write from the perspective of an enslaved prostitute in Pompeii's brothel in a way that is informed by canonical literature, Harper is taking the established 'storyworld' of ancient Rome, that is what is established in canonical literature, and taking it in a new direction while also challenging the discourse those texts created. This also speaks to the final category Thomas lists as qualifying fanfiction, that it has the ability to be 'transgressive' and give voice to marginalized identities. Thus, by taking the canon in a new direction through the eyes of a marginalized identity, Harper creates fanfiction of the ancient world that is transgressive in its depiction of that world.

Canon vs. (Fan)Fiction in *The Wolf Den*

Now that I have established that *The Wolf Den* trilogy can be defined as fanfiction of ancient Rome, I want to explore how Harper uses her narrative to question the canon and show that the immersion in the ancient world created by

mock the freedmen and I had him sort of as a ridiculous but very insecure character, so pretty much every chapter is steeped one way or another in the sort of textual background of that period" Albert (2021). Cf. Armstrong 2023.

¹⁵ Armstrong (2023).

her combination of material and literary evidence challenges the idea that the ancient world is exactly as represented by canonical literature. I will do so by first exploring some of the material remains that Harper has incorporated into her novels, and then by comparing scenes inspired by the canonical literature Harper cited as inspiration (Petronius' *Satyricon*, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, Martial's epigrams, and Terence's comedies) to how they are used in the text.

References to places and material finds that are easily accessible either in museums or the site of Pompeii itself are scattered throughout the novels. When speaking about how she got inspired to write Pompeii, Harper notes that

I went to the site and then I went to the museum in Naples which has got a lot of the treasures and kind of got a real sense from that of the objects and then finally I went to the site to sort of piece it all together and you know that really was just invaluable I mean you cannot even from all the books which are amazing just the sense of what it's like to walk around those streets you know you can see the counters the sunken bowls where people would have got served their stew there's the bars there's these incredible house um and so even houses that I've invented in the book are based on real places um apart from the Lupanar and one or two other kind of places like the baths.¹⁶

Harper's descriptions of Pompeii are so evocative that Kate Armstrong, the host of "The Exploress" podcast, has stated that "The setting in the book is really its own character, it's so visceral, it's so detailed I mean, as I said before, reading the book really felt like I was there in ancient Pompeii and seeing the sights and smelling the smells."¹⁷ Reading *The Wolf Den* for the first time, the ways in which it evokes Pompeii were immediately obvious. For example, in the first chapter the women of the Lupanar are attempting to gain new clients at the Marine Baths, and after they are kicked out, the narrative follows them as they re-enter the city. Amara notes that "...they force their way through the crush of people, heading up the hill to the Forum Gate"¹⁸ and that they pass "under the high archway, into the dark, echoing tunnel, the road growing steeper and the crush more

¹⁶ Armstrong (2021).

¹⁷ Armstrong (2021)

¹⁸ Harper (2021), 8.



Figure 1 Marine Baths and Marine Gate (Adam Harangozó via Wikimedia Commons, reprinted under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license)

intense.”¹⁹ Readers familiar with Pompeii will immediately recognize not only the hill to reach the city from the Marine baths but also the tunnel you have to use to access the city which is often crowded with people.

However, because much of the narrative takes place in the brothel, Harper spends a lot of time immersing the audience in the building. Here is the first introduction to the building: “...the looming bulk of the brothel doesn’t give her any sense of homecoming. There’s no hot drink waiting, just Felix and his anger. They huddle outside the building, pressed single file against the wall, keeping dry under the overhanging balcony.”²⁰ Without going into lavish detail, Harper has already set the atmosphere for the brothel while also giving an accurate description of how it looks from the outside.

¹⁹ Harper (2021), 9.

²⁰ Harper (2021), 11.



Figure 2 Tunnel to enter Pompeii from Marine Gate (Nersi Elahi via Wikimedia Commons, reprinted under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license)

Later, Amara describes the inside:

The five women set about extinguishing most of the oil lamps to save fuel and limit the smoke. The constant smelly fug indoors means the paintings Felix recently paid for – endless sex scenes emblazoned round the top of the walls – are already smeared with soot. The picture above Amara's cell, of a woman being taken from behind, has a new grimy shadow across the bed. She bends down to put out the terracotta lamp burning beneath it. Like every other light in the brothel, it is modelled in the shape of a penis, flames flickering from the tip. One or two even have a small clay man attached, brandishing an enormous fiery erection. Felix finds it amusing, says the lamps get the customers in the mood. Amara hates them. As if they don't have enough cocks to put up with.²¹

²¹ Harper (2021), 20.



Figure 3 The Brothel of Pompeii from Outside (Alicia Matz)



Figure 4 Woman being taken from behind wall painting from brothel (Alicia Matz)



Figure 5 Priapic Lamps from Pompeii in the Naples Archaeological Museum (Alicia Matz)

Within this description are two specific references to images and material remains actually found at Pompeii: there really is an image of a woman being taken from behind over the door of one of the cells in the brothel as well as lamps of men/satyrs with giant erections.

Later, Amara also mentions the painting above Victoria's, another brothel slave, door: "the painting of two lovers above the door shows the woman on top, a gift from Felix to his hardest working whore."²² In reality, the first door to the left of the entrance of the brothel does have an image of a woman on top.

Through the inclusion of real material evidence like this in the narrative of her novels, Harper immerses the audience in Pompeii. In addition, she establishes that the brothel is a place that is inimical to the women who inhabit it.²³

But images and material remains are not the only way in which Harper immerses the audience in Pompeii – written texts play a huge role as well. As mentioned previously, each chapter begins with an epigraph drawn from either a literary work or graffiti and inscriptions found in and around Pompeii. There are also many references to graffiti in the text of the novel. After a particularly hard night in the brothel, the women are enjoying a moment of camaraderie:

'I think we should write him a message on the wall,' Victoria says. 'In case he ever comes back.' She bends down and hands a shard of pottery to Amara. 'What shall we say? I know! *Thrust SLOWLY.*'...Amara scratches the motto on the wall. They all sit looking at it when she's finished, smirking with satisfaction.²⁴

22 Harper (2021), 36.

23 Harper has been very clear in interviews that she did not want to depict the brothel as a happy place, but rather highlight its oppressive aspects. Talking with the podcast "Let's Talk About Myths, Baby," Harper has said "it's really a powerful place, it's impossible not to have quite a visceral reaction to it I think because there are these 5 tiny cells, there's the corridor, there are the paintings, it's still quite an oppressive space even today but also a really intriguing one" and notes her intentions with the depiction of the brothel: "If you go into the brothel today it's quite a sort of carnival atmosphere, you know people are laughing, naughty paintings on the wall, you know we all do it there's nothing particularly wrong with it but it's still quite objectifying even today. You know it's like, let's have a laugh at the brothel. I wanted the women to be laughing back in a way together, the way people do when they face hardship" Albert (2021).

24 Harper (2021), 37.



Figure 6 Woman on top wall painting from brothel (Alicia Matz)

There is an actual graffito that reads *lente impelle* ('thrust slowly,' CIL IV 794)²⁵ found in Pompeii, though found in a small room in what is either a house or a *caupona*. In addition, in the same scene, the women discuss a client who they call Mr. GarlicFarticus. This is a reference to an actual graffito found in the brothel, which reads *Scordopordonicus hic binii fuit quiim volvit* ('Scordopordonicus [GarlicFarticus] fucked well here whomever he wanted,' CIL IV 2188). It is clear that Amara and the women of the brothel view graffiti as an act of resistance, a sentiment that is made clear later in the book. Amara, after reading the familiar graffiti around her, contemplates the words internally:

Another message catches her eye, its letters large and jagged. *I FUCKED*. She stares at it. The words look like an act of physical aggression, a reminder of her own powerlessness. She opens her father's bag, searching for the broken stylus she once picked up in the street. It has already come in useful. She used it to draw a bird in her own cell the other day, a small act of defiance against the endless fucking and sucking that hems her in. She walks over to the message, starts to gouge into the

²⁵ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

stone, her hand shaking with anger. A man's profile takes shape, the letters of the boast becoming his forehead, transforming his own words in to a slave brand.²⁶

Pompeii is famous for its graffiti, among other things, and by casting graffiti as an act of defiance, Harper shows how the non-elite members of society may have made their marks on the world. In addition, many names of characters associated with the brothel were drawn from graffiti found in the brothel: Felix, the owner of the brothel who used to be an enslaved male prostitute in the brothel, is named from a graffito that reads *Felix bene futuis* ('Felix you fuck well,' CIL IV 2176); Paris, the son of a former prostitute and current male prostitute in the brothel, comes from a graffito that says *calos Paris* ('beautiful/good job Paris,' CIL IV 2179); and Victoria, a trash heap baby who became a brothel slave, is named from a graffito that says *victrix Victoria va* ('goodbye, victorious Victoria,' CIL IV 2212).²⁷

Harper was also inspired by Roman literature, and tried to only use texts that would have been available at the time. Harper has noted that "pretty much every chapter is steeped one way or another in the sort of textual background of that period."²⁸ There are many scenes where the textual background is immediately obvious. Pliny the Elder makes an appearance, and rents Amara for a week. Each of the chapters where he is featured are introduced by a quote from *Natural History*.²⁹ In the third installment, Amara witnesses the funeral procession of Vespasian and each chapter here has an epigraph from historiography, especially Suetonius and Cassius Dio.³⁰ The entirety of Amara's escape from Pompeii during the eruption is accompanied by epigraphs from Pliny the Younger's account

26 Harper (2021), 91.

27 Cf. Harper: "I wanted to reflect some of the different experiences that women were likely to have and the different reactions, the different ways that we all try to survive, really; so one particular character, Victoria, who's based actually on the graffiti in the brothel. So there was a Victoria who refers to herself as 'Victoria the Conqueress,' you know she – trying to think of the right word – but she's finding a way to glorify herself in an environment where a lot of the graffiti is like "I fuck loads of women here' type stuff, and she's taking some control over it in the way that she refers to herself as a conqueress" Albert (2021).

28 Albert (2021).

29 Harper (2021), 224–61.

30 Harper (2023), 36–64.

of his uncle's experiences and attempted rescue mission.³¹ In these instances, there is nothing to really subvert, as the canonical text in question is being used to provide information.

However, there are many texts that Harper uses to subvert the canonical texts that she quotes. As previously mentioned, Harper has stated that the *cena Trimalchionis* of Petronius' *Satyricon*, as well as the epigrams of Martial, which Harper has cited as inspiration for the freedman Zoilus' dinner that Amara attends as a (rented) companion to an invited guest.³² In addition, Amara's prospective wealthy patron, Rufus, is obsessed with Roman theater, and takes Amara to see a production of Terence's *The Eunuch*. The chapters where this viewing and the aftermath are introduced by epigraphs from *The Eunuch*. When watching the show, Amara "finds herself laughing at this world where the slaves are cleverer than their masters, and the men love women to distraction. She remembers Rufus telling her he admired the theatre for telling the truth – can he really think the world is like this?"³³ And yet, even though she knows that the play does not depict the reality, especially for a brothel slave, Amara knows she can use it to manipulate Rufus so that he will continue to want to see her and possibly become a patron that could free her: "She thinks of Thais, of the illusion of power she wielded. Rufus believes that is what life is really like. He has all the power, and she has none, but he does not know this. And she cannot let him realize. She turns to him in anger. 'You presume too much.' They stare at one another in mutual astonishment. The words seem to come from someone else. It is a part Amara is playing, yet somehow, she just found her own voice."³⁴ By

31 Harper (2023), 203–66.

32 "there's a book called "The Satyricon" by Petronius which is set in that part of the world if not Pompeii, you know around there, and I sort of deliberately riffed on some of his set pieces like Trimalchio's feast. But again that's sort of making fun of this awful nouveau riche guy, Trimalchio, I mean it's a brilliantly funny piece of writing but I wanted to think okay well, what if its not the freedmen who's the butt of the joke? What if it's the people laughing at him because he's the freedman? How would Amara see that going into that environment as an entertainer, as an enslaved entertainer seeing how the guests are kind of laughing at the host up their sleeves. And I called him Zoilus and that's also borrowed from a Latin text because Martial makes fun of a similar – a kind of stock Roman joke to mock the freedmen and I had him sort of as a ridiculous but very insecure character" Albert (2021).

33 Harper (2021), 271.

34 Harper (2021), 274.

using the play to play into Rufus' expectations, Amara is able to gain power in her relationship.

However, the most important text to the understanding of *The Wolf Den*, as per Harper, is Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. In discussions about the sources she used when writing the books, Harper states:

But really the actual original text, so Ovid's *Art of Love*, which is kind of – you know it's very funny but it's also a bit of a pickup artist manual as well, you know it's a very deeply cynical attitude to love, it's the sort of thing you might get of men are from Mars and women are from Venus type cliché of sexual relations but obviously there must be something in there in terms of how to manipulate people so I used that because obviously for Amara what she's trying to do is find a patron who will have enough attachment for her that she can get out of where she is.³⁵

With Ovid specifically, then, Harper intentionally uses her novels to challenge the narrative set forth by the canon, in this case, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. Harper only uses the actual text of this three book work as epigraphs twice: a quote from book 2 is used to introduce chapter 8 of *The Wolf Den*, and a quote from book 3 is used to introduce chapter 9. Unlike other texts, which are heavily quoted or referenced, the *Ars* is more subtly interwoven into the books. For the sake of brevity, I will only examine references to book 3 of the *Ars Amatoria* in Harper's text, since books 1 and 2 are aimed at men trying to win women, while book 3 is aimed at women trying to keep or attract a man – that situation is clearly more fitting to Amara's situation.

Scholarship on this book of the *Ars* is varied, and usually focuses on the intended audience. Gibson has shown on multiple occasions that the intended audience for the text is confused between *matrona* and *meretrix*.³⁶ James has argued that it is "...uncertain how likely it is that there are enough *puellae* who are new to their profession, and thus somewhat naïve, to make the poem's eroto-didaxis even minimally necessary, even in the unrealistic poetic world of Ovidian elegy."³⁷ Zuckerberg has argued that

35 Albert (2021); Cf. Armstrong (2021).

36 Gibson (1998, 2003, 2006, 2007).

37 James (2008), 156.

If women are the enemy when it comes to seduction, then the first two books of the *Ars* would seem to be more damaging than the third. After all, a woman reading the first two books might learn to recognize and avoid men's seduction techniques, while a woman using the advice in the third book is clearly a willing participant in the game. Furthermore, the first two books of the *Ars* would seem to give advice to the real enemy – that is, the other men who might end up as competition for a target's attention.³⁸

Meanwhile, Sharrock has shown that “very little happens in *Ars* 3, because there is very little for the primary character to do, except to adorn herself and wait.”³⁹ What this brief review of literature shows is that the main thrust of this canonical text is not really to arm women against men pursuing them, as Ovid claims, but to make them more susceptible and willing to give in.

Harper turns this expectation on its head in *The Wolf Den*. In fact, Amara does many actions that seem to be inspired by *Ars* 3, and yet, rather than making her susceptible to men or a ‘pawn’ in their game, she instead uses them to advance her own status. For example, Ovid suggests that women be educated not only in poetry but also the lyre in order to win and keep a man:

Res est blanda canor: discant cantare puellae
 (pro facie multis vox sua lena fuit)
 Et modo marmoreis referant audita theatris,
 Et modo Niliacis carmina lusa modis;
 Nec plectrum dextra, citharam tenuisse sinistra
 Nesciat arbitrio femina docta meo.
 ...
 Disce etiam duplici genialia nabila palma
 Verrere: conveniunt dulcibus iocis.
 Sit tibi Callimachi, sit Coi nota poetae,
 Sit quoque vinosi Teia Musa senis:
 Nota sit et Sappho (quid enim lascivious illa?)
 Cuive pater vafri luditur arte Getae.

³⁸ Zuckerberg (2018), 137. Cf. Myerowitz 1985.

³⁹ Sharrock (2006), 37. Cf. Downing (1990) who has argued that Ovid's *praeceptor* is an anti-Pygmalion, who uses his hatred of women to turn real women into living statues rather than withdrawing to an artificial woman.

Et teneri possis carmen legisse Properti
Sive aliquid Galli sive, Tibulle, tuum
Dictaque Varroni fulvis insignia villis
Vellera germanae, Phrixe, querenda tuae
Et profugum Aenean, altae primorida Romae,
Quo nullum Latio clarius extat opus.⁴⁰

Singing is an alluring thing: let girls learn to sing
(her voice was the procuress for many instead of her face)
And sometimes repeat what you heard in the marble theaters
And sometimes songs played in the Nilotic mode;
Nor should a woman taught by my advice not know how
To hold the plectrum in her right hand, the lyre in her left.
...
Learn also to strike the jovial Phoenician lyre with each
Palm: these are fitting for sweet games.
Let the poetry of Callimachus, of the Coan poet,
And also the Teian muse of the boozy old man be known
Let Sappho also be known (for what is more provocative than her?)
And whose father was tricked by the crafty Geta's skill.
And may you be able to have read the song of delicate Propertius
Or that of Gallus or yours, Tibullus,
And the fleece marked by golden hairs spoken of by Varro
Which must be mourned by your sister, Phrixe
And refugee Aeneas, the origins of high Rome,
Than which no other more famous work exists in Latium.
(*Ars* 31–320, 327–38)

Amara seems to have this statement in mind many times throughout the text. First of all, she was not born enslaved, but rather was a freeborn Greek woman who was sold into slavery after her family hit on hard times. As a freeborn Greek woman, she would have been trained in the lyre, and knows that this skill could be beneficial, not only to her but also her owner:

40 Brunelle (2015).

'Why did you buy me?' she asks. 'I was sold as a concubine. I'm educated, play the lyre. I know that cost you more. If you didn't want all those skills for yourself, then why? What sort of investment am I if I grind out the rest of my days in the cells downstairs?... I could make you a lot more money than that, if you let me.'⁴¹

Amara, who is desperate to move beyond the brothel, knows that she can gain a wealthy patron by utilizing the skills she already has. Even though Felix dismisses her by saying "*Porna eis*. You are a common whore. Even if you do play the lyre,"⁴² Amara proves him wrong through her lyre and singing skills. She learns that her singing, especially when accompanied by her fellow she-wolf Dido, is especially popular one night at dinner at the local bar.⁴³ Later, at the Vinalia, she is asked to sing and play the lyre in public, and one of the songs she chooses to sing is Sappho, one of Ovid's suggested reads.⁴⁴ This event leads to her being rented to attend parties as entertainment, which leads to her introduction to Pliny, which eventually leads not only to her introduction to Rufus, who will eventually become her patron, but also to her manumission. Thus, rather than using the canon to become a statue that is pursued, Amara instead uses it to gain her freedom.

Ovid also suggests that women should aim to keep a lover once they have snagged one by pretending that there is some sort of rival for their love:

Ponite iam gladius hebetes, pugnetur acutis;
 Nec dubito, telis quin petar ipse meis.
 Dum cadit in laqueos, captus quoque nuper, amator
 Solum se thalamus speret habere tuos;
 Postmodo rivalem partitaeque foedra lecti
 Sentiat: has artes tolle, senescet amor.
 Tum bene fortis equus reserato carcere currit,
 Cum, quos praetereat, quoseque sequatur, habet.

⁴¹ Harper (2021), 50.

⁴² Harper (2021), 52.

⁴³ Harper (2021), 69–72.

⁴⁴ Harper (2021), 130–4.

Quamlibet extinctos iniuria suscitāt ignes:

En ego, confiteor, non nisi laesus amo.⁴⁵

Now put aside the dull swords, fight with sharp ones;

No doubt I myself am sought by my own weapons.

While a lover, also recently captured, falls into the traps

He hopes that he alone has your bedchamber;

Later let him be aware of a rival and the divided pacts

Of the bed: take these skills, love grows old.

It is then that the brave horse runs from the opened stall

When he has those whom he passes and whom he follows.

Injury rekindles an extinguished love however it pleases:

Even I, I confess, do not love unless injured.

(Ars. 589–98)

Amara, as an enslaved prostitute, does not have the ability to choose who she sleeps with. She uses this fact to manipulate Rufus, as she not only casts Felix, her owner, as a harsh master who has all control of her, as a rival:

Amara knows she cannot tell him she is ashamed of the squalor; she must invent a more poetic reason to stay away [from the brothel.] 'My master is unbelievably cruel,' she replies. 'If he thought there was a chance I might be happy with you, even for an hour, he would never let me see you again.' 'Really?' Rufus looks alarmed. Amara glances at him sidelong, as if too shy to be direct. 'If he thought I might care for anyone, he would punish me dreadfully.' Even as she says it, she can imagine Felix laughing. As if he would care about *anything* other than the money.⁴⁶

By casting Felix as a rival, not of her affections but as someone who might keep her from Rufus, Amara uses Ovid to ensure that Rufus will remain dedicated to her.

Finally, one of Ovid's last pieces of advice is to make the man believe that you love him, even if you really do not:

45 Brunelle (2015).

46 Harper (2021), 272.

Efficite (et facile est) ut nos credamus amari:
 Prona venit cupidis in sua vota fides.
 Spectet amabilius iuvenem et suspiret ab imo
 Femina, tam sero cur veniatque reget;
 Accedant lacrimae, dolor et de paelice fictus,
 Et laniet digitis illius ora suis.
 Iamdudum persuasus erit; miserebitur ultro
 Et dicet 'cura carpitur ista mei.'
 Praecipue si cultus erit speculoque placebit,
 Posse suo tangi credet amore deas⁴⁷.

Make it happen (it is easy) that we believe that we are loved:
 Faith comes easily for their own wishes of love.
 Let the woman look lovingly at the young man and sigh
 From deep within, so late that he comes and asks;
 Let tears be added, and grief invented from a mistress,
 And let her rip his face with her fingers.
 Already now he'll be persuaded; he'll show affection on his own
 And will say "she is seized with care for me."
 Especially if he will be cultured and pleasing to the mirror,
 Let him believe that the gods can be touched with his love.
 (*Ars* 673–82)

Amara mixes this advice with her earlier manipulation of Rufus using his love of the theater:

'What about all these plays that mean so much to you? What about love?' her voice is scathing. I have enough clients,' she lies. 'I thought you were different; I thought you wanted something else.' The anger is starting to take on a momentum beyond Rufus, and she knows she has to stop. She takes a breath, turning her face aside, as if to hide emotion. 'I thought you might *care* for me.' She falls silent, waiting to see if he will accept the role she is offering.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Brunelle (2015).

⁴⁸ Harper (2021), 275.

Even though this is very early in their relationship, Amara uses the idea that she might love him in order to manipulate him, just as Ovid suggests. In addition, even though it is to control her anger, her deep breath, turning away, and question whether Rufus actually cares about her is almost exactly how Ovid suggests a woman should use emotions. She also emphasizes greatly the harm she faces nightly with clients in the brothel, providing even more rivals for Rufus to be jealous of. But Amara is not doing this to make herself complicit in the game of love, but rather to ensure her escape from the brothel:

She thinks of Rufus, feels a sense of elation shot through with anxiety at the memory of his kiss goodbye. The tender way he tucked the jasmine back behind her ear before she left, his wholehearted acceptance of the part she offered him. She could almost love him for the gift he has given her: granting her the illusion of being a person and not a slave. But she knows it is an illusion, and the fantasy they have created together is fragile. It would be so easy to care for him, to forget how little she really has. Now begins the painstaking journey of discovering how he might help her escape. It's not a journey on which she can afford to have feelings.⁴⁹

With these words, Amara reveals her true intentions with Rufus. Although Harper never indicates that Amara has read the *Ars Amatoria*, she is deft at using the skills Ovid suggests manipulating her way into freedom. Thus, rather than 'adorning herself and waiting,' as both Myerowitz and Sharrock have suggested is the end goal of *Ars* 3, Amara subverts the canon by using the skills of the *Ars* for her own benefit.

I do not want to reveal too many spoilers, because I earnestly believe that anyone interested in Pompeii, feminist interpretation of the ancient world, and just good fiction should read the whole series. But because the thesis of this article is that Harper uses the canon to subvert the canon with Amara's narrative, I do want to provide a few details that show her manipulation of Rufus along Ovid's advice works. Although Rufus hesitates to buy her and free her outright, Amara convinces him that is the only way they can truly have a loving relationship. When his father will not pay for her freedom, he turns to Pliny, and by the end of *The Wolf Den*, Amara is freed and set up in a house to be Rufus' personal concubine. Throughout the next book, *The House with the Golden Door*, Amara processes a devastating personal loss while also trying to ensure Rufus stays in-

⁴⁹ Harper (2021), 278.

terested in her, as she knows the loss of a patron could have devastating effects on a newly freed woman. When Rufus begins to lose interest, she decides the best way to try and hold him would be to get pregnant. However, when that proves difficult with Rufus himself, she turns to his personal slave, Philos, with whom she starts an actual romantic affair. She gets pregnant, and tells Rufus the baby is his. However, that is not enough to hold him when his father arranges a political marriage and insists he must drop his concubine. At the end of *The House with the Golden Door*, Amara is living in an apartment rented from Julia Felix with her baby girl, Rufina, and the personal slave who has been entrusted to Amara to help raise Rufus' daughter. Julia Felix knows that Amara will need a new patron soon, and introduces her to Demetrius, an Imperial freedperson. The end of the book sees her sailing to Rome with Demetrius, leaving her family and true love behind. *The Temple of Fortuna* begins with Amara in Rome, who has befriended an imperial concubine in order to spy on the imperial family for Demetrius and Pliny. When the imperial concubine is murdered and Amara witnesses it, it is decided for her own safety she should retreat to Pompeii until she can marry Demetrius. She does so, and happens to arrive in Pompeii just before the volcano erupts. She, Philos, and Rufina escape, join Pliny for a while, and then make their way to Puteoli. After the eruption has started, they return to Pompeii to try and recover a chest of money and jewels Amara has been collecting as dowry for Rufina, to learn that it would be impossible to reach. Instead, they pretend to be freed members of Julia Felix' household, and end up living happily in Naples. This brief summary, which does not do justice to the incredibly intricate interweaving plotlines Harper has created, shows that Harper is successful in her attempt to subvert the canon – whereas canonical texts would expect her to accept her fate, Amara manages to escape slavery and live free, as she wanted.

Student Reactions to *The Wolf Den*

Not only does *The Wolf Den* trilogy challenge the canon in very interesting ways, as we just discovered, but I also posit that it can be a useful teaching tool for introducing marginalized perspectives into the Roman civilization classroom. In the fall of 2023, I taught a course for the Writing Program at Boston University titled “‘Invisible’ Identities in Ancient Greece and Rome.” The course was split into three modules: module 1, where we read canonical literature by women (Sappho and Sulpicia specifically) as well as male perspectives on women

(Juvenal's *Satire 6*, Vergil's *Aeneid* Book 4, and other selections from Lefkowitz and Fant's *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook*); module 2, where we read Hunink's *Oh Happy Place!: Pompeii in 1000 Graffiti* and compared it to the literature; and module 3, where we read fictional accounts of Pompeii from the female perspective, including the first six chapters of *The Wolf Den*. Modules 1 and 2 ended with an 'academic' paper, and module 3 ended with a short story writing assignment.

As a part of the transition between Module 2 and 3, we talked about genre and what it means, as well as read Thomas' article as well as reception theory. Then, I asked students to complete a "genre reflection," which asked students to reflect on "the similarities and difference between academic writing on this topic and non-academic writing" and gave them the following guiding questions: Which genre speaks to you more? What you prefer about academic writing? What you would change about academic writing? What you prefer about fictional narratives? What you would change about fictional narratives? If you rewrote one of your previous essays as a different genre, what would you do differently? What would stay the same?

Of the eighteen students enrolled in the class, six have given me permission to share insights from their genre reflection in order to see how reading (fan)fiction affected their understanding of ancient Rome. One noted that "fictional writing can bring life to these historical contexts. Rather than looking at a brothel as just a structure, it is turned into a story, with depth behind it. Bringing life to inanimate objects enables readers to experience what life might have been like. They can live vicariously through the eyes of the fictional characters, and connect more to their stories. The storytelling allows for a deeper understanding of non-elite Romans [sic] and their human condition. However, this type of writing is not entirely accurate. Sometimes it is more about the compelling story than it is about the historical context. Although it is more entertaining to read, it is not a good source when trying to learn about these historical times." Another notes that "Fictional narratives also allow me to use information in a way that academic writing doesn't. I can bend information rather than state facts and interpret their meaning." Another student expressed joy at being able to recognize names and places from the historical sources in Harper's fiction:

Fictional narratives are not only more interesting to read, but more accessible and understandable. The academic writing that we read would take me 15–20 minutes to read about 10–15 pages. I read the first 64 pages of *The Wolf Den* in about 40 minutes. The work was so much more enthralling and I found that the plot-based read-

ing had me on the edge of my seat to see what would happen next. This was a really entertaining way to learn about non-elite Roman women working as enslaved prostitutes. The characters had depths and background stories and I was still able to learn something about the time period. Of course, fictional writing is not as accurate as straightforward academic analyses of Pompeiian graffiti like we read about in *The Brothel of Pompeii*. That type of writing employs more historically accurate research and findings than historical fiction writing does. That said, I recognized some of the characters' names in *The Wolf Den* from various graffiti and other works (i.e. Victoria, Dido, Paris).

Another student highlighted the impact that fictional narratives can have on increasing interest in studying the ancient world: "Given the choice between academic writing and historical fictional narratives, I would much rather read the latter any day of the week. This is simply because historical fiction is made to be entertaining, and it tends to succeed in that pursuit. Of course, sometimes this can lead to the author taking more artistic liberties in order to make a more interesting story to the common reader, which in turn decreases the overall historical accuracy of the work. Despite this, this genre is a good introduction to a casual audience, and could spark interests and encourage further research of the topic within. This further research could lead to people gaining an interest, pursuing a career, and then exposing more material to more audiences, leading to a cycle of growing awareness." Building on statements by other students, one student notes that reading fictional narratives makes them excited to read more: "I prefer that fictional narratives are more imaginative and that they create a story that may be inspired from something already existing so it may relate to something I already know. They also sometimes exaggerate a story and make it really unrealistic so it's more fun to read. Especially the ones that are supposed to be historical fan fiction." Finally, another noted that fictional narratives help them connect to the setting in ways that academic arguments cannot: "what I like about non-academic writing is that it is easier for me to relate myself to a story than it is to relate myself to a thesis. Non-academic writing helps me to place myself into the time period in order for me to get a better understanding of it. I just think fictional narratives need to be more clear about what is literal, and they shouldn't focus so much on describing things. They should focus more on character interactions and action."

What all these anecdotes show is that reading (fan)fiction along with historical sources can humanize marginalized groups from the ancient world in ways that a textbook or elite male source cannot. If given the proper background in

canonical literature and Roman society, students can easily separate fact from fiction. In addition, they highlight that fictional accounts have a way of garnering interest in the ancient world that academic scholarship does not. The remarks from these students, to me, suggest that rather than being written off as less factual and therefore less 'accurate,' historical fiction narratives from the ancient world should be included in civilization courses, if possible. By incorporating (fan)fictional narratives alongside canonical works, scholars of the ancient world can introduce accessible and informative ways of familiarizing non-expert audiences to the ancient world.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Harper's *The Wolf Den* trilogy presents a narrative set in ancient Pompeii that can be considered 'fanfiction': it is written by a person knowledgeable about the ancient world in the way that a fan is knowledgeable about their fandoms, it deviates from the established 'storyworld' of canonical literature, and does so in a way that is not only subversive but also highlights marginalized identities that the canonical texts often omit. Through comparison of passages from *The Wolf Den* to the ancient literature that seems to have inspired them, I hope to have shown that by focalizing the ancient world through the viewpoint of an enslaved prostitute, Harper challenges the 'common discourse' put forward by the 'storyworld' found in canonical Latin texts. Through student anecdotes, I also hope to have made a convincing argument for the incorporation of (fan)fictional readings in the Classics classroom. Students find them more engaging than scholarship, and if given proper background information can easily separate fact from fiction. In this way, we can possibly create more interest in the ancient world and maybe get a few new majors.

**APPENDIX: EPIGRAPHS FROM *THE WOLF DEN TRILOGY*,
COLOR CODED BY TYPE OF SOURCE (ALICIA MATZ)**

Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	1	“Baths, wine and sex make fate come faster” ~Roman maxim (epitaph from Ostia? https://www.antiquitatem.com/en/baths-wine-sex-hedonism-carmina/)	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	2	“She reeks of the soot of the brothel!” ~Seneca, <i>Declamations</i> 1.2	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	3	“All other animals derive satisfaction from having mated; man gets almost none” ~Pliny the Elder, <i>Natural History</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	4	“Take one who through long years would slave for you; take one who'd love with purest loyalty” ~Ovid, <i>Amores</i> 1.3	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	5	“Grab your slave girl whenever you want: it's your right to use her” ~Pompeii Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	6	“If anyone wants a fuck, he should look for Attice; she costs 16 asses” ~Graffiti near Pompeii's Marine Gate	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	7	“The whole place rang with their theatrical laughter, while we were still wondering why this sudden change of mood and looking now at each other, now at the woman” ~Petronius, <i>The Satyricon</i> : 'Quartilla's Brothel'	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	8	“This truly is a Golden Age; for gold High place is purchased; love is bought and sold” ~Ovid, <i>The Art of Love</i> II	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	9	„Tomorrow I'll start living,' you say, Postumus: always tomorrow. Tell me, that 'tomorrow,' Postumus, when's it coming? How far off is that tomorrow?” ~Martial, <i>Epigrams</i> 5.58	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	10	Sextus, you say their passion for you sets the pretty girls on fire – you who have the face of a man swimming underwater” ~Martial, <i>Epigrams</i> 2.87	Literary quotation

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	11	"Do you regard yourself as chaste just because you are an unwilling whore?" ~Seneca, <i>Declamations</i> 1.2	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	12	"Celebrate the power of Venus, girls of the street; Venus is appropriate for the earnings of women who promise a lot. With an offering of incense ask for beauty and popular favour, ask for seductiveness and words that are fit for fun. And give your mistress pleasing mint along with her own myrtle, and bonds of reed covered with well arranged roses" ~Ovid, <i>Fasti</i> IV	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	13	"Learn singing, fare ones. Song's a thing of grace; Voice off's a better procuress than face" ~Ovid, <i>The Art of Love</i> III	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	14	"It was more like a musical comedy than a respectable dinner party" ~Petronius, <i>The Satyricon</i> : 'Trimalchio's Feast'	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	15	"He who lies down with dogs will wake up with fleas" ~Traditional, attributed to Seneca	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	16	"I pawned earrings with Faustilla for 2 denarii. She has deduced an ass a month in interest" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	17	"Trickles of acacia pomade ran down his sweaty forehead and there was so much powder in the wrinkles on his cheeks he looked like a peeling wall in a thunderstorm" ~Petronius, <i>The Satyricon</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	18	"I hate and I love. How is this possible? Perhaps you ask. I don't know. But I feel it, and I am tortured" ~Catullus, <i>Poem</i> 85	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	19	"I like not joy bestowed in duty's fee, I'll have no woman dutiful to me" ~Ovid, <i>The Art of Love</i> II	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	20	"All the girls fancy Celadus the Thracian gladiator!" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	21	"For assuredly to live is to be awake" ~Pliny the Elder, Natural History	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	22	"I pursue my research in odd hours, that is at night – just in case you think I pack up work then!"~Pliny the Elder, Natural History	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	23	"No other part of the body supplies more evidence of the state of mind. This is the same with all animals, but especially with man; that is, the eyes show signs of self-restraint, mercy, pity, hatred, love, sorrow, joy; in fact, the eyes are the windows of the soul" ~Pliny the Elder, Natural History	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	24	"Perfumes are the most pointless of all luxuries...their highest attraction is that, as a woman goes by, their use may attract even those who are otherwise occupied" ~Pliny the Elder, Natural History	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	25	"They must conquer or fall. Such was the settled purpose of a woman – the men might live and be slaves!" ~Tacitus on Boudicca, Queen of the Icenii, Annals 14	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	26	"Thais: Me not speaking from my heart? That's not fair! What have you ever wanted from me, even in fun, that you didn't get?" ~Terence, the Eunuch	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	27	"Pythias: I don't know who he was, but the facts speak for themselves about what he did. The girl herself is in tears and when you ask her she can't bring herself to say what's up" ~Terence, The Eunuch	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	28	"Poems are praised, but it's for cash they itch; A savage even is welcomed if he's rich" ~Ovid, The Art of Love II	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	29	"Vouchsafe no easy promise to his prayer nor yet reject it with a ruthless air; Blend hopes with fears; but hopes must grow more bright" ~Ovid, The Art of Love III	Literary quotation

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	30	"If anyone has not seen Venus painted by Appelles, he should look at my girlfriend; she shines just as bright" ~Pompeiiian graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	31	"I see that it's brothels and greasy bars that stir your desire for the town" ~Horace, Satires 1.14	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	32	"Take me to Pompeii where love is sweet!" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	33	"I don't care about your pregnancy Salvilla; I scorn it" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	34	"When you are dead you are nothing" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	35	"You may look perhaps for a troop of Spanish maidens to win applause by immodest dance and song, sinking down with quivering thighs to the floor" ~Juvenal, Satire 11.162	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	36	"Suns when they sink can rise again, but we, when our brief light has shone must sleep the long night on and on" ~Catullus, Poem 5	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	37	"Now, my little love, entrust your happiness to the wind. Trust me, the nature of men is fickle" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	38	"The common night awaits us we all must walk death's path" ~Horace, The Odes 1.28	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	39	"He who does not know how to protect himself does not know how to live" ~Herculaneum Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	40	"He who hates life easily scorns god" ~Pompeii Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	41	"The pair of us were here, dear friends forever" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	42	"The Saturnalia, the best of days!" ~Catullus, Poem 14	Literary quotation
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	42	"Many who Fortuna has raised high, she suddenly throws down, and hurls them headlong" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffiti
<i>The Wolf Den</i>	44	"We thus began to imprison animals to which nature had assigned the heavens as their element" ~Pliny the Elder, Natural History, on the caging of birds	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	1	"Man alone of living creatures has been given grief...and likewise ambition, greed and a boundless lust for living" ~Pliny the Elder, Natural History	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	2	„They're slaves,' people say. No. They're human beings. 'They're slaves.' But they share the same roof as ourselves" ~Seneca, Letters from a Stoic	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	3	"And all this time the poor slaves are forbidden to move their lips to speak, let alone to eat. The slightest murmur is checked with a trick; not even accidental sounds like a cough, or a sneeze, or a hiccup are let off a beating" ~Seneca, Letters from a Stoic	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	4	"We can tell she ahs been in a pimp's house – she is a wheedler" ~Seneca, Declamations 1.2	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	5	"The things slaves say; the squalid snark; the filthy slanders of a street vendor's tongue" ~Martial's epigrams 10.3	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	6	"He still feels his master's slap and wants to give himself a good time" ~Petronius, the Satyricon	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	7	"A small problem gets bigger if you ignore it" ~Pompeiiian Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffiti

Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	8	“In the estate of Julia Felix, daughter of Spurius to let elegant Venus baths for respectable people, shops with upper rooms, and apartments” ~Notice in Pompeii, on the praedia of Julia Felix	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	9	“She was welcomed by the kisses of the whores, taught to wheedle, shown how to make all kinds of movement with her body” ~Seneca, <i>Declamations</i> 1.2	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	10	“Give me the pimp’s accounts; you will find the entries balance” ~Seneca, <i>Declamations</i> 1.2	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	11	“She stood naked on the shore to meet the buyers’ sneers; every part of her body was inspected – and handled	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	12	“The body seeks that which the mind has wounded with love” ~Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of the Universe</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	13	“Love and fear will not mix” ~Seneca, <i>Letters from a Stoic</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	14	“I’m just a guest then, gazing at my darling while at your touch another takes delight” ~Ovid, <i>Amores</i> 1.4	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	15	“Even woods and the wilder aspects of Nature furnish medicines, for there is no place where Nature has not provided remedies for mankind – so that the desert itself has become a chemist’s shop” ~Pliny the Elder, <i>Natural History</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	16	“Now that I know you, you’re much cheaper, lighter, and yet desire in me flares even brighter” ~Catullus, <i>Poem</i> 72	Literary quotation

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	17	"It's because they're smitten by our looks that our lovers worship us; when our looks have faded they take their fancy elsewhere; if we haven't made some provision in the meantime, we find ourselves abandoned" ~Bacchis speaking in Terence's Play "The Self Tormentor"	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	18	"First Writer: Lovers, like bees, live a honeyed life. Second Writer: I wish" ~Pompeii graffiti exchange	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	19	"I've never been so foolish in my young life, I swear, or done one thing that I've regretted more, than going from you last night and leaving you alone, trying to hide how desperately I love you" ~Sulpicia, Roman woman poet	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	20	"For this reason too, if proverbs interest you, folk say bad women marry in May" ~Ovid, Fasti: On the Rites of the Lemuria	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	21	"See to it, slave boy, that water washes feet and a serviette wipes away the drops; and that our linen covers the couch" ~Motto from a Pompeii dining room	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	22	"The praetor should not endure the slave of yesterday, who is today, to complain that his master has spoken abusively to him, or struck him lightly" ~Ulpian, Roman Jurist	Law Text
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	23	"If anyone wishes to have a slave – male or female – punished privately, he who wishes to have the punishment inflicted shall do as follows. If he wants to put the slave on the cross or fork, the contractor must supply the posts, chains, ropes for floggers and the floggers themselves" ~Inscription at Puteoli, Roman city near Pompeii	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	24	"Crescens, the Netter of young girls by night" ~Pompeii Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	25	"Oh, if only I could hold your sweet arms around my neck in an embrace and place kisses on your tender lips" ~Pompeii graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	26	"Next comes the well-known fertile region of Campania. In its hollows begin the vine-bearing hills and the celebrated effects of the juice of the vine, famous the world over, and, as writers of old have said, the venue of the greatest competition between Bacchus and Ceres" ~Pliny the Elder, Natural History	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	27	"He always said there was no book so bad that some good could not be got out of it" ~Pliny the younger, on his uncle, Pliny the Elder	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	28	"I want a girl who's easy, who goes around in a coat and nothing else. I want a girl who's already given it up to my slave" ~Martial's epigrams 9.32	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	29	"Seen in a dream, the butchers who cut up meat and sell it in the marketplace signify dangers" ~Artemidorous, The Interpretation of Dreams	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	30	"Nothing can last for all time: when the sun has shone brightly it returns to the Ocean; the moon wanes, which recently was full. Even so the fierceness of Venus often becomes a puff of wind" ~Pompeii Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	31	"Whoever loves, let him flourish. Let him perish who knows not love. Let him perish twice over whoever forbids love" Pompeii Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	32	"May you suffer, Phoebus" ~Herculaneum graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	33	"How soft is violence?" ~Herculaneum graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	34	"Hail profit" ~Mosaic in Pompeiian house	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	35	"I see you hurrying in excitement with a burning torch to the grove of Nemi where you bear light in honour of the goddess Diana" ~Propertius, Poems	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	36	"Restitutus has often deceived many girls" ~Pompeii graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	37	"I bought my wife's freedom so nobody could wipe his dirty hands on her hair" ~Petronius, the Satyricon	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	38	Well, well, forgotten her flute-girl days, has she? She doesn't remember but she was bought and sold, and I took her away from it all and made her as good as the next" ~Petronius, The Satyricon	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	39	"There is indeed some truth in that line of Callimachus: 'to little people, the gods will always give little.' ~Artemidorus, The Interpretation of Dreams	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	40	"Rivers are analogous in one way to slave's masters and to judges, because they just do what they want at their own discretion without answering to anyone" ~Artemidorous, The Interpretation of Dreams	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	41	"The sin is sweet, to mask it for fear of shame is bitter. I'm proud we're joined, each worthy of the other" ~Sulpicia, Roman woman poet	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	42	"To see one's face reflected in a dish signifies fathering children with a slave girl. But if this dream is seen by someone who is himself a slave, we must conclude the dish reflects his own slavery" ~Artemidorous, The Interpretation of Dreams	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	43	"Show me a man who isn't a slave; one is a slave to sex, another to money, another to ambition; all are slaves to hope or fear" ~Seneca, Letters from a Stoic	Literary quotation

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	44	“But those you see with figures like to each and faces like both parents, these having sprung from the father’s body and the mother’s blood...by two hearts breathing as one in mutual passion, an neither masters the other nor is mastered” ~Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of the Universe</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	45	“Mistress, I ask you to love me” ~Pompeii Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	46	“But tears cannot put out the flame; they inflame the face and melt the spirit” ~Pompeii graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	47	“Not always is a woman feigning love when she sighs and clings to a man in close embrace” ~Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of the Universe</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	48	“The women who have avenged” ~Herculaneum graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The House with the Golden Door</i>	Epi- logue	“Now we come to examples of changing Fortune, which are innumerable. For what great joys does she bring except after disasters, or what immense disasters except after enormous joys?” ~Pliny the Elder, <i>Natural History</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	1	“Berenice was at the very height of her power... she dwelt in the palace, cohabitating with Titus. She expected to marry him and was already behaving in every respect as if she were his wife; but when he perceived that the Romans were displaced with the situation, he sent her away” ~Cassius Dio, <i>Roman History</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	2	“We are so subject to chance that Chance herself takes the place of God; she proves that God is uncertain” ~Pliny the Elder, <i>Natural History</i>	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	3	“What a splendid comrade you were when we were on active service together” ~Pliny the Elder to Emperor Titus, <i>Preface to the Natural History</i>	Literary quotation

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	4	“Even at his funeral, the leading mime actor Favor, who was wearing a mask of his face and imitating the actions and speech of the deceased during his lifetime, as is the custom, asked the procurators how much the funeral and the procession had cost and, hearing that it was ten million sesterces, exclaimed that they should give him a hundred thousand and throw him into the river” ~Suetonius, “The Deified Vespasian,” the Lives of the Caesars	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	5	“Domitian hated [Titus and Vespasian] because they had not supplied all his numerous and unreasonable demands, as well as because they had been held in some honor; for he regarded as his enemy anyone who had enjoyed his father’s or his brother’s affection” ~Cassius Dio, Roman History	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	6	“His cruelty was not only extreme but also ingenious and unpredictable. The day before he crucified one of his stewards, he invited the man into his bedchamber, made him sit down beside him on the couch, then sent him away happy and confident” ~Suetonius on Domitian, Lives of the Caesars	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	7	“The only time he took from his work was for his bath, and by bath I mean his actual immersion, for while he was being rubbed down and dried he had a book read to him or dictated notes” ~Pliny the Younger on his uncle, Pliny the Elder	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	8	“There had been tremors for many days previously, a common occurrence in Campania and no cause for panic” ~Pliny the Younger, on the eruption of Vesuvius	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	9	“Shared danger is the strongest of bonds.” ~Livy, History of Rome	Literary quotation

Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	10	"Victoria is unconquered here" ~Graffiti from Pompeii's brothel	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	11	"May the gods make us happy" ~Pompeii graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	12	"How about reflecting that the person you call your slave traces his origin back to the same stock as yourself, has the same good sky above him, breathes as you do, lives as you do, dies as you do?" ~Seneca, Letters from a Stoic	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	13	"Here love will be wise" ~Herculaneum graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	14	"Methe, slave-girl of Cominia from Atella, loves Chrestus. May Pompeian Venus be dear to them both and may they always live in harmony" ~Pompeii Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	15	"They must conquer or fall. Such was the settled purpose of a woman – the men might live and be slaves!" ~Tacitus on Boudicca, <i>Queen of the Iceni</i> , Annals 14	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	16	"In difficult and desperate cases, the boldest counsels are the safest" ~Livy, History of Rome	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	17	"It was not clear at that distance from which mountain the cloud was rising (it was afterward known to be Vesuvius); its general appearance can best be expressed as being like an umbrella pine, for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches, I imagine because it was thrust upward by the first blast and then left unsupported as the pressure subsided, or else it was borne down by its own weight so that it spread out and gradually dispersed" ~Pliny the Younger, letter to Tacitus on the eruption of Vesuvius	Literary quotation

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Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	18	<p>“He gave orders for the warships to be launched and went on board himself with the intention of bringing help...he hurried to the place which everyone else was hastily leaving, steering his course straight for the danger zone”</p> <p>~Pliny the Younger, writing on the rescue mission launched by his uncle Pliny the Elder during the eruption of Vesuvius</p>	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	19	<p>“Elsewhere there was daylight by this time, but they were still in darkness, blacker and denser than any ordinary night, which they relieved by lighting torches and various kinds of lamp”</p> <p>~Pliny the Younger, on the final day of Pliny the Elder's rescue mission</p>	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	20	<p>“A terrifying black cloud, split by twisted blasts of fire shooting in different directions, gaped to reveal long fiery shapes, similar to flashes of lightning, only bigger”</p> <p>~Pliny the Younger, on the eruption of Vesuvius</p>	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	21	<p>“We attended to our physical needs as best we could, and then spent on anxious night alternating between hope and fear. Fear predominated, for the earthquakes went on, and several hysterical individuals made their own and other people's calamities seem ludicrous in comparison with their frightful predictions”</p> <p>~Pliny the Younger on the aftermath of the eruption of Vesuvius</p>	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	22	<p>„[Emperor Titus] chose commissioners by lot from among the ex-consuls for the relief of Campania; and the property of those who lost their lives by Vesuvius and had no heirs left alive he applied to the rebuilding of the buried cities”</p> <p>~Suetonius, The Lives of the Caesars</p>	Literary quotation

Book	Ch.	Epigraph	Type
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	23	"Love dictates and Cupid points the way as I write I'd rather die than be a god without you" ~Pompeii Graffiti	Inscription/ Graffito
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	24	"Here is Vesuvius that until recently was green with shady vines. Here did the noble grape load the vats with juice...Here was Venus' seat, that she favored over Sparta; this spot was famous for its Herculean name. All lie sunk in flames and dismal ash. The gods themselves must have wished this was not in their power" ~Martial, Epigrams	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	25	"This alone is certain, namely that there is no such thing as certainty" ~Pliny the Elder, Natural History	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	26	"Timarete scorned the duties of women and practiced her father's art" ~Pliny the Elder on the Greek artist Timerete, famous for her painting of the goddess Diana	Literary quotation
<i>The Temple of Fortuna</i>	Epi- logue	"Fortune favors the brave" ~Words spoken by Pliny the Elder, on his rescue mission during the eruption of Vesuvius	Literary quotation

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Women philosophers and enslaved robots: automation fantasies and consent in Jo Walton's *The Just City*

Abstract When Athena and Apollo decide to gather children and intellectuals (including a good number of women) from different eras to put into practice Plato's proposal of an ideal politeia, everything seems to be going just fine. However, problems soon disrupt the harmony of this quest for individual and social excellence. Through the literary depiction of interactions between various historical figures and schools of thought, Jo Walton's *The Just City* raises a series of questions on topics of great relevance for our own world, especially those related to debates on fairer socio-economic ways of organisation and the struggle for social justice and freedom. This paper will analyse how gender, sexuality and social hierarchies are presented in this literary realisation of Plato's Republic as well as the way Walton imagines ancient thought would deal with modern issues such as invisible and devalued labour performed by marginalised collectives such as, in this case, women and robots.

Keywords Plato, robots, women, philosophers, Socrates, Jo Walton, utopia

INTRODUCTION

Jo Walton's *The Just City* is the first volume of a trilogy of novels, called *Thessaly*, which explores a possible fantastic implementation of Plato's ideal city or state (*politeia*) from his dialogue *Republic*.¹ First published in 2015, *The Just City* was quickly followed by *The Philosopher Kings* (2015) and *Necessity* (2016), in which the story of the protagonists of *The Just City* is developed further. The main plot is presented through a conversation between the gods Apollo and Athene in which brother and sister discuss the former's astonishment at the nymph Daphne's preference to turn into a tree to mating with him.² In their dialogue, Athene introduces her brother to the notion of "consensuality" and Apollo learns about "volition" and "equal significance",³ thus introducing one of the main topics of the novel: consent. Then, as a direct consequence of his desire to learn more "things about equal significance and volition",⁴ Apollo announces his intention of becoming a mortal for some time. His divine sister offers him the perfect environment for his human experience: a place, in the island of Kallisti ("Thera before it erupted"),⁵ where some people are setting up Plato's Republic, led by Neoplatonists from all times who had prayed to Athene for this to happen. In this experiment playfully orchestrated by Athene, 10.000 children ("orphans, slaves, abandoned children and volunteers")⁶ from throughout history will be instructed by a group of three hundred followers of Plato (among which we find Cicero, Plotinus, Boethius, Marsilio Ficino, Lucrezia Borgia or Ellen Francis Mason). All of them will be taken care of by a group of apparently emotionless

1 The authors would like to express their gratitude to the editors of Duermevela Ediciones, the Spanish publishers of the trilogy (who have already published its two first tomes, *La ciudad justa* (2021) and *Los reyes filósofos* (2023)), thanks to whom this book series became first known to them, for making Walton's works available to Spanish-speaking audiences and for bringing the readers closer to a more diverse range of fantasy and science fiction authors.

2 Walton (2015), 13–19. We follow the spelling of Greek names used by the author (Athene, Sokrates, etc), except when referring to Plato's Sokrates. In such instances, the spelling will be "Socrates".

3 Walton (2015), 15–16.

4 Walton (2015), 282.

5 Walton (2015), 17.

6 Walton (2015), 18.

and mindless robots.⁷ Athene's preference of robots rather than slaves introduces another key theme in the book, the invisible and devalued work which often sustains human societies.

From this point on, the story unfolds through the alternating points of view of three characters: Apollo, who takes on the shape of a young boy called Pytheas; Simmea (originally called Lucia), the 11 years old daughter of a farmer from near Alexandria, who was enslaved shortly before she was bought in Smyrna by the masters of the Just City; and Maia (formerly called Ethel), a Victorian woman with a solid knowledge of classical history and languages who becomes one of the city's founders and masters. These three protagonists provide us with different perspectives of the story and are joined by a cohort of characters which include other children and masters, such as Sokrates, who will act as a catalyst in the story, and of course the goddess Athene. The scholars divide the children into different houses and set up different committees to run the city, "sleeping houses" and other buildings are built, robots (euphemistically called "the Workers") perform the basic caregiving tasks and work the land and the children begin their training in different subjects which will help them to eventually become true Philosopher Kings.

The Just City's genre is difficult to determine. The complete trilogy of *Thessaly* was nominated in 2017 by the Mythopoeic Society for its Fantasy Awards, while the novel considered in this contribution was nominated in 2017 for the Prometheus Award to the best libertarian science fiction novel given by the Libertarian Futurist Society.⁸ Jo Walton herself has stated in an interview given in 2016 that this trilogy was different from anything she had written before and that a story which mixes magic, gods and robots and is set in a "metaphysical world that is reasonably Neoplatonic" can be understood as something on the crossroads between fantasy and science fiction,⁹ both very popular genres to think about the world in the last seventy years, but that at the same time with very deep roots in

7 Walton (2015), 16–19.

8 Here the term "libertarian" must be understood as a synonym of "anarchist" rather than referring to the contemporary conservative political current that advocates a radical neo-liberal version of *laissez-faire* capitalism. The Wikipedia entry for this award specifies that it rewards "The best science fiction or fantasy fiction promoting individual freedom and human rights, or critiquing tyranny, slavery, war and other abuses of government power" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prometheus_Award, 05/02/2024), a consideration to bear in mind in our study of the novel.

9 Fast Forward (2017).

the past.¹⁰ As stated by Walton as well, Thessaly can be understood as a “generational saga”, by the end of which replicating Plato’s *Republic* is something normal for a part of humanity.¹¹ In the version of reality in which *The Just City* is set, temporality and space seem to be especially relative if the gods intervene. For example, Athene affirms that her experiment is going to take place in “Thera before it erupted” (referring to the volcanic eruption that destroyed part of the island at the height of Minoan civilization), which implies that the Republic will be implemented before the actual Platonic dialogue was written in the 4th century BCE, while the masters and children brought to the island come from very different chronological contexts, from ancient Athens to 19th century USA and Renaissance Florence. Walton’s immersive world-building in a novel that is constructed basically as the narration of quasi philosophical dialogues, with almost no action, reminds readers sometimes of Mary Renault’s *The Last of the Wine* (first published in 1956), a very suggestive quotation of which is included at the beginning of Walton’s oeuvre. This coherent recreation of how this attempt to set the Platonic Republic would have come out together with the use of certain literary devices,¹² or the places chosen by Apollo for his human experiment (“Periclean Athens? Cicero’s Rome? Lorenzo di Medici’s Florence?”),¹³ betray the author’s training in Classics and Ancient History¹⁴ and her familiarity with and fondness of Greek and Roman culture and literature and especially with the Platonic dialogues. As hinted by Liz Bourke, herself a Classicist and scholar of fantasy and science-fiction literature, in her interview to Walton in the speculative fiction online magazine *Strange Horizons*, *The Just City* is not the first time in which she sets the action of her novels in a historical background. In Walton’s own words, she is interested in the lives “hidden in the margins, overlooked, or

10 Rogers and Eldon Stevens (2018), 1–2.

11 Fast Forward (2017).

12 For example, the use of one of the most common epithets to refer to Athene in Homer’s *Odyssey*, “grey-eyed” (γλαυκῶπις), which sometimes translates as well as “owl-eyed” or “bright-eyed”. See, among other occurrences, Walton (2015), 16. Later on, in page 18, Apollo compliments Athene for the recursiveness of “doing Plato’s Republic on Atlantis”, a direct reference to Critias’ account on Atlantis in Plato’s dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias* (Plat. *Tim.* 24e–25a and *Criti.* 113a–120d). On Plato’s Atlantis, see Pérez Martel (2010).

13 Walton (2015), 16.

14 Bourke (2015).

completely forgotten” and, borrowing J. R. R. Tolkien’s words, conceives fantasy as “history true or feigned, or both together” and fundamentally linked with time and the past.¹⁵

We could therefore envisage *The Just City* as a suggestive re-reading of the possibilities of Plato’s Republic as well as of various historical figures together with some other “forgotten” people whose voice is brought to the front in this narrative. Its main concern is with the viability of the Platonic project, or of utopias in general, when put in practice by real human beings (although with divine help). The novel presents an exploration of what would happen if a group of humans (many of which were taken against their will) guided by a cohort of devote Platonists would try, theoretically under the perfect conditions, to put in practice the utopian form of communal life advocated by Plato, focusing especially on his idea of justice. The dialogues presented along throughout the novel confront the readers with a series of questions on topics of great concern in the present world, set in a fantastic world and framed in the terms Walton imagines Plato or his followers would have approached them. Some of these topics include gender equality, economic equality, the possibilities of automation and its moral dilemmas, labour conditions, human rights, consent and universal and free access to education. In a similar way to the city depicted in Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973), Athene’s time-travel Platonic experiment in Walton’s novel seems to rest on invisible and devalued work, featuring a society where hierarchical power relations still operate. In the following pages, this contribution will delve into Walton’s proposal of how gender and social hierarchies could develop in her fantastic implementation of the Platonic πολιτεία on top of the invisible and devalued work of other collectives and in ways she imagines ancient thought would deal with the automation fantasies upon which Athene’s Just City is built.

15 Bourke (2015).

THE “JUST” CITY? GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND HIERARCHIES

Recently there has been a growing interest in the study of the feminine presence within the philosophical field in Antiquity.¹⁶ In this sense, special attention has been paid to the figure of Plato, even considering him one of the precursors of feminism because of his idea that sex should not be a determining factor in the search and acquisition of knowledge.¹⁷ Plato emphasizes the importance of an adequate disposition of the soul as an essential requirement to approach knowledge. Only the rational part of the soul can achieve *logos*, while the body is linked to the corporeal sphere and in turn to elements that impede knowledge, such as vices, passions, corruption, or temporality. Although Plato recognizes that the soul benefits from the individual dispositions of each person, he also argues that sex should not constitute an obstacle to the learning process, since the *logos* is independent of the physical characteristics.¹⁸ This Platonic theory sets up the discursive basis of *The Just City*'s narrative on women and it highlights the initial surprise of both the girls and the female guardians as they actively participate in the foundation of a utopian city where their voice is equal to that of men. In fact, one of the characters (Maia) is astonished when she declares that:

Plato's ideas about all these things were fascinating and thought-provoking, and I read on, longing to talk about them with somebody else who cared. Then, in Book Five, I found the passage where he talks about the education of women, indeed about the equality of women. I read it over and over again. I could hardly believe it. Plato would have allowed me into the conversation from which my sex excluded me. He would have let me be a guardian, limited only by my own ability to achieve excellence.¹⁹

¹⁶ Some examples are Coon (1997), 28–51; Taylor (2012), 75–87; MacLachlan (2013); Denzey Lewis (2014), 274–297; Schultz & Wilberding, (2022).

¹⁷ There are multiple references to gender equality in Plat. *Rep.* 452a; *Leg.* 770c–d, 796c, 804d–e, 813e–814c; *Tim.* 18c. See also Garside Allen (1975), 135.

¹⁸ Addey (2018), 412. In fact, “the soul is immaterial, eternal and gender-less; only human bodies are different”. The topic of women in Plato's work is also considered in the novel, for example when Maia and Ikaros discuss the case of Axiothea, see Walton (2015), 91.

¹⁹ Walton (2015), 32.

This enthusiasm becomes clear through continuous allusions to the unusual phenomenon represented by Maia's presence in Kallisti, as when she thinks "Father said I had the wits of a man, and it was a shame I could not go to Oxford too, as I would get more benefit from it",²⁰ or when Septima, one of the girls that arrived to the island as a student, considers the presence of all the female guardians in the following terms:

"I talked to Kriton once about why most of the male masters here were old when most of the women were young. It seems it's because men achieve so much more in their lives, and they couldn't be missed from them until they were near to death, whereas most women might as well not exist for all the individual contribution most of us get to make to history".²¹

In this sense, Walton seeks to mirror the revolution that Plato advocates by suggesting that women can actively participate in the public sphere and in the decision-making processes.²² At the same time, she highlights the contrast with the gender constraints these characters suffered before arriving in the ideal city.²³ Although it is true that the masters in the Just City come from different historical periods, they share two common characteristics. The first is their desire to see realized and to participate in the *πολιτεία* proposed by Socrates in the Platonic dialogue. The second trait, common only to the female characters, is having been marginalized due to their gender regardless of their origins.²⁴ This tension is

²⁰ Walton (2015), 29.

²¹ Walton (2015), 158.

²² Maia alludes to this in Walton (2015), 33: "In Plato's Republic, as never in all of the history, my sex would have been no impediment. I could have been an equal to anyone. I could have exercised freely, and learned philosophy. I wished fiercely that it existed and that I had been born there. He had written two thousand three hundred years ago, and never in all that time had anyone paid any attention. How many women had led stupid, wasted, unnecessary lives because nobody listened to Plato?".

²³ Athene points out in Walton (2015), 72 how the most progressive guardians in the city are actually women.

²⁴ Maia hints at this when she says: "had never before met another woman who cared about scholarship. Now I did, and it was wonderful. Before long I realised that most of the women were much like me, young, and fortunate enough to obtain enough education to make their possible lives unsatisfactory. I met young women from every century, including several from my own and the century after". Later, she adds in Walton (2015), 45: "For most of the his-

evident in Maia's declarations: "I was a woman, a young lady, and this constrained me in everything. My choices were so unbearably narrow. If I wanted a life of the mind I could work at nothing but as a governess, or a teacher in a girls' school [...].²⁵ Due to this fact, the women in the Just City relied on orally transmitted knowledge to fill this educational void that all of them have suffered throughout history. That is why they use knowledge such as the use of the sylvium root to prevent conception, experiences during pregnancy and postpartum or sorority and female companionship to prevent a possible rape.²⁶

It is worth mentioning that most current issues are treated in the novel by feminine characters.²⁷ The omission of questions related to women's intimacy in Plato's dialogues is glaringly obvious in the upbringing of children in the city. Walton chooses to highlight this by addressing the education of girls in relation to their personal hygiene, in the episode where the students reach puberty and the female patrons have to teach them all about menstruation. All of them (both adult guardians and young students) benefit from the knowledge that Kreusa, a former 1st century CE Corinthian *hetaira*, transmits a knowledge acquired from other *hetairai* who used menstrual sponges.²⁸ Important feminine wisdoms are therefore learned only by the women in the community that aspires to become Plato's Just City, conveying current concerns about male disinterest about specific needs of women (perhaps due to cultural inertia, perhaps the perception that these issues are inextricably related to the female body) and about the centrality of male bias in most aspects of human life, both currently and in the

tory it was really unusual for women to be taught to read," I said. "Nobody except Plato had seen that we were human. It still made me angry to think of all those wasted lives" (Walton (2015), 186). Lastly, when speaking with Sokrates, she declares in Walton (2015), 338, referring to Plato: "If it wasn't for his wanting women to be philosophers, I'd imagine that he thought wives were a fungible resource".

²⁵ Walton (2015), 33.

²⁶ On the sharing of knowledge about contraceptive methods, see Walton (2015), 50. For an updated and complete overview of abortion and contraceptive methods in Antiquity, with a focus on Rome, see González Gutiérrez (2015). Pregnancy is discussed through the nausea that prevents Auge from painting and sculpting: Walton (2015), 182–183. For other examples of these feminine shared knowledges, see Walton (2015), 212, 229, 241–244, 253, 284–285. Rape will be discussed later in this contribution.

²⁷ This is the case, for example, of consent, which we will address later in the contribution.

²⁸ Walton (2015), 50, 59–61.

society imagined by Walton.²⁹ This leads to a discrediting of this type of knowledge as unimportant because, in Maia's words, "we knew the men wouldn't recognize or care about their significance".³⁰ Walton presents in her work an oral transmission of practices among an exclusively female community that does not permeate to their male colleagues, maybe out of disinterest – as it belongs to the female sphere – or because of a conscious act of non-transmission. In the novel, the female guardians take a conscious decision not to such issues with their male colleagues.

Indeed, examples from Antiquity demonstrated instances of women instructing other women. For instance, within the Pythagorean school, female members such as Theano, Arignote, and Myia were known to show their wisdom to their peers. Theano, Pythagoras' wife, distinguished herself as a philosopher who wrote to different correspondents, mostly, however, women. Also, her daughters Arignote and Myia were relevant intellectuals.³¹ Myia, in particular, is documented to have written a letter, although it is now lost, focusing on child-rearing, indicating a tradition of women sharing expertise in matters such as pregnancy, abortion, delivery, and child-care.³² These topics were often associated with midwives, who frequently held roles as priestesses. Notable examples include Phaenarete, the mother of Socrates, and Diotima of Mantinea, a prophetess in Delphi renowned for her teachings to Socrates on matters of love (*eros*).³³

While there have been numerous cases of intellectual female authors, women have historically faced relegation and unequal opportunities compared to men. The novel addresses this issue with examples of capable intellectuals that decided to undercover as men, such as Axiothea of Phlius,³⁴ or Aristomache, a character inspired by Ellen Francis Mason, a 19th century translator of Plato's

²⁹ This topic has been recently addressed from a manifold perspective in Criado Pérez (2019).

³⁰ Walton (2015), 50.

³¹ These examples all revolve around individuals closely associated with Pythagoras but who also stood out in their own right. See Addey (2018), 418; Brisson (2022), 73.

³² These characters were mentioned in Porph. *VP*. 4: Iambl. *VP*. 30, 36. On the Myia's letter, see Plant (2004), 79.

³³ In Plat. *Tht.* 149a, Socrates compares his role as a philosopher with her mother's job as *maia* or midwife. Diotima is mentioned in Plat. *Symp.* 201d–2.

³⁴ With an ironic undertone, Walton (2015), 91 envisions the role of Axiothea of Phlius, the disciple of Plato's Academy who came with men clothes in order to be admitted as a man, exposing the inequalities that women have suffered in the past: "The woman who came to

works. Mason published her translations anonymously, a strategy employed to circumvent societal biases against female scholars.³⁵ Notwithstanding Plato's consideration for women and the fact that girls learn with boys on equal terms,³⁶ Walton's *The Just City* features clear gender inequalities that start with the very different origin situations from which female and male masters came to the city, as acknowledged by Athene herself.³⁷ The goddess notes, though, that from the Enlightenment onwards, most of the humans who pray to her and care about progress, education and equality.³⁸ But in the Just City some gender roles still persist, and boys and girls are not considered entirely equal, as Maia notices when she sees Simmea arguing with Ficino.³⁹ This inequality is evident in all levels, from the children who populate this utopia to the masters who continue to show gender biases that they had in their previous lives. In this sense, Simmea claims that a city in which there are fifty percent men and fifty percent women does not imply that gender inequalities have been overcome. Simmea states that "though we had nominal equality, there were always those like Tullius who would not accept us as equals".⁴⁰ This is also tied in with unbalanced power situations, as power is also not equally divided, since most of the masters are old men coming from societies where they already held power and, as Klio observes, "they're not going to want to give that up, even to Philosopher Kings".⁴¹ On the other hand, it is repeatedly established during the novel that most of the burden

him [Plato] in disguise as a youth and was admitted into the Academy? Perhaps she made him realise it's souls that matter". This anecdote is mentioned by Diog. Laert. 3.46.

35 Walton (2015), 158 mentions her important role in the transmission of Plato's opera: "She published it anonymously. Nobody in her time would have trusted a woman as a scholar. But her translation helped a lot of young people discover philosophy. She couldn't come until she'd finished it, and until after a friend of hers had written a poem to her".

36 As expressed by Simmea, Walton (2015), 58: "I had friends. And best of all, I had music, mathematics, and books to stretch my mind. I learned from Maia and Ficino, from Axiothea and Atticus of Delphi, from Ikaros and Lucina of Ferrara, and from time to time from other masters. [...]I could almost feel my mind growing and developing as I listened to them."

37 Walton (2015), 72.

38 Walton (2015), 72.

39 Walton (2015), 188.

40 Walton (2015), 48.

41 Walton (2015), 162.

of basic tasks falls on women.⁴² Traditionally, these tasks have been labelled as feminine under a series of premises that are related to the dynamics of gender inequalities. In this sense, the features attributed to women's character are extrapolated to all aspects of their lives, including work. Simmea emphasises this when she declares that "there's a tendency in most places to think that women are soft and gentle and good at nurturing, that by nature they should be protected".⁴³ In addressing gender inequality, the female characters in the *Just City* perceive these disparities not as inherent attributes of their sex, but rather as societal constructs lacking practical foundations. Walton draws upon Plato's tripartition of the soul to emphasize that there is no inherent distinction between individuals regarding their elevated part of the being, that is, the soul: "our souls have parts in different balances – maybe she doesn't have as much passion, and perhaps not everyone has it in them to stand in the line of battle [...] Every example of a coward we've ever heard about who was shamefully wounded in the back has been a man. And plenty of those who are brave and would stand firm are women".⁴⁴ Once again, Walton references virtues as the most important feature in the human being, according to the philosophical ideals in Antiquity. But she underscores the absurdity of associating socially constructed masculine attributes like bravery and heroism in the battlefield as positive and juxtaposed them with feminine attributes of weakness and subtlety. In the context of a city characterized by peace, absence of war, and fully populated by scholars, these gender-based attributions are revealed to be inefficient. The criteria for usefulness in such a society are not tied to gender but rather to their skills and previous life experiences, challenging traditional notions of utility based on gender roles. After all, even the intellectuals lack basic survival skills such as hunting or food provision.

⁴² A clear claim in Walton (2015), 249, which denounce the situation toward invisibilization of women's work: "Even here and now, more of the burden falls on women,' Maia went on. 'I'm in here helping you right now, not in my room reading or thinking, where the male masters are. And you're giving birth while whoever the father is sleeps peacefully. But you won't be here helping the next generation through labor and wiping up the blood. You'll be organizing which of the iron girls do that work". One of the most difficult tasks which is entirely entrusted exclusively to women is the decision on what to do with "defective babies": Walton (2015), 207.

⁴³ Walton (2015), 83.

⁴⁴ Walton (2015), 84.

JUSTICE WITHOUT CONSENT?

Walton has explained in several interviews that she first had the idea for the Thessaly trilogy when she was looking at Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture *Apollo and Daphne* in Rome's Galleria Borghese (Florence, Italy).⁴⁵ Bernini's work captures the precise moment in which the god has finally reached the nymph who is already transforming in a laurel tree, as recounted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*.⁴⁶ This is also the situation that impresses Apollo and leads subsequently to his conversation with his sister at the beginning of the novel. It seems like an appropriate image with which to commence a piece of speculative fiction which explores the notion of consent in several contexts. Its protagonists end up questioning the possibilities of real justice without consent.⁴⁷ In her interview by Liz Bourke, that in *The Just City* she wanted to explore whether Greek gods, perceived as super-powerful human beings, can learn lessons, as Athene invites his brother to do.⁴⁸

In *The Just City*, consent is essentially discussed in the two ways Western thought has approached it, according to David Johnston: in relations among persons and in "discussions of the relationship between governments and the collectivities over which they rule".⁴⁹ In an especially uncanny scene, master Ikaros (the Italian humanist Pico della Mirandola), rapes his colleague Maia. We witness the rape from the point of view of Maia, who states, in very Platonic terms, that her body "unquestionably enjoyed it" but her "mind and soul remained entirely unconsenting".⁵⁰ Later on in the book, Maia is shocked when she learns

⁴⁵ Bourke (2015); *Fast Forward* (2017).

⁴⁶ Ov. *Met.* 1. 547–555.

⁴⁷ Sokrates includes this as one of the problems that needs to be solved for the city to be truly just. See Walton (2015), 362.

⁴⁸ Bourke (2015). The process of Apollo learning about consent is indeed an important thread in the book, including his considerations on his father's tendency towards rape and his own enjoying of the chase of nymphs, as well as on the way he intentionally chose to forget about Daphne's lack of consent (Walton (2015), 177–178).

⁴⁹ Johnston (2009), 25. See also 28–29 for Plato's criticism of the idea of consent as a fundament for the legitimacy of government and 38–40 for his criticism of individual consent as a driving force of human actions.

⁵⁰ Walton (2015), 91–92. The twisted logic through which he pressures her into having sex is also to be considered: "It doesn't mean I don't see you as a person," Ikaros said; "that

that Ikaros appears to have dismissed the rape incident from his mind, focusing solely on their earlier conversation, almost as if he has forgotten it.⁵¹ Subsequently, it is this female character who observes how Ikaros recreates the role of Alkibiades publicly with Plotinus, who personifies the wise old man who teaches the young according to propaedeutic “pederasty”.⁵² Maia thinks about Ikaros that:

He was conducting a spectacular public Platonic relationship with old Plotinus, the leader of the Neoplatonists. Plotinus was much older than Ikaros, but still handsome, very dignified with his white beard and flowing hair. They acted as if they were Sokrates and Alkibiades in the Symposium, at least in public, and Ikaros seemed happy. Atticus asked me whether I thought they were as Platonic in private as in.⁵³

After fleeing Ikaros, Klio (Kylee, a woman coming from the 20th century) advises Maia not to tell anybody because of what the rest of the community would say.⁵⁴ Here, Walton seems to invite us to consider how the negative behaviours of certain members, though widely known, are silently tolerated, granting disproportionate power to those responsible. As readers, we are contemplating the dynamics of complicity and the implications of turning a blind eye to wrongdoing within a community.

While consent is obviously absent in the first steps of the construction of the community as outlined by Athene and a very exclusive group of the masters, particularly in personal relations as the one just described, we do find consent

I want to copulate with you. Latin is an impossible language for this, and you don't know Italian. Let's speak Greek”.

51 Walton (2015), 213.

52 On the idea of propaedeutic “pederasty”, see Calame (1999), 91–109. This idea is also reflected by female characters in the novel that ask themselves how Plato could think about equality when the romantic relations between men and women are unbalanced. In this regard, see Walton (2015), 90: “What he says about *agape* between men with no thought of love between men and women being like that makes me think he didn't know any women who were capable of being seen as equals” and “But... if he didn't know-any women who were people, how could he have written about women being philosophers the way he did in the *Republic*. It's in the *Laws* too”.

53 Walton (2015), 101.

54 Walton (2015), 93.

in the relations between women. In the context of “sorority” or, at least, of a feminine community in which certain wisdoms are transmitted orally agreement and authority are discussed. After a certain point, issues in relation with consent, especially in the sexual sphere, are openly considered.⁵⁵ In that sense, while the Just City creates the conditions for the construction of an unequal polity, it also creates the opportunity to build safe spaces, in the context of the “sleeping houses” in which the city is organized, where women’s willingness to discuss certain topics, such as forced pregnancy, is clearly shown.⁵⁶ Thus, a project initially designed to bring together masters and students in order to create the perfect society, but based on clearly unequal structures, also makes possible a context in which not only cultured women are able to meet other women with similar intellectual pursuits, but also discuss topics which are normally unspoken and transmit important wisdoms to a younger generation.

Throughout the novel, it becomes evident that both the children and the robots were not given a genuine choice regarding their residence in Kallisti or the conditions of life within this version of Plato’s Republic; they were simply brought there.⁵⁷ The god Apollo, which arrives at the island disguised as a young man, is shocked at this lack of choice.⁵⁸ Towards the end of the novel, this theme

55 For example, Simmea speaks openly to Klymene about her nervousness regarding the Hera festivals because she had witnessed the rapes of both her mother and other women when she was enslaved: Walton (2015), 167: “I suppose ifs just because this is the first time and I don’t know enough about it. I saw my mother raped, and then more women were raped on the slave ship.’ That had been the stuff of nightmare for years. ‘So I have some uncomfortable feelings’”. Also, Laodike and Simmea speak openly about copulation while pregnancy as a normal topic in Walton (2015), 181. Finally, in the book there is a clear contrast between sex as a curious topic for the children and the taboo that adults have with it, not even considering it as an important matter in the Chamber: “We never discussed the personal sexual morality of the masters in Chamber, though the children’s was a constant topic of debate.” (Walton (2015), 107).

56 Walton (2015), 318. This topic is often debated within close communities (“sleeping houses”) but remains largely unaddressed in the Chamber, as it is perceived as belonging exclusively to the female sphere and therefore lacks importance in the eyes of the whole community.

57 At the beginning of the novel Simmea notes, for example: “I was twelve years old. I still missed my parents and my brothers, sometimes, when something recalled them to me. But little did. My life was so different now. Sometimes it truly felt as if I had slept beneath the soil until I awakened in the City” (Walton (2015), 58).

58 Walton (2015), 68–74.

resurfaces in discussions once more.⁵⁹ At first, none of the groups realize their lack of freedom and simply accept their destiny,⁶⁰ a situation that will start to change when the children grow up and are expected to procreate and when Sokrates arrives to the Just City, also without consenting to it.⁶¹ Among the children, the case of Klymene, one of Simmea's closest friends, is especially interesting. Halfway through the book, it's revealed that unlike the others, she was born a slave. Despite gaining freedom during her time in the Just City, she still thought "like a slave", wanting to please the masters instead of truly striving for personal excellence. This realization burdens her with guilt, leading her to confess to the master Maia when she gets pregnant. Klymene feels she has deceived the inhabitants of the Just City, therefore perpetuating injustice with this "slave mentality".⁶² Her confession horrifies Maia, whose previous upbringing in a well-off 19th century British family made her find slavery (theoretically) unacceptable. Klymene's case poses a problematic dilemma for a community which claims to be based on the idea of justice. Despite its noble ideals, the city's actions are fraught with ambiguity, which highlights the ethical implications of their actions.⁶³ In this case, a slave girl is brought without asking her (as well as the rest of the children), to an unfamiliar environment where she is expected to be raised in a Platonic way, so that she will become the best version of herself. However, her efforts are driven, at least initially, not by personal excellence and autonomy, but by a desire to please her new masters. This scenario highlights the complex interplay between idealistic principles and practical realities that the novel proposes.

59 For their lack of choice when coming to Kallisti, see also Sokrates' final debate with Athene, who insists that, if they had not come to the island, the workers might have never developed a soul at all: Walton (2015), 357.

60 With the eloquent exception of Kebes: see Walton (2015), 363. Their destiny includes the ban of leaving Kallisti under the threat of punishment, as in Kebes' and Glaukon's cases (Walton (2015), 358).

61 Walton (2015), 99: "I should have been dead, but for my friend Krito, who thought it good to overrule my own wishes and the will of my daemon and drag me off here, for whatever good I might do. What would I do in Thessaly? I asked him, and yet here I am, will I or not."

62 Walton (2015), 184–189.

63 Maia and Aristomache, for example, confess at the end of the novel that they feel bad for having brought the children to the Just City, based on principles designed by a sage who was no "expert in the education of younger people": see Walton (2015), 350–351.

ROBOTS, INVISIBLE WORK AND SLAVERY

The hardest works in the Just City are done by robots, which are called “the Workers” by the members of the polity. Ancient Greek and Roman mythology and literature are rich in examples of these devices, robotic servants, living statues and other types of artificial intelligence that appear in the tales of characters like Dedalus, Hephaestus or Medea.⁶⁴ We also have hints of the design of different types of *artifices* and *automata* in places like Alexandria.⁶⁵ As pointed by Adrienne Mayor, the relief of humanity of manual labour is one of the main motivations of the creation of robots and other machines, and so is discussed in Aristotle’s *Politics* as a part of his defence of slavery.⁶⁶ Labour is a central issue in political debates in our current late capitalist societies, where it has been gradually devaluated, especially in the case of jobs related to the caring sector.⁶⁷ But in Walton’s novel, the robots do not only work as *de facto* slaves, but are also initially denied even consciousness,⁶⁸ connecting with the Aristotelian justification of slavery, according to which some people are naturally suited to be slaves, a notion that has been used for centuries to enslave different peoples.⁶⁹ Most of the masters come from historical times in which slavery was a perfectly accepted social institution, and although slavery is sometimes a matter of debate between them, we sometimes find clearly pro-slavery attitudes, such as when Tullius (Cicero) refers to the robots: “And if there ever were natural slaves, the workers are clearly that”.⁷⁰ This understanding of the nature of “the Workers” radically changes when Sokrates arrives to the City.⁷¹ He teaches Simmea, Pytheas and

⁶⁴ Mayor (2018).

⁶⁵ Mayor (2018), 179–212.

⁶⁶ Mayor (2018), 152; Costero-Quiroga (2024).

⁶⁷ Graeber (2018), 207–220, 265–269. Graeber speaks of the necessity of a “revolt of the caring classes” (265).

⁶⁸ On the idea in ancient thought of robots as “made, not born”, see Mayor’s introduction to her monography on robots in Antiquity: Mayor (2018), 1–6.

⁶⁹ Dihal (2020), 201. Arist. *Pol.* 1.4–5.

⁷⁰ Walton (2015), 255.

⁷¹ With a rather dramatic entrance the first time we hear of him: “You can’t trust everything that ass Plato wrote” (Walton (2015), 99).

the other children to question the decisions of the masters and Athene, by instructing them to ask for a choice in the way they lead their lives. Maieutics is also crucial in the discovery of the sentient nature of the robots (carried out through the Socratic method) because it encourages them to defeat the *status quo* and ask for their basic rights.

Although slaves were a fundamental part of Plato's *Republic*,⁷² due to Apollo and Athene's uneasiness about slavery, they decide to substitute them with slaves imported from the future.⁷³ However, at some point Apollo himself doubts about their nature, wondering if they were sentient and what would have been the point of having them instead of slaves if they were and thinking that his sister may have chosen the ones that were not.⁷⁴ Sokrates is the first to take seriously this possibility, proposing that "the Workers" may not only be clever tools, but also have "self-will and desires" and be "very interesting to talk to".⁷⁵ After several attempts to communicate with them, Sokrates manages to, and when asked if it likes their job, one of them answers "no" by arranging the bulbs it is planting.⁷⁶ In their first full conversation, Sokrates names this robot "Crocus"; he will be one of the only two who remain on the island after Athene's monumental anger in the novel's finale.⁷⁷ This process of naming them turns them from mere objects into individuals.⁷⁸ Sokrates grants them personhood and individu-

72 This is still a very much open debate in scholarship. Gregory Vlastos (1941, 1968) argues for Plato's acceptance of slavery in his *Politeia*, while other authors, such as Brian Calvert (1987) consider that such a fair society would not accept slavery. See also Levinson (1953), 163.

73 Walton (2015), 47. It is interesting to note that Athene and Apollo consider the robots something else but not slaves, showing repulsion towards the idea of slavery: "Robots?" I asked, surprised. 'Would you rather have slaves?' 'Point,' I said. Athene and I have always felt deeply uneasy about slaves. Always" (Walton (2015), 17).

74 Walton (2015), 230.

75 Walton (2015), 190.

76 Walton (2015), 192.

77 Walton (2015), 267–269, 362.

78 Dihal (2020), 204. This reminds us of the "Lord–bondsman dialectic", where Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* asserts that when an individual attains self-consciousness, thus this being cannot be enslaved. Furthermore self-consciousness is seen as a triumph that is produced not by the subject, but rather it is understood as a social phenomenon: see Hegel (1977), 111.

ality: “Those who are aware can choose the good, and therefore they have souls,’ Sokrates said. ‘Whether they are of the same kind I do not know’”.⁷⁹

As pointed out by Kanta Dihal, the Just City’s resistance to manumit the robots even when their conscience is discovered reminds us of Aristotle’s preference to intelligent machines instead of slaves, an ancient version of some of the automation fantasies we find in present political debates. Even in a utopia such as the one developed by Athene and the masters, manumission is perceived as threat to those “who had been relying on the labour of enslaved intelligent machines”.⁸⁰ Once they rise up against the conditions they have been living under, it is revealed that their absence would be a threat to the Just City, due to the fact that the citizens were highly depend on their – until then invisible – work, as stated by Klio, one of the masters: “But we need the workers. We’ve been saying for years that we have to reduce our dependence on them, but nobody’s ever willing to do it. They do so much, and some of it we can’t do. We can’t manage if they just sit in their feeding stations and feed and don’t work”.⁸¹ Later on, she will remind the other masters that “[...] all our comfort rests on them”.⁸² In Dihal’s words, “the masters of the Just City are torn between maintaining their standard of living and acknowledging the sentience of the Workers”, because admitting their sentiency would imply to redistribute the labour they had been doing between the rest of the members of the Just City (therefore belittling the time devoted to philosophy) and that Plato’s project cannot be achieved without slavery.⁸³ This consideration of the invisibility and devaluation of these tasks, this essential reproductive work, key for the survival of any society, is especially eloquent in a novel produced in a historical time in which, as said before, work is being gradually devalued, especially the caring tasks, traditionally considered as an inherently feminine labour and therefore part of the roles of women. This fact is represented even in the Committee that deals with the functioning of the robots. This Committee consisted mainly of women (with the exception of one man, Ikaros). Also the duties of the Committee are imperceptible for the other members of the community, and so, in Maia’s words, “Somehow, imperceptibly,

⁷⁹ Walton (2015), 316.

⁸⁰ Dihal (2020), 201–202.

⁸¹ Walton (2015), 206.

⁸² Walton (2015), 323.

⁸³ Dihal (2020), 203–204. See also note 73 in this contribution.

because of this, technology came to be seen among the masters as feminine and unimportant”.⁸⁴ In addition to this, to the eyes of the masters robots seem to have been placed in the city by some sort of magic. Most of the citizens come from historical periods robotics was not as developed, and thus they consider the robots as beings sent by Athene, relating to the realm of the divine and the magical. Hence, as they do not belong to the domain of rationality, the masters show disinterest towards these beings. It is also remarkable that most of the citizens who start to realise the personhood of “the Workers” are women. Indeed, Aristomache joins Sokrates in his exploration of the robots’ nature, to communicate their discovery to the Chamber and to defend them in a passionate speech which ultimately leads to their manumission.⁸⁵

At a certain point, the robots begin a nonviolent uprising against the Just City, with the help of Sokrates and some of the children, and go on some kind of strike, not leaving their “feeding stations”.⁸⁶ At first, the masters resort to a rather cruel solution, “taking out the piece of them that makes decisions and replacing it”, which, in Pytheas/Apollo’s words amounts to “cutting out their minds”.⁸⁷ Finally, Sokrates calls on for a vote to free the workers and they are manumitted.⁸⁸ It is agreed that they will continue working, and this implies that the masters have to accept that they need to negotiate with them. But a debate follows on their new status in the city and on whether they will become citizens, finishing with the assurance that some of them want to learn as the children have.⁸⁹ At the end of the novel, Athene’s decision of making the robots disappear (except for Crocus and Sixty-One) forces masters and students to depend on their own work for the foreseeable future.⁹⁰ The next two parts of the trilogy show how the different communities emerged from the original Just City have dealt with fundamental maintenance tasks, some of them resorting to actual slavery.

84 Walton (2015), 48.

85 Walton (2015), 252–255, 301–305.

86 Walton (2015), 203–204.

87 Walton (2015), 205–206.

88 Walton (2015), 303–304.

89 Walton (2015), 307–316. There is also a debate on what consequences granting them personhood and manumit them would bring, since that would imply for the labour to be redistributed among all the members of the community: Walton (2015), 322–324.

90 Walton (2015), 362–364.

CONCLUSIONS: THE PROBLEMS OF UTOPIA

We live in passionately anti-utopian times. In late capitalist societies, where Margaret Thatcher's "There is no alternative" has become part of common sense and is deeply ingrained in the ways politics is understood, utopia has bad press.⁹¹ Capitalist realism has cancelled the future. It seems impossible for the late twentieth and early twenty first century societies to imagine worlds in which the attempts of reaching a fairer, more democratic, and redistributive political systems do not lead us to some kind of extremely authoritarian regime that worsens the current state of affairs. The prevailing view in a good number of speculative science-fiction works from the last sixty years is that it is better to stay as we are now, with dystopia acting as an effective legitimation of the current order.⁹²

Walton's thought-provoking *The Just City* certainly presents a number of criticisms to the way Athene and the masters have organized their own version of a work that could be framed as a utopian proposal: Plato's *Republic*.⁹³ It encourages the reader to critically think, using philosophical teachings, about real, daily life problems. In the final chapter of the novel, we witness a formidable debate among Sokrates and Athene, nonetheless. With the help of some of the masters, former children and robots, Sokrates unveils the numerous contradictions of the Just City and the unhappiness they have provoked, finally blurting out that, as a goddess, she should know better than mortals but "you choose to take our lives and meddle to amuse yourself, doing what you please with them, against our will and in ignorance of whether the outcome is good or evil".⁹⁴

⁹¹ Martorell Campos (2019), 11–13.

⁹² For a thorough study of the reasons that explain this process, see Martorell Campos (2021), 105–192; see also Martínez (2020), 121–142. Martorell Campos has also researched the recent peak of dystopia in relation with the gradual decline of utopia in fiction in Martorell Campos (2019). A prominent exception to that trend are the works of Ursula K. Le Guin, which feature numerous debates on the possibilities of utopian organizations, sometimes based in mutual aid, such as *The Dispossessed: an Ambiguous Utopia* (1974).

⁹³ See, for example, Apollo's criticism of the almost dystopian way in which the match-making and upbringing arrangements of the City were working: Walton (2015), 229. See also Walton (2015), 248, for the suffering that the separation of the new-born children from their mothers in the interest of overcoming personal bonds causes in the community.

⁹⁴ Walton (2015), 362. Apollo reflects frivolously on this same topic earlier in the story, in Walton (2015), 123: "What was interesting was seeing how much of it could work, how much it really would maximize justice, and how it was going to fail". The god also notes the corrup-

The philosopher directly accuses her of not letting the children to consciously choose their destiny and criticizes the Chamber's will to ignore the injustice and malfunctioning of the matches during the festivals of Hera as well as the free will and intelligence of the robots; the way personal relations and the breeding practices are handled; the fact that Athene decided to set the Just City in an isolated place (unlike Plato's *Republic*) that will eventually be destroyed and can therefore not affect any other group of human being.⁹⁵ Athene takes her inspiration from the island of Atlantis to set her project in a non-location (literally *u-topia*, no place),⁹⁶ whose basic ideals are unrealisable, making even a utopia that attempts to achieve equality of the sexes doomed to failure. The utopia, unfortunately, becomes a dystopia from its initial basis. Even when at the beginning of the play, Apollo converses with Athena and states that the basis of the city that will be created is:

The Good with capital letters, the Truth, the one unchanging Excellence that stays the same forever. Once that's established, the system goes on the same in ideal stasis for as long as it can continue to do so, with everyone agreeing on what is Good, what is Virtue, what is Justice, and what is Excellence. For the first time in the En-

tion of the masters, who really only wanted for somebody else to make it work "and for them to have been born there. The masters were always envious of the children".

95 Walton (2015), 96: "It may already have gone there, in the far future that they won't tell us about. But we've been deliberately brought into a sterile back-water of history where nothing we do can achieve anything". See also Walton (2015), 356, on how Plato's plan is changed to Athene's taste.

96 The relationship between myth and the creation of a city is referred by mentioning Rome, Walton (2015), 116: "In his time, Rome had been no more than a little village, founded by Romulus and Remus only a few centuries before, unheard-of away from Italy. Then Rome had grown great and spread civilization over the world, so that even when she fell, her language had preserved it in human minds, so that now – except that now in this moment Rome did not even exist. Aeneas, if he had even been born, had not yet sailed from Troy. It's like looking through the wrong end of a telescope". Athene's utopian Just City is framed almost as a scientific experiment, set in an untraceable place, reminding us of Plato's handling of the myth of Atlantis in his *Timaeus* and *Critias*: see Walton (2015), 45. This also brings a nice parallelism with the fact that, unlike in the Platonic dialogues, the chronological setting of *The Just City* is not specified by its author. The Just City will only be remembered as the legend of an ideal society, because all material trace of it will be lost.

lightenment, they had the idea of progress, the idea that each generation will find its own truth, that things will keep on changing and getting better.⁹⁷

Furthermore, Sokrates also denounces the fact that the children are forbidden to read Plato's *Republic* until they are fifty years old⁹⁸ and therefore have no real say in the functioning of the city. Finally he wonders how it would be possible to conduct a Good Life (*eudamonia*) if divine intervention is continuously required.⁹⁹

Walton's election of a multitemporal set of characters allows her to discuss the main topics from very different points of view adjusted to the historical conditions of each character. In that sense, it is noteworthy that the most modern and progressive perspectives tend to be adopted by feminine characters, one of the most affected groups by the flaws of the Platonic utopia formulated by Athene. We have already seen the evident gender inequalities at work in the Just City, and thus the novel suggests that the Platonic theory would be inefficient when dealing with issues related to women, leaving only Diotima to talk about love and not considering in detail a series of important problems discussed in the novel, such as menstruation, the constant endeavour for pregnancy or the suggestion of separating the newborn babies from their families and preventing the formation of individual attachments as the only possible criticism to the notion of family and the only way of preventing factionalism.¹⁰⁰ Walton therefore poses a profound critique of some of the foundations on which the Platonic project rests, suggesting that a city inhabited only by the best invokes unsettling parallelisms and entails a set of conditions that would bring unhappiness to their inhabitants and make justice impossible. Again, these are issues that specifically (but not only) affect women and raise the question whether Plato really intended

⁹⁷ Walton (2015), 71. A recurring topic is the pursuit of excellence, as for example in Walton (2015), 142: "‘That brings us back to what is best,’ Sokrates said. ‘The pursuit of excellence, as Pytheas said just now. When we first came here, Ficino said that he wanted each of us to become our best self,’ I said. ‘That seems to me an admirable goal.’ ‘And that has been your constant pursuit since you were ten years old,’ Sokrates said”.

⁹⁸ This is also stated in Walton (2015), 102, 172, 341.

⁹⁹ Walton (2015), 347–362.

¹⁰⁰ Walton (2015), 352–353. On the separation of new-borns from their mothers, see also Walton (2015), 248.

to carry out the project of the *Republic* in practice, or whether he had not adequately considered essential gender-related details. What is certain is that Plato advocated gender equality in the intellectual realm, but he did not fully understand female experiences and vicissitudes.

Notwithstanding Walton's fine criticisms to the contradictions that would rise from the realisation of the Platonic *Politeia*,¹⁰¹ the critique she puts in the mouth of Sokrates, Simmea, Maia and other characters is not at all demobilizing.¹⁰² While the reaction of Athene, ultimate target of Sokrates' criticism, is initially devastating, it leads to a number of different projects of Good Life in the following books, some of which do not necessarily imply giving up all the ideals of the Just City, but some of the ways in which they had been implemented.

Walton's novel encourages the reader to think about the importance of understanding human nature, something feasible only by experiencing life as a human being, as Apollo tries to do. As the god finally understands, the key to a fair and good life would be to understand each other's needs, possibilities and limitations and to accept them without prejudice. Women and men being taught about their bodies and living egalitarian relations is one important aspect, sentient robots becoming free and accepted members of the just society, another. The gods, particularly Athene, find difficult to understand human nature with its unending possibilities, contradictions and manifold shortcomings. A hyper-rational approach, as the one represented by Athene, will thereby not necessarily lead to success because it misses radical parts of what it means to be human: feelings, empathy, and irrationality. The novel leads to a clear moral: it seems more promising to follow Apollo's way of becoming human and subsequently also suffer for some time to develop a sense of empathy and compassion which again leads to

101 In which there is an implicit criticism to many of the structures of the society in which the *Republic* was produced, such as slavery or the so-called "noble lie" upon which the metal division of the citizens is built in the Platonic dialogue (Plat. Rep. 3.414e–415d): "The difficult thing is deciding who's iron and who's bronze, when Plato gives no guidelines there at all," Kreusa said. "And it's hard to assess exactly what work each child has an aptitude for and ought to be trained for. Not to mention what work we need done. And who can train them for it?" (Walton (2015), 150–151).

102 In this sense, Sokrates aims at improving the City even if it implies dismantling it: "You don't believe rhetoric could harm the city?" Sokrates asked. "If rhetoric could harm it then it isn't the Just City and it deserves it," she said" (Walton (2015), 127).

forgiveness and the opportunity to learn and become better.¹⁰³ This could also be a way for the gods to improve and reach real justice, only if they are willing to become more human in the process. In that sense, some of Pytheas/Apollo's last thoughts on the Delphic maxim ("Know Thyself") are especially treasurable and they will be returned upon in the following novels:

Be aware that other people have equal significance. Give them the space to make their own choices, and let their choices count as you want them to let your choices count. Remember that excellence has no stopping point and keep on pursuing it. Make art that can last and that says something nobody else can say. Live the best life you can, and become the best self you can. You cannot know which of your actions is the lever that will move worlds. Not even Necessity knows all ends.¹⁰⁴

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103 In fact, Apollo's main learnings in the story come from experiencing life as a human and from contact with another human being, Simmea (and also with Sokrates): see Walton (2015), 63–66 and especially 226–234 for his thoughts on the nature of *agape*.

104 Walton (2015), 364. A nice reminiscence of the myth of Er at the end of Plat. *Rep.* 10.614a–621b, in which Necessity is present but it is not a determining factor on the human decision-making.

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Ovid at Cair Paravel: Periodization and the Ages of Man in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*

Abstract Unlike many fantasy series, the *Chronicles of Narnia* have an explicit beginning, middle, and an end – a chronology. A mainstay of children's literature since their publication in the 1950s, the *Chronicles* have received a great deal of scholarly attention, but most of it directed to Christian allegorical themes. The way that Lewis composed his novels out of order, or the strategies with which he shaped the reader's expectations by doing interesting things with time, has gone largely unnoticed. Yet, in recent years scholarly approaches to the *Chronicles* have expanded to consider questions of mythology, cosmology, environmentalism, ideology, and even politics. This paper adds to that expansion by turning to the classical elements in the *Chronicles*. By examining the ways in which C. S. Lewis uses narrative techniques borrowed from Ovid's periodization in the *Metamorphoses*, this paper argues that Ovid was Lewis's main source of inspiration for devising a chronology for Narnia, and moreover, that we should not be surprised to find such a presence in Lewis's work. Although mostly remembered as a medievalist, Lewis wrote with a dizzying array of inspiration and influences, and to underplay his classical training is to obfuscate the subtlety in his compositional technique.

Keywords Chronology, classical reception, *Metamorphoses*, Narnia, periodization

INTRODUCTION

‘In the last days of Narnia, far up to the west beyond Lantern Waste and close beside the great waterfall, there lived an Ape.’ So begins the first chapter of *The Last Battle*, the final novel in C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. The next chapter echoes that end-of-days sentiment: ‘About three weeks later the last of the Kings of Narnia sat under the great oak...’ This ominously repeated emphasis on ‘last’ is suggestive of impending apocalypse and the end of Narnia as the reader knows it and has consistently been read as evoking – and indeed borrowing from – *Revelation*. Such a reading is aligned with the vast amount of scholarship on Lewis’s Christian faith and its presence in his work. And although the purely allegorical reading of Aslan as Christ¹ and the *Chronicles* as reworkings of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Apocalypse² has given way to more nuanced understandings of Lewis’s materials and the subtle ways in which the author engaged his faith to make the reader act upon the ‘political implications’ of the story³, the reading of Narnia as Christian allegory remains persistent until this day.⁴ It is perhaps because of that persistent lens that we fail to investigate how Lewis treats time in Narnia, how that ‘last’ is meant to function: the convincing Christian elements blind us to other alternatives.⁵ But upon closer inspection, the division of time in Narnia – the elements that give it a chronology – follows not Biblical but classical precedents. In fact, the division of Narnian time draws from a surprising classical source: the Ages of Man in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In this paper, I examine how Lewis used Ovid’s approaches as a literary strategy for showing a change in time and to establish a chronology for his world. In Narnia, themes present in Ovid’s periodization become vehicles for positioning reader and character in a world that is still the same yet also different because time has passed from novel to novel. Although Lewis does not *periodize* like Ovid

1 Wood (2003) 329.

2 Attebery (1980) 9.

3 Glasner (2014) 54–55 underscores the author’s motivation to promote certain themes that function as a ‘Christian call.’ This is likely the reason for public criticism of Lewis’s ‘Christian propaganda’ in the *Chronicles*: see e.g. Wolfe (2010) 174. Interestingly, Lewis himself argued that Narnia did not ‘represent’ anything: *Letters* 44–45.

4 Ravikumar et al (2018) 266 even call this ‘recycling’ the story of Creation.

5 In general, allegorical readings seem to focus mostly on the New Testament but Walls (2017) suggests that Lewis is more indebted to the Old Testament than what most scholars see.

does – Narnia only has one named age – he borrows subtly and effectively from the strategies the poet uses to demarcate between separate ages, and he does so because the passing of time is central to how the reader understands Narnia as a living world. Importantly, when viewed in order of composition, the *Chronicles* suggest that Lewis applied this strategy gradually, implementing more of Ovid’s periodization as his world gained a beginning, a middle, and an end – a chronology. Consequently, periodization in Narnia underscores Lewis’s competence in classical literature and offers an alternative to the canonical reading of Narnia as purely Christian allegory.

ALTERNATIVES TO ALLEGORY

To date, there is no published study of how Lewis intentionally draws on existing source material to describe the passing of time or how the concept of periodization operates within the *Chronicles*. This may be explained through subconscious cross-contamination: the obvious parallels between Aslan and Christ make us interpret the *Chronicles* as a Biblical journey through time from *Genesis* to *Revelation*: one Christian theme infers the existence of another. One may also suspect the genre Lewis wrote in – mythologized fantasy for children – for not inviting consideration of layered complexity in the author’s process. Yet, the *Chronicles* are not just for children, and books for children are not separate from the mind of the adults who wrote them. To Maurice, books for children involve ‘by definition an element of ideology’ – the presence of the adult author.⁶ And as Beckett demonstrates, the *Chronicles* are better understood as crossover literature, written for *all* readers, and Lewis himself argued that a children’s story that is only enjoyed by children is not a good story.⁷ And within this crossover space, scholars are gradually discovering room for alternative readings of Lewis’s work that neither compromise the Christian allegorical reading nor stop at accepting those readings as the sole mode of explanation. Manlove, for example, suggests that while Lewis wrote ‘mythopoeia within a resonant literary and Biblical tradition’ and the story of Christ clearly informed *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Narnia books are best understood as ‘a remarkable mix-

6 Maurice (2015) 4.

7 Beckett 2009; *On Stories* 45–65.

ture of literary influences' ranging from Milton and Spenser to H. C. Andersen and Beatrix Potter.⁸ Other scholars have uncovered elements of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Lewis's work whose long academic career was devoted to medieval and renaissance literature.⁹ These underpinnings have been explored at length by Ward, who convincingly argues that the *Chronicles* are modeled on a medieval cosmological tradition, each Narnia novel mapping onto a planet with its associated mythological themes.¹⁰ Ward's argument seems to have opened the door for new interpretations of Narnia, even among scholars who accept the allegorical reading. Chapman, for example, maintains that the division of books roughly follows a *conception* of the Christian narrative but is convinced by Ward's cosmological reading.¹¹ In other words, there are other ideologies and mythologies at work in Lewis's world that coexist with Christian elements.¹² To that end, scholars now assess Lewis's academic training as a medievalist and its echoes in his work.¹³ But the rich literary tradition with which Lewis wrote also included a classical presence. Recently, Slater has examined elements of classical myth in Narnia which function as 'classical memories' that playfully bubble up here and there without necessarily following the story patterns from their original contexts.¹⁴ In *Prince Caspian*, for example, Bacchus steps straight out of Roman mythology.¹⁵ Slater's concept of 'memory' is important because it underscores that Lewis wrote with a repertoire of influences and themes but also that he may not always have made a conscious decision to borrow specific content from his sources. Crucially, this subconscious reading invites consideration of Lewis's creative process because the strategies he implemented while writing might illuminate how deeply he had internalized certain myths, themes, or con-

8 Manlove (1993) 6.

9 Daigle-Williamson (2015) 157.

10 Ward (2008).

11 Chapman (2012) 13 n 3. Burton (2020) 358 also accepts this reading.

12 See for example Dickerson and O'Hara (2009) who takes an environmental approach to the *Chronicles*.

13 Niedbala (2006) reads *The Silver Chair* as the *Odyssey*, and Montgomery (2000) also suggests that it has Homeric elements.

14 Slater (2015) 171. Edwards (2010) 66 agrees that Greek and Roman myths exist in Narnia although 'they are seldom harvested.'

15 *PC* 159–160.

cepts. Although none of these scholars look at the concept of periodization, their interpretations illuminate the possibilities of discovering deeper complexity and additional modes in Lewis's work. And crucially, their work establishes that the presence of allegorical elements does not mean that Lewis cannot also periodize in ways that he learned from Ovid or that he cannot draw from his wealth of knowledge of classical and medieval literature while composing his work as a Christian. In fact, I posit that Lewis not only operated on several levels at once – Christian allegory, medieval cosmology, classical mythology – but that he drew with finesse on his detailed understanding of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text that has had unparalleled presence yet little acknowledgment in the retelling of classical myth for children.¹⁶ Although this paper focuses on Ovid in the *Chronicles*, understanding his presence in Lewis's work, no matter how subconscious Lewis's use of his work, may provide a first step toward acknowledging the Roman poet's influence on children's fantasy at large.

OID AND THE AGES OF MAN

Periodization, although a concept for a modern historian to describe historical structures in the past, is not a modern invention.¹⁷ In fact, when Ovid wrote his *Metamorphoses* and divided mythical time into discrete, titled ages, he was not inventing a new way of thinking about the past. Already in the first century BCE the Romans were making use of a wide range of criteria and concepts to divide the past into periods.¹⁸ For Ovid, the core concept that sits at the center of his epic is metamorphosis, transformation. Although most research on the *Metamorphoses* focus on fantastical changes and transfigurations in the pursuit of love, Kennedy suggests that this concept can 'serve to organize the way we

16 Crucially, all these elements – cosmology, mythology, periodization, a medieval *Nachleben* – are wrapped up in Ovid's work. On Ovid's reception in the Middle Ages, see e.g. Dimmick (2002).

17 For an introduction to how the Romans conceived of the past, see Flower (2010). Rosen (2004) emphasizes how varied the approaches were with which ancient cultures addressed the concept of time.

18 Hay (2019) 233.

think about history.’¹⁹ Through transformation, we see the passing of time, event following event, the present becoming the past: transformation and periodization, then, have similar utility as a narrative technique. No Roman historian would consider *Metamorphoses* actual history, of course, but the techniques and structures in the work suggest to the reader that we are ‘hearing the narrative of events’ the way we might approach history.²⁰ By ‘flattening out distinctions’ and ‘exaggerating differences’ between eras, Ovid employs periodization the way a historian would.²¹ Moreover, the poet combines chronological order with analogic order into a ‘vague and indefinite chronology’ which suggests that the work is intended to convey a temporal quality – a sequencing of eras.²² This is nowhere clearer than in the section commonly referred to as the Ages of Man.²³ Here, Ovid lays out the prehistoric phases of humanity, starting in a Golden Age of absolute purity and ending with doom in the Iron Age having passed through the Ages of Silver and Bronze. Each age is characterized by certain elements that did not exist in the previous age. For example, the Golden Age is described as an eternal spring – *ver erat aeternum*²⁴ –, but in the next age, seasons are introduced – *exegit quattuor annum*.²⁵ In fact, Ovid intentionally separates his ages from one another by emphasizing their differences and lack of continuity: nothing that existed in one age will continue unchanged into the next. In the Silver Age, cattle have been domesticated and are used to plow the fields – *pressique iugo gemuere iuveni*²⁶ – but in the Iron Age, those gifts of agriculture are not enough; instead, man extracts baneful metals from the earth – *nocens ferrum ferroque nocentius aurum prodierat* – leading to war and crime.²⁷ Ovid, then, periodizes by first characterizing an age and then exaggerating its differences. Never subtle in

19 Kennedy (2002) 231. Michelakis agrees that periodization ‘shapes *perception of change*’ (my italics) which is useful to control the passage of time (2008) 219.

20 Rosati (2002) 271.

21 Hay (2019) 216.

22 Rosati (2002) 277–278.

23 Ov. met 1, 90–150.

24 Ov. met 1, 107.

25 Ov. met 1, 118.

26 Ov. met 1, 124.

27 Ov. met 1,141–142.

their differences, these characteristics function as temporal walls or bookends, neatly terminating one age for the emergence of the next. These discrete walls infer that not one element can go unchanged from one age to the next: there is either newness or decline because Ovid shows the passing of time through change. In the Golden Age, man lives in harmony with the natural environment, but in the following age, trees are felled to build houses, animals are tamed, the earth is tilled: that harmonious relationship between man and nature no longer exists which signals to the reader that time must have passed because the world is changed. Crucially, this ‘temporal signaling’ makes an age immediately identifiable as there can be no mistaking it for another era. Moreover, as a narrative technique, periodization enables Ovid to influence his reader’s understanding of the past: so different from the reader’s contemporary experiences, those long-lost ages require scaffolding to make sense as human prehistory. In other words, by treating the mythological origins of man as vaguely temporal – eras marked by identifiable differences – Ovid makes them more believable as history. And it is that explicit intended outcome for the reader, periodization generating a sense of history, that Lewis needs in the *Chronicles*. Importantly, in the Ages of Man, periodization has a retrospective quality: Ovid describes a time that is so distant from contemporary Rome that it is shrouded in mystery. This retrospective approach to history in part what makes Ovid’s strategies so useful for a storyteller who, in a sense, is writing about something that is already over – stories set in an unfamiliar past.

THE PASSING OF TIME: CHANGE IN NARNIA

Narnia, of course, has only one explicitly named age: the Golden Age when the Pevensie children ruled at Cair Paravel, and it would be a mistake to seek direct comparisons between Ovid’s eras and Lewis’s treatment of time. Lewis, after all, does not technically periodize. Yet, the core approach to *change* in Ovid’s periodization – the discontinuity of something old and the invention of something new, a *transformation* – echoes through Lewis’s work. Because the passing of time is central to the relationship between reader and story, the methods with which Ovid periodizes become narrative strategies for how Lewis shows his reader that the Narnia they have just arrived in is not the exact same world that they experienced in the previous novel. But how? Importantly, although some of the *Chronicles* have a narrator who directly or indirectly addresses the reader,

that narrator never addresses the passing of time: only occasionally are we told which time period the novel is set in, and in those cases, only two eras are mentioned, the Golden Age under Pevensie rule and Narnia's 'last' days.²⁸ Instead, the passing of time is always placed within the reader's own experience of the text. Lewis achieves this by destabilizing the reader in several ways, but it is always through the characters who *experience* the change.

Lewis's most immediate and most obvious approach is to use setting. By always shifting the location the characters arrive to, and by establishing a clear visual difference between the two locations, Lewis suggests to his reader that they are in a time different to what they experienced in the previous novel. Notably, the 'coming and going' between novels never happens in the same place although it can be repeated within the same novel.²⁹ In *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace leaves Narnia at the edge of the world, but in *The Silver Chair*, he arrives to the quay of Cair Paravel, a place he has never been before, and in *The Last Battle*, he arrives in the ancient forest of Lantern Waste far away from Ettinsmoor. The Pevensie children leave Narnia through the wardrobe in the Lantern Waste at the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, but they arrive in an unfamiliar, dense forest by a sandy beach in *Prince Caspian*. The arrival place both *is* different and *feels* different. The shifted setting immediately destabilizes the reader: although we know that we are in Narnia, we are not in the *same* Narnia that we just experienced in the previous novel. But the shift in setting to denote the passing of time extends beyond the location of initial arrival. Not two novels are set in the same location within Narnia: when Edmund and Lucy return in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, they do not even set foot in mainland Narnia as Lewis sets the entire novel in the Lone Islands. Eustace spends his entire first visit to Narnia at sea but in *The Silver Chair*, explores the northern moors on foot. Moreover, even when the characters revisit previously known locations, those places are experienced differently. The Stone Table, for example, the setting for Aslan's sacrifice in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and a place of intense trauma and grief for Lucy and Susan, is described in *Prince Caspian* as an ancient, broken thing,

28 The narrator indicates that *The Horse and His Boy* is set in the Golden Age and mentions the at-that-point-distant era in SC 47: 'But I haven't the time to tell it now, though it is well worth hearing.'

29 The most obvious example is the wardrobe that both Lucy and Eustace use to enter Narnia before the four Pevensie children enter Narnia together in *LWW*. Each time, the wardrobe places them in the same snowy forest. See Jenkins (2003) for how Lewis uproots the coming-and-going in *The Last Battle* by turning literal readings into allegory.

‘too magic a thing for any common use’, but without any emotional resonance: all it holds is immeasurable age.³⁰ This intentional shift in setting closely mimics Ovid’s use of place to show a shift: in the Silver Age, man tills the earth but in the Iron Age, he sails the seas, having left the fields behind.

But setting itself is not a sufficient vehicle to tell the reader that time has passed. Lewis also employs a variety of creatures to suggest change. In a sense, the Narnian creatures become reminders of a world having changed: there are no badgers in *The Silver Chair*, but at an earlier time in Narnian history – *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian* – they played an important role for the plot. Similarly, a marsh-wiggle takes center stage in *The Silver Chair*, a creature mentioned in no other novel and it is unclear if the creature even existed in earlier periods. And although many Narnian creatures exist and indeed get reused throughout the *Chronicles* – most notably centaurs, Dwarfs, and dryads – they are most often bystanders and not part of the plot. For the reader, the outcome is immediately felt: the Narnia of fauns living in comfortable caves in the forest or beavers in cozy dens has become a Narnia where marsh-wiggles, like humans, build huts and live in bleak villages. Society has changed because time has passed, and the world is different – a technique straight out of Ovid’s playbook.

And yet, sometimes changing the setting and placing different Narnian creatures at the center of the plot is not sufficiently impactful to show the passing of time, or at least not sufficiently specific in determining *how much* time has passed. In those cases, Lewis uses ruins. The most obvious example is Cair Paravel which in *Prince Caspian* has fallen into such a ruinous state that not even the Pevensie children whose home it was for most of their Narnian lives recognize the castle for what it is. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the castle is described as a massive, wonderful place with an ivory roof, visible from far away, but in *Prince Caspian*, it is so overgrown with trees that the building itself is not even recognizable as architecture at first glance, and it takes the Pevensie children several hours to recognize where they are. Notably, not until they overcome their confusion about the ruins can they accept that they are in Narnia. Moreover, ruins also play an important role in creating a retrospective. In *The Silver Chair*, ruins are central to Jill and Eustace’s quest to find Prince Rilian, and Lewis intentionally makes their age a point of confusion. The ruinous city south of Harfang is so old, its origins so obscure, that even Prince Rilian – an educated

30 PC 95.

Narnian – misreads them. Jill and Eustace read UNDER ME, thinking that the ruins cover an entrance to a lost underground city, but Rilian refutes this, instead suggesting that the inscription is an ancient epitaph to a king buried long ago.³¹ Importantly, Rilian's alternative interpretation underscores that so much time has passed that it is reasonable to both accept that all meaning has been lost and that things can become so ruinous that they are no longer recognizable for what they once were. In other words, ruins function as a deliberate shorthand to tell the reader that Narnia has aged – and in the case of *The Silver Chair*, is now an old country with an almost mythical prehistory.

In this shift of setting to denote the passing of time, Lewis often lets his characters experience a prolonged moment of confusion, thereby destabilizing the reader's expectations. For example, when arriving to the sunny beach in *Prince Caspian*, the Pevensie children *hope* they are in Narnia, but see nothing in their surroundings that supports this hope. Everything they see confuses rather than clarifies: the beach is empty, there is no sign of life, and there are no recognizable cues to where they are. Even when they find the ruins and begin to interpret the architectural layout of the former castle, they remain uncertain of their whereabouts until they find unmistakable evidence that they are at Cair Paravel: a little chess-knight of gold that they had played with when kings and queens of Narnia. And even then, the passing of time seems so monumental, so unbelievable, that Edmund has a hard time accepting it.³² Since they experienced time 'normally' when they were last in Narnia and so much Narnian time seems to have passed in a single lived year, Edmund's confusion will not quite let go of him. He is only convinced once the evidence is irrefutable – in this case, the children discovering their own belongings in the treasury behind the throne room. In other words, because the transformation is so complete, and because there is no continuity of anything Edmund had experienced when he was last there, he cannot overcome his doubt and accept that this is Narnia. This kind of confusion plays a similarly destabilizing role in *The Silver Chair* when Eustace arrives. Never having been to mainland Narnia, the quay at Cair Paravel is unfamiliar to him, but more importantly, so is the aging king embarking on a sea voyage. Confused by what he sees, Eustace refuses to believe this to be King Caspian whom he knows to be a young man, and therefore rejects Jill's sugges-

31 SC 153.

32 PC 20.

tion – and thereby Aslan’s signs – that he immediately approach the king.³³ And just like Edmund, Eustace refuses to let go of his doubt until presented with irrefutable evidence. By employing confusion this way, Lewis very directly indicates that time passes differently in Narnia and effectively tampers the reader’s expectations: the book they are about to read will not be set on the same ‘stage’ as the previous novel. Since the characters who have been to Narnia before are confused about what they encounter, the reader cannot expect repetition. This confusion has practical outcomes for Lewis’s storytelling. By focusing on how the characters react to the passing of time and to a past they have or have not experienced, he can avoid necessary parallels between Narnia and England, and is also at liberty to tell a dramatically different story to the previous one.

But Lewis shows us the passing of time not only through his characters’ confusion to evidence thereof. He also centers the passing of time in how his characters *relate* to it. In fact, when Lewis wants to show that time has passed, he employs a Roman tactic by making characters react with skepticism. This approach to history – characters doubting what they see or what they are being told about events that seem mythical or impossibly distant – follows Roman precedents. Hay, for example, suggests an expressed increase in skepticism in the 1st century BCE (contemporary with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*): mythological aspects of the past simply could not be considered to have happened.³⁴ Interestingly, the more skepticism you express toward the past, the further distanced that past becomes. In a sense, Lewis’s characters react with skepticism because they cannot see through the ‘wall’ Lewis has erected between the time they live in and the time that is being referenced: the 1st-century-BCE Roman saw no evidence of a time before the republic, and in Ovid’s degenerate Iron Age, there was no evidence of the purity of the long-lost Golden Age. Skepticism toward the past becomes a reasonable response because the past shares no elements with the present. Edmund’s confusion is reasonably tinged with skepticism: the ruinous structure just *cannot be* glorious Cair Paravel. Similarly, the Witch in *The Silver Chair* challenges the children and Rilian that Narnia ever existed: taking control of their expectations, she deprives them of the setting that is familiar to them and thereby makes them doubt. Occasionally, skepticism and doubt even tip over into denial. In *Prince Caspian*, King Miraz chides Caspian for his curiosity about the distant past: ‘There never were those Kings and Queens... And

33 SC 36.

34 Hay (2019) 224 looks especially at Scipio in Cicero’s *de Re Republica*.

there's no such thing as Aslan. And there are no such things as lions. And there was never a time when animals could talk. Do you hear?'³⁵ Miraz thus rejects the existence of Narnia's Golden Age and simultaneously denies that Narnia has changed. In doing so, he makes Narnia atemporal which in turn justifies his reign: if there is no prehistory and no time before the present, then Telmarines never harmed anyone when conquering Narnia. A similar denial occurs in *The Last Battle* when the Dwarfs outright reject Aslan's existence: if there was no Aslan before, there is no reason to follow him now and the Dwarfs can control their own fate.³⁶

And yet, the passing of time is not only confusing. It is also an element of what makes Narnia Narnia and not England. Some characters are simply curious about how time in England maps onto time in Narnia, but they tend to arrive at the same superficial conclusion: time just does not work the same way in Narnia. For example, Jill and Eustace spend a week in England but only a moment passes for Tirian in Narnia: this discrepancy is met with immediate acceptance.³⁷ Similarly, when the Pevensie children first return to Narnia they experience shock at how much time has passed since they ruled at Cair Paravel, but when Edmund and Lucy return the following year, they are unsurprised when King Caspian tells them that three years have passed. 'Time talk' becomes a commentary on difference rather than the characters trying to make sense of how much time has passed or indeed *how* time passes. In *The Last Battle*, Eustace does not even react to finding out that two hundred years have passed since Prince Rilian died: this is just how time behaves in Narnia.³⁸ But notably, Lewis was aware that the time difference could confuse the reader more than necessary: thus, in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* he explains that 'Narnian time flows differently from ours.'³⁹ And in *Prince Caspian*, Lewis lets Peter speculate that their return to Narnia is as if they were 'Crusaders or Anglo-Saxons or Ancient Britons or something coming back to modern England!'⁴⁰ Importantly, the characters are never dissatisfied with their conclusions: they never seek out information about what specific

35 PC 44.

36 LB 83.

37 LB 54.

38 LB 57.

39 VDT 11.

40 PC 32.

events they have ‘missed’, the eras that have passed. All that matters is that time has passed but they are still in Narnia. And if the characters accept this passing of time, so must the reader.

So far, Ovid is only somewhat visible in Lewis’s approach to time. In fact, the themes Lewis employs – destabilizing his reader by showing a shift in setting, employing confusion, and having his characters respond to the past with varying degrees of skepticism – look like practical solutions to an unusual storytelling problem for an author who is finding himself writing what amounts to history, albeit fictional. And yet, when viewing the *Chronicles* in order of their composition, a crucial element emerges: Lewis’s gradual employment of foreshadowing and temporal signaling that draw subtly on the way that Ovid differentiates between his Ages. In fact, it is only when assessed in the order of composition that the *Chronicles* illuminate the extent with which Lewis shaped Narnia’s chronology drawing on Ovid’s narrative techniques.

COMPOSING WITH OVID: ESTABLISHING A CHRONOLOGY

Famously, Lewis stated that every book began with a picture in his mind’s eye: a faun standing in a snowy forest, arms full of parcels, an umbrella in tow.⁴¹ When writing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis did not know that there would be another six books, let alone another one, nor did he know that there would be an immediate successor to *Prince Caspian* whose subtitle was *The Return to Narnia*. But once he started writing, the stories followed, although their order of composition neither map onto the order of publication nor onto the temporal arc of Narnia. In fact, Lewis composed the *Chronicles* in bursts with writing and publication sometimes overlapping, and the temporal bookends – Narnia’s birth in *The Magician’s Nephew* and its demise in *The Last Battle* – were completed and published last, although their writing overlapped.⁴² Ford divides the *Chronicles* into four compositional periods. First, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was completed in 1948–1949 although Lewis began it as early as 1939. Next, *Prince Caspian* and *the Dawn Treader* were composed (mid-1949 to early 1950), immediately followed by *The Horse and His Boy* (begun and

41 *Other Worlds* 42. See also Jacobs (2010) 266.

42 Ford (2005) 15–22; *Letters* 68–69.

finished in 1950) filling in the backstory to the first two works, Finally, *The Silver Chair* (begun late 1950, finished early 1951), *The Magician's Nephew* (begun after *The Silver Chair's* completion but abandoned in late 1951 and not finished until early 1954), and *The Last Battle* (begun late 1952, completed mid-1953) were completed.⁴³ When Lewis returned to write Narnia into existence in *The Magician's Nephew*, then, he had written Narnia's end, and importantly, the publishers held off on *The Horse and His Boy*, chronologically set before *Prince Caspian*, so as to publish the three novels centered on Caspian in succession.⁴⁴

A few points will immediately become clear. First, Lewis had no initial thought of a Narnian chronology and therefore no conception of the passing of time – he just wanted to tell a story. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* starts in media res: an imperfect Narnia already exists, as if Ovid's Ages of Man had started with Silver instead of Gold. It is therefore not surprising that Narnia at first seems oddly atemporal: the eternal winter underscores only that the Witch is powerful and that the coming of the Pevensie children will provide release from evil. There is no suggestion of *how* Narnia came to be, only that there was something before Narnia: the Stone Table responds to magic that extends into the night before the first sunrise, and does so because it serves the plot. This explains why *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* contains idiosyncratic elements that occur nowhere else in the *Chronicles*: most notably, Adam and Eve and Father Christmas. If the world is atemporal and has no temporal scaffolding of its own, then Narnia can borrow elements from England. But already when composing *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis seems to have realized that his world needed a chronology to strengthen the historical quality of his storytelling, even if he had not yet conceived of what that chronology would entail. Therefore, Ramandu's daughter tells Caspian's party that the knife that killed Aslan will be kept on her father's island 'while the world lasts' – the first signal that Narnia will not last forever.⁴⁵ And crucially, by the time Lewis wrote *The Silver Chair* he had internalized a need for this temporal scaffolding because it had become clear to him that Narnia would one day end. Father Time, sleeping underground, serves no role in that book except for having been placed there so as to exist in *The Last*

⁴³ The *Chronicles* were published in the following order in the UK: *LWW* (1950), *PC* (1951), *VDT* (1952), *SC* (1953), *HHB* (1954), *MN* (1955), *LB* (1956).

⁴⁴ See Ford (2005) 464 for an illuminating timeline of Lewis's compositions.

⁴⁵ *VDT* 168.

Battle. And it is against this compositional background that Lewis's use of Ovid comes into focus.

Because periodization is characterization, Morris maintains that it 'constrains thoughts about the past but also enables it.'⁴⁶ This is precisely how Ovid becomes useful to Lewis. Because when we think of periodization as a means of organizing history, and of Ovid exaggerating differences between discrete ages to show the passing of time, Ovid's strategies become useful for creating a chronology: the constraints provide an opportunity for scaffolding, to emphasize the differences between eras to make them recognizable from one another. But interestingly, since much of Narnia was already in place when Lewis realized the need for a chronology, Ovid's approach could not be applied as is: Lewis could not start inventing ages because time was already in motion. For that reason, Lewis had to subvert Ovid's thinking. Instead of using periodization to make the reader think a certain way about a certain time in the past and to maintain a critical distance to it, Lewis uses Ovid's approaches to *foreshadow* – to create a connective thread through time. And since Lewis's composition is not sequential, sometimes that foreshadowing technique had to become retrospective: Lewis writing an idea into place in a later novel that will eventually be important in an earlier one. That is why Father Time is sleeping in *The Silver Chair*: his sleep foreshadows the awakening of Jadis in Charn before the birth of Narnia as well as his own awakening at Narnia's end.

But importantly, as Murrin points out, there is no change in Narnia.⁴⁷ All changes happen *between* the books, not during them, and each book occupies only a few weeks of Narnian time. For Lewis, this makes foreshadowing an important strategy. In fact, we might best understand this Ovidian reversal as Lewis creating temporal anchors between the novels, anchors that serve to constrain the reader's thoughts. When Lewis wrote *The Magician's Nephew*, he knew what Narnia's Long Winter looked like and how readers had responded to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In that first-published novel, readers had encountered cozy and recognizable elements of an England-like civilization: a library in Mr. Tumnus's cave, fireplaces, flagstone courtyards, even Turkish delight. They had done so in the presence of fantastical Talking Beasts: fauns, dryads, centaurs, and others, and in the setting of a wintry forest canopy. Those characterizations had defined Narnia and established the world to reader and characters alike. So,

⁴⁶ Morris (1977) 96.

⁴⁷ Murrin (1991) 248.

when composing *The Magician's Nephew*, set many generations before the atemporal Long Winter, Lewis had to emphasize the difference in characterization to underscore that time will have passed when the reader next encounters Narnia, that the reader is currently in an earlier era. To that end, in *The Magician's Nephew* Narnia is sunny and warm, the main Talking Beast is a horse, and no one attempts to create a built environment: the coronation takes place outdoors, under the sky.⁴⁸ Since Lewis knew where the reader would go next in the context of Narnian chronology, he could characterize Narnia in ways that made it visibly different to the 'next' Narnia. Because history, as Barkan says, 'is a series of skewed travels.'⁴⁹ In *Metamorphoses*, the travel is one-directional: we always move *forward* in time, from the older era to the younger, and the changes that demarcate the passing of time do so by transforming known entities – there is never a reversal. For example, the untouched trees in the Golden Age metamorphosize into boats in the Iron Age – never the reverse. Therefore, Lewis, composing his *Chronicles* out of chronological order, could take control of the reader's 'travel' through time by intentionally and deliberately showing differences between the Narnia he was composing and the Narnia he has already composed. By ascribing characteristics to the newborn Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew* that do not exist in the following novel, Lewis elegantly and effectively shows the passage of time through transformation – and so, Narnia gains a chronology.

Reader familiarity with known entities contributes substantively to the success of this technique. In *The Last Battle*, for example, Lewis's reader knows what the worlds of the earlier and middle novels were like, which allows Lewis to accelerate the passing of time by emphasizing change even more: the 'last of the Kings of Narnia' is familiar because the reader has encountered other Kings of Narnia. Because of this familiarity, *The Last Battle* can be made into a book-end, the last discrete age after which there is no other age: time will stop, and so will the *Chronicles*. In the same way, *The Magician's Nephew* can be made to set time in motion. In fact, in that novel Aslan's speech takes on a prophetic quality simply due to the events Lewis had already described in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: 'Evil will come of that evil, and it is still a long way off, and I will see to it that the worst falls upon myself. In the meantime, let us take such order that for many hundred years, yet this shall be a merry land in a merry world.'⁵⁰

48 MN 150.

49 Barkan (1986) 28.

50 MN 121.

The reader, familiar with Aslan's sacrifice at the Stone Table, will immediately understand this foreshadowing reference. Similarly, in *The Silver Chair* a Dwarf can say 'these Northern Witches always mean the same thing, but in every age they have a different plan for getting it' and at once both remind the reader of the White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which the reader has already read, and have primed the reader for eventually encountering Jadis in *The Magician's Nephew*.⁵¹

In fact, for Lewis, chronology becomes a question of connecting the various stories to one another in a reader-friendly way – of keeping Narnia Narnian while creating a temporal arc through the novels. Since the characters keep being confused about *when* they are but ultimately assured of *where* they are, the differences between a later or earlier time can be made to coexist with an unchangeable Narnian identity in the reader's mind. In fact, the element of character confusion helps place the reader in a new place on the Narnian timeline. So long as certain locations are referenced – Cair Paravel and the Stone Table – and some elements are maintained – Aslan and Talking Beasts – the reader, and the characters who experience them, can accept substantial changes caused by the passing of time, because those changes, too, have become part of Narnia's fabric. This explains why *The Horse and His Boy* (begun in the spring of 1950) opens by telling the reader that it is set during the Golden Age – not during the reign of King Caspian X who ruled in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (completed in the winter of 1950): chronologically it overlaps with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and in that overlap it departs from reader expectation of a new time. And compositionally, it butts up against a novel set a thousand years later, suggesting that Lewis felt the need to clarify to his reader that we have in fact 'traveled' backwards in time – we are not following a strict chronology from book to book.

Importantly, because of the reader's familiarity with an everchanging temporal fabric that still maintains a specific Narnian quality, by the time we get to *The Last Battle*, Lewis can unravel all those unique characteristics the reader needed for Narnia to remain Narnia: there is no need to maintain continuity for the sake of chronology when we are at the end. And that is why we see Dwarfs denying the existence of Aslan, Talking Beasts enslaving other beasts, Dryads having their trees felled, the murder of a centaur: all the known entities that make Narnia Narnia can be destroyed because we have come to the end of Narnia's chronological time – there will be no next novel, no more Narnia.

51 *SC* 227.

It is now clear that while Lewis had no conception of chronology when he first created Narnia, the element became a gradual concern as he wrote more of his world into being. To Lewis, to tell a good story well was to make it convincing, and for a fictional world to be convincing, it needs historic fabric. Just like Ovid, Lewis wrote ‘believable history’ as transformation, and to that end, he effectively borrowed strategies from the Roman poet.

LEWIS AND THE CLASSICS

Although we know him today mostly for his creative writing, in his lifetime Lewis never stopped being an academic and academically, he was first and foremost a medievalist. After decades of teaching English at Oxford, he held the newly founded chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalen College, Cambridge from 1954 until the end of his life. It is unsurprising that Boenig sees clear parallels between the Arthurian romance *The Quest for the Holy Grail* and *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: our knowledge of Lewis as a medievalist helps us identify medieval influences in his work.⁵² But the medieval period did not exist in isolation nor did Lewis’s teaching of medieval literature. Kramer argues that Lewis saw classical mythology and philosophy ‘as the primary influence on the medieval period’⁵³ and Edwards maintains that Lewis was an avid reader of Latin and Greek throughout his life.⁵⁴ But despite Lewis’s robust training in the classics – as a student at Oxford, he did Mods (Greek and Latin) in addition to English and received First Class in each – and despite the profound presence of classical antiquity in the British educational system Lewis grew up in, Lewis is rarely considered a classical scholar.⁵⁵ And it is true: he never held an academic position teaching Greek and Latin.

52 Boenig (2012) 80.

53 Kramer (2017) 155.

54 Edwards (2010) 58–71.

55 Montgomery (2000) 52. Maurice (2015) 9 demonstrates that classical studies were the ‘backbone’ of the British educational system. Hall (2008) underscores that this system was reserved for the elite but describes other ways in which people became familiar with the classics at this time.

But one does not have to abandon broader training to specialize in something specific, nor does one have to be an expert to write with inspiration. Slater, for example, argues that Lewis both thought and wrote with a wide range of influences accumulated through childhood and his undergraduate years – not only with the expertise gained through his academic career.⁵⁶ Moreover, classical influences need not be considered different to medieval ones nor necessarily that separate from Lewis's own life: in Montgomery's words, Lewis 'would not view that distant age as something foreign and discrete from our own experience.'⁵⁷ To Wood, there is an 'essential continuity' between things pagan and Christian that were central to how Lewis thought about the world.⁵⁸ And Lewis himself emphasized the importance of the classics on numerous occasions: 'I am no enemy of the classics... Hardly any lawful price would seem to me too high for what I have gained by being made to learn Latin and Greek. If any question of the value of classical studies were before us, you would find me on the extreme right.'⁵⁹ He even connected his training in the classics to his work as a medievalist: 'There are perhaps no source so necessary for a student of medieval literature to know as the Bible, Virgil, and Ovid.'⁶⁰ So, to avoid Lewis's classical training is to reduce Lewis to something that he was not, to omit something meaningful from our study of Lewis's work. Given the presence of classical thought in medieval literature, which Lewis taught, and Ovid's presence in the dissemination of classical myth for children, which Lewis was interested in, this omission seems particularly peculiar. How can we explain this reluctance toward examining the classical presence in the *Chronicles*?

56 Slater (2015) 171.

57 Montgomery (2000) 57.

58 Wood (2003) 333.

59 *Image* 8.

60 *Discarded Image* 22. Lewis repeats this sentiment in *Image* 9 in which he ranks Boethius, Ovid, and Virgil among 'the great Kings whose reign had begun before *Beowulf* was written and had not ended yet.' Notably, Plato, who is referenced several times in the *Chronicles*, is not among these 'great Kings.' For Plato in the *Chronicles*, see Johnson and Houtman (1986).

LEWIS, OVID, AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The culprit, I suggest, is the source Lewis drew so heavily from: Ovid himself. Because once you start looking for evidence of Ovid at Cair Paravel, you immediately find it. For example, Miles recently examined the transformative elements in Narnia – Eustace being transformed into a dragon – to argue that Lewis intentionally both drew on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for inspiration and subverted some of Ovid's most Ovidian themes to fit the Christian ethos with which he was composing. In Miles's reading, Lewis endows Ovid's amorous tales with a moral seriousness that was lacking in the original source.⁶¹ Huttar, too, suggests that the *Metamorphoses* are present in Narnia, and in a recent article, Boler elegantly demonstrates that Ovid's presence in *The Screwtape Letters* 'looms far greater' than Milton or any other medieval source.⁶² In fact, Ovid's presence in Lewis's work is no more difficult to ascertain than Christian allegory or the medieval cosmological elements analyzed by Ward, and I agree with Miles that it is surprising that scholars do not see it. Lewis's Narnia is sufficiently flexible that allegory, mythology, philosophy, ideology, and cosmology can coexist: it is not Lewis's composition that makes it difficult to understand his source material. Rather, I posit that this omission is best understood through Ovid's massive reuse in the retelling of classical mythology in 20th-century children's literature on the one hand and the near-silence about their Ovidian debt among the authors who reuse him on the other.

Despite Ovid having a varied and at times questionable reputation in the Middle Ages, he is everywhere present in modern literature, and no one overtly denies that presence.⁶³ Kennedy, for example, shows influences of the *Metamorphoses* on numerous authors ranging from T. S. Eliot to Ezra Pound.⁶⁴ The narrative techniques Ovid used are almost universally productive for a writer that seeks to write character-driven plot where the central characters undergo some kind of transformation, and the reflective qualities of his composition suggest to the reader that we are hearing the 'narrative of events' – a quality that makes a

61 Miles (2018).

62 Boler (2019) 22; Huttar (1977).

63 Dimmick (2002) 264 ff. Barchiesi (2002) underscores that it is Ovid's narrative techniques that make him so useful.

64 Kennedy (2002) 320 ff.

story believable.⁶⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that so many writers acknowledge their debt to Ovid.⁶⁶ Moreover, by expressing their connection to Ovid, writers place themselves in a millennia-long cultural context in which the *Metamorphoses* is the ever-present source from which we draw both knowledge of classical mythology and inspiration for transformative themes of love.⁶⁷

Yet, in the genre of children's fantasy, a genre that retells known myths explicitly for a young audience, Ovid is almost entirely omitted, and when he is acknowledged, it is in passing: Maurice interprets this as a reflection of negative attitudes toward Ovid as a source.⁶⁸ Robert believes that this tendency, although negative, is better understood as a writerly preference for privileging 'the idea of the folktale' over a classical text.⁶⁹ Both authors, however, agree that this omission is intentional. To Roberts, writers benefit from downplaying their debt to Ovid because it helps them present their myths as either Greek or universal. If Rick Riordan wants to remain an original author and provide a gateway to Greek mythology through his *Percy Jackson* series, he is not served by acknowledging that much of the transformative fabric of his novels derives from *Metamorphoses* – a Roman source. And if *The Magicians* is supposed to explicitly riff on Narnia which many scholars believe it is, Grossman has no reason to acknowledge Ovid.⁷⁰ Moreover, mythologizing authors may not be aware of how influenced they are by Ovid since some of their source materials have been anthologized, thereby separating the Roman poet from the myths that they are retelling.⁷¹ And if Attebery is correct that to modern writers, myth is 'ancient, anonymous, and traditional' it is not strange that nobody pursues their own ties to Ovid: in their view, it is not in the nature of myth to have an originator.⁷²

65 Rosati (2002) 271.

66 For example, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is prefaced by a quote from *Metamorphoses*.

67 Graf (2002) 108.

68 Maurice (2015) 13.

69 Roberts (2015) 235.

70 Kramer (2017).

71 Roberts (2015) 237.

72 Attebery (1980) 166.

This can be further explained by scholarly approaches to children's fantasy. Although always of interest to literary scholars, only in recent years has the genre garnered attention in the context of classical reception.⁷³ Lewis, because of the lasting success of *Narnia* and the *Chronicles* consistently being marketed for younger readers, has remained a steadfast presence in study of children's literature – but not in reception studies. And since 20th-century authors who themselves are engaged in classical reception by retelling classical myths for children do not acknowledge where their inspiration comes from, it is no longer strange that we cannot see Ovid at Cair Paravel. If we could, we might falsely conclude that the beloved *Chronicles* are no longer original, that Lewis is a borrower rather than a creator: he would no longer be one of the great inventors of children's fantasy, because he is using the same source material as everyone else. Yet, the opposite perspective has more promise. If we can instead see how competently Lewis uses Ovid's strategies and how effectively the poet's approaches can be adapted to a modern author's creative processes, we can both begin to restore Ovid's reputation as an intrinsic contributor to children's literature, and to appreciate the extraordinarily rich and varied repertoire with which one of the most admired authors of the 20th century wrote. Lewis may not have been a classicist, but his clever and subtle use of Ovid's techniques underscores the depths to which he had internalized the fabric of classical mythology – the fabric which helped him build the *Chronicles*.

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⁷³ Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018); Marciniak (2020); Marciniak (2016); Maurice (2015).

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Snatched from Spring

Persephone as a paradigm for young adult fantasy heroines

Abstract Although often making direct appearances in YA fantasy literature as actual characters, Hades and Persephone – and their myth – can also be used as a paradigm based on which authors develop their characters and plots. This type of reinterpretation is at the core of two recently published books in the aforementioned genre: *A court of mist and fury* (2016), by Sarah J. Maas; and *Midnight sun* (2020), by Stephenie Meyer. In both books, some of the main aspects of the myth as well as distinguishable attributes from the gods are used to structure the relationship between the main characters. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse how Maas and Meyer appropriated elements from the Greek myth to create their own innovative versions of the rape of Persephone, especially concerning the love relationship resulting from these retellings.

Keywords Young adult literature, The rape of Persephone, *Twilight* saga, *A court of thorns and roses* series

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of young adult (YA) books among readers is undeniable. Despite the difficulty faced by criticism to define the genre (something also shared by children's literature)¹, readers' love can be seen in every social media – with the astounding phenomenon of BookTok being especially noteworthy² – as well as in the overall financial healthiness of the market³.

Usually having teenagers as main characters and focusing on relevant issues for the life experience of these young people who are no longer children, but also not yet adults, it would be natural for young adult literature to favour realism. However, it can be argued that the fantasy branch of YA runs just as strong, with the global success of the *Harry Potter* series being its ultimate coronation⁴.

Regarding the presence of Greek and Roman tradition in YA literature, it is impossible not to mention the *Percy Jackson* series, by Rick Riordan, whose serialisation began in 2005 and is still running strong, with recent book launches and a TV series being produced. Whereas retellings of Greco-Roman myths have only recently become a trend in adult literature⁵, Riordan's series, focusing on characters who are either children or teenagers inserted in the Greco-Roman world in a very unique way, can be considered somewhat a trailblazer in this regard.

Retellings or uses of the Greco-Roman universe as the scenario for new adventures are not, however, the only ways of employing Greek myths in contemporary literature. For instance, Greek gods can be depicted as a form of paradigm for character development and worldbuilding. For the ends of this paper, we shall focus specifically on the case of Persephone and Hades, and the myth of the goddess's abduction.

1 Hunt (1996) 4.

2 See "TikTok is taking the book industry by storm, and retailers are taking notice". NBC News. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/tiktok-taking-book-industry-storm-retailers-are-taking-notice-n1272909>.

3 Campbell (2010) 33.

4 Campbell (2010) 13.

5 An earlier example is Madeline Miller's *The song of Achilles* (2011). However, it can be argued that myth retellings have only become truly popular in adult literature with *Circe* (2018), also by Miller. After its publication, a true profusion of titles, especially ones focusing on the female experience, have been published.

Although Hades and Persephone have directly appeared in YA fantasy literature as actual characters or as in more straightforward retellings of the abduction myth, they can also be used as a paradigm based on which authors develop their characters, plots, and world. A young and naïve girl, flowery landscapes, a mysterious man with darker powers are some of the myths' *topoi* often explored by modern authors in their imaginative, freely inspired retellings of Hades and Persephone's story. This type of reinterpretation is at the core of two recently published books in the YA fantasy literature genre: *A court of mist and fury* (2016), the second instalment in Sarah J. Maas' *A court of thorns and roses* series; and *Midnight sun* (2020), the most recent addition to Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga.

In both books, even though the characters are not Hades and Persephone *per se*, some of the main aspects of the myth as well as distinguishable attributes from the gods are employed to structure the relationship between the main characters. It is especially interesting – and therefore a main goal for this paper – to notice how those aspects are used to develop the romance between them, thus constructing the heroines of the novels as versions of a Persephone that falls in love with Hades and wants to be snatched from her comfortable spring and taken into a darker world.

To this end, this paper is divided in four other sections: the next one presents some considerations regarding the myth of the rape of Persephone, its ancient source and its place on the Greek imaginary; the following two sections will delve into the contemporary novels and their key scenes concerning Hades-Persephone elements; and finally the last section is dedicated to final remarks.

PERSEPHONE AND HADES IN ANCIENT GREECE

Our earliest source of the myth of Persephone's rape is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (HHD). Of unknown authorship, its composition dates around the 6th–7th centuries BCE and was likely composed for public recitation in the region of Attica⁶.

The HHD narrates the abduction of the goddess Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus, by Hades, as well as Demeter's relentless search for her, which

6 Richardson (1974) 5–12.

will end up taking the harvest goddess to the city of Eleusis and there found her Mysteries. Being the first literary attestation of the famous Eleusinian Mysteries, the HHD has commonly been interpreted by historians of ancient religion as a key to unlocking them, and consequently read in the search for information about what happened at the Telesterion temple⁷. The Mysteries, however, are one of Antiquities' best kept secrets, and since their aim was for the initiates to learn something about the afterlife, it was prohibited by law to speak of them. Only the ones who saw them could know, and so be a little more blessed in life, and in death, for knowing⁸.

Even though we do not know much about how the Mysteries were conducted, we do know the myth of Persephone's rape was at its core. With Persephone spending a part of her year in the underworld with her husband Hades, and the other at the surface with her mother Demeter, it only makes sense that she would be able to offer this privileged knowledge to her worshippers. The goddess abduction is also the centre of the action of the HHD.

Traditionally, the story has an etiological role, as a narrative that explains why there are moments when the earth flourishes and others when nothing grows from it. In the mythical logic, the feelings of the harvest goddess, Demeter, are responsible for this oscillation: when happy, accompanied by her daughter, Persephone⁹, the earth flourishes and is favourable to men; however, Demeter is saddened when separated from Persephone, and this reflects on the earth, which withers and remains infertile until the cycle begins again. To Burkert¹⁰, the myth should be understood as follows: Persephone is the grain that must descend to the earth in winter – mimicking the Greek practice of keeping containers with seeds underground during Winter – so that a new crop can grow; and return to the upper world when the grain blooms in Spring. It is, therefore, a myth that deals with life and death. Persephone's upward and downward movement causes something living to be taken to death, and something of death to life.

7 Clay (2006) 203.

8 By the end of the HHD (480–2), we are told, “Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiate and who has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom” (translation by Evelyn-White 1914).

9 Or Kore, if we consider that Demeter never calls Persephone by this name in the entire HHD, referring to her only as “her daughter” (Carvalho 2019, 70).

10 Burkert (1985) 160.

Although that is not exactly what is narrated in the HHD, as it can be argued that the seasons already existed in the world of the Hymn¹¹, the prominence of this life-death aspect remains. Persephone, as a daughter of both sky (Zeus) and earth (Demeter), marries the king of the underworld, and by moving through the spheres she shall be responsible for bringing some life to the world of the dead, and some death to the world of the living. She is a goddess who becomes dual in nature, showing different powers and significances when associated with the other two divine figures who are very important to her story.

Consequently, when associated with her mother Demeter, she is responsible for the earth's fertility, for the movement of seasons, and in the Mysteries she shall reveal some of the secrets of death to the lucky initiates.

But what about Hades? What does he represent in this myth? By abducting Persephone, is he taking her to marriage or to death? In a way, both possibilities are correct. To understand this dichotomy, we should have in mind what marriage meant for girls in Ancient Greece. The *parthénoi*, the young girls who were of age to get married, must leave the world they know, in their paternal home, and enter adulthood through marriage, starting to live in a new, completely unknown territory: their husband's home. It is not without violence: these girls must leave behind everything they know in favour of a new life¹². In a way, getting married represents a symbolic death: the *parthénos* dies for an adult woman, a *gyné*, to be born, with all her responsibilities and duties. In this sense, there is no goddess who better represents the feminine meaning of marriage than Persephone.

Marriage was, however, the most important rite of passage for a Greek girl, a rite that would properly integrate her into society. Accordingly, in this symbolic death there is an underlying promise of a new, more fulfilling life. Which makes us wonder: was that the case for Persephone? Did her marriage to Hades significantly affect her existence as a woman and as a goddess?

¹¹ E.g.: one of Demeter's epithets is *ōrephóre*, giver of seasons. Also, it is said in lines 401–403 that Persephone shall return to the world of the living "(...) when the earth shall bloom with the fragrant flowers of spring in every kind" (translation by Evelyn-White 1914) and not the other way around. For a more detailed discussion of this matter, see Clay (2006) and Carvalho (2019).

¹² Deacy (1997) 45.

Let's take a closer look at the HHD. The situation of the rape is well explained to the audience at the very beginning of the poem (1–39)¹³:

I begin to sing of rich-haired Demeter, awful goddess – of her and her trim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus rapt away, given to him by all-seeing Zeus the loud-thunderer. Apart from Demeter, lady of the golden sword and glorious fruits, she was playing with the deep-bosomed daughters of Oceanus and gathering flowers over a soft meadow, roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, irises also and hyacinths and the narcissus, which Earth made to grow at the will of Zeus and to please the Host of Many, to be a snare for the bloom-like girl – a marvellous, radiant flower. It was a thing of awe whether for deathless gods or mortal men to see: from its root grew a hundred blooms and it smelled most sweetly, so that all wide heaven above and the whole earth and the sea's salt swell laughed for joy. And the girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely toy; but the wide-pathed earth yawned there in the plain of Nysa, and the lord, Host of Many, with his immortal horses sprang out upon her – the Son of Cronos, He who has many names. He caught her up reluctant on his golden car and bare her away lamenting. Then she cried out shrilly with her voice, calling upon her father, the Son of Cronos, who is most high and excellent. But no one, either of the deathless gods or of mortal men, heard her voice, nor yet the olive-trees bearing rich fruit: only tender-hearted Hecate, bright-coiffed, the daughter of Persaeus, heard the girl from her cave, and the lord Helios, Hyperion's bright son, as she cried to her father, the Son of Cronos. But he was sitting aloof, apart from the gods, in his temple where many pray, and receiving sweet offerings from mortal men. So he, that son of Cronos, of many names, who is Ruler of Many and Host of Many, was bearing her away by leave of Zeus on his immortal chariot – his own brother's child and all unwilling. And so long as she, the goddess, yet beheld earth and starry heaven and the strong-flowing sea where fishes shoal, and the rays of the sun, and still hoped to see her dear mother and the tribes of the eternal gods, so long hope calmed her great heart for all her trouble ... and the heights of the mountains and the depths of the sea rang with her immortal voice: and her queenly mother heard her.

These lines present to us a girl who plays in nature, picking flowers and having fun with her friends. Even though she is a goddess, we have no information about her powers, or her *timai*, her godly attributions. It is safe to assume that,

13 All translations of the HHD used in this paper are by Evelyn-White (1914).

up until this point, she actually did not have any. As the young daughter of Demeter, Persephone had no name and no powers of her own. This shall change with her marriage to Hades.

After Hermes descends to the underworld, at Zeus's orders, to retrieve the young goddess, Hades eloquently gives his bride a small speech (HHD 360–9):

“Go now, Persephone, to your dark-robed mother, go, and feel kindly in your heart towards me: be not so exceedingly cast down; for I shall be no unfitting husband for you among the deathless gods, that am own brother to father Zeus. And while you are here, you shall rule all that lives and moves and shall have the greatest rights among the deathless gods: those who defraud you and do not appease your power with offerings, reverently performing rites and paying fit gifts, shall be punished for evermore.”

In order to keep her as a wife, Hades appeals to Persephone's rational side, asking her to disregard her feelings and her mother's, and think about the advantages of remaining married to him, as queen of the underworld. If she previously had no *timai* of her own, as the queen of the dead she shall “rule all that lives and moves” (365), and since all beings eventually die, she shall be able to punish all those who do not worship her properly. What he offers her is finally becoming the “dreadful” Persephone the Greeks already know and that we can see in the Homeric poems¹⁴.

Whether she takes the pomegranate seeds by force or willingly¹⁵, by eating it Persephone accepts all the attributions and honours Hades promised, and becomes queen of the dead by his side – the girl who previously had nothing becomes a prominent part of the organisation of the cosmos.

Therefore, for Persephone, the narrative told in the HHD is the story of her transformation into an actual goddess, going from merely Demeter's daughter to the queen of the underworld, with her very own *timai*. Her marriage, as that of mortal girls, is transformative and a rite of passage, ultimately bestowing her a role in the Olympian society.

14 In *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Persephone is often called *epainé Persephoneía*, dreadful Persephone, queen of the underworld and goddess of the dead. See Clay (2006) 252.

15 With how the scene is described and conducted in the HHD, there is ground to argue Persephone ate the seeds willingly. For a more detailed discussion, see Clay (2006) 252; and Carvalho (2019) 60–62.

With the myth and the potentials of its interpretation in mind, we can dive into the contemporary novels selected for this paper: *A court of mist and fury* (2016), by Sarah J. Maas, and *Midnight sun* (2020), by Stephenie Meyer.

A COURT OF MIST AND FURY: FEYRE AND RHYSAND

Sarah J. Maas's *A court of thorn and roses* series follows the life of Feyre Archeron, a young human girl living in a harsh high fantasy world where humans are oppressed by magical creatures called the Fae. While humans were given just a small strip of land and mostly live in poverty, which is the case of Feyre's family, the Fae are wealthy and have a vast land divided in seven courts.

Our focus is on the second book of the series, called *A court of mist and fury* (2016), when the romance between Feyre and Rhysand is developed. However, some considerations about the first book *A court of thorns and roses* (2015) must be made in order to locate the characters and the plot.

In the first book, driven by hunger and the harshness of Winter, Feyre ends up killing a wolf who, in reality, was a Fae in disguise. For that she is punished by being taken to the Fae lands, specifically to the Spring court. While at first she distrusts the place and its inhabitants, little by little she falls in love with the court and its lord, a Fae named Tamlin, which in the end leads her to face some trials and break a curse that has been haunting the Fae people¹⁶. Although she faces death, with the combined magic of all Fae lords she is turned into a Fae herself by the end of book 1. So, how does this girl, firstly characterised almost as a fairy tale princess ultimately becomes a Persephone? To understand it, we must analyse her relationship with a male character called Rhysand.

In the first book of the series, he is constructed as a villain, allied to the biggest enemy of the Fae people. In his very first appearance, when Feyre yet did not know who he was, she described him as follows¹⁷:

¹⁶ In this regard, the first book could be analysed as a kind of retelling of the *Beauty and the Beast* traditional fairy tale.

¹⁷ Maas (2015) 189.

Everything about the stranger radiated sensual grace and ease. High Fae, no doubt. His short black hair gleamed like a raven's feathers, offsetting his pale skin and blue eyes so deep they were violet, even in the firelight. They twinkled with amusement as he beheld me. For a moment, we said nothing. *Thank you* didn't seem to cover what he'd done for me, but something about the way he stood with absolute stillness, the night seeming to press in closer around him, made me hesitate to speak – made me want to run in the other direction.

Rhysand has dark hair and pale skin, and his powers are aligned with darkness: the very night clings to him. As the story unfolds, Feyre's relationship with Rhysand gets furtherly complex, as he is an enemy to Tamlin and the Spring court, but ends up being an ally to her during the trials she must face to lift the curse, aiding her in more than one occasion.

By the end of the book, the curse is lifted, the true enemy defeated, and Feyre, now a Fae herself, makes the Spring court her home, beside the man she loves and fought to save, in a perfect fairy tale fashion.

By the beginning of the next instalment, however, things have changed. Traumatized by everything she went through, Feyre is haunted by nightmares and her own guilt. Life in the Spring court, however, goes on, regardless of her pain, and she is stuck planning her wedding to its lord. When the big day finally arrives, she hates everything about it, especially her "monstrosity" of a wedding gown¹⁸.

"You look beautiful," Alis said quietly. I was fairly certain her thoughts on the dress were the same as my own, but I believed her.

"Thank you."

"And you sound like you're going to your funeral."¹⁹

The mingling of wedding and funeral images is one of our first clues that Feyre is no longer the fairy tale princess from the first book, and is starting to step into other paradigms.

The wedding party is arranged in a garden decorated with flower petals, not unlike Persephone's flowery meadow. Differently from the goddess, however,

18 Maas (2016) 38.

19 Maas (2016) 40.

who screamed not to be taken away from her flowery haven²⁰, Feyre inwardly begs to be saved from hers²¹:

Help me, help me, help me, I begged someone, anyone. Begged Lucien, standing in the front row, his metal eye fixed on me. Begged Ianthe, face serene and patient and lovely within that hood. *Save me – please, save me. Get me out. End this.*

And prompted by it, Rhysand appears to take her away²²:

I shouldn't have been surprised. Not when Rhysand liked to make a spectacle of everything. And found pissing off Tamlin to be an art form.

But there he was.

Rhysand, High Lord of the Night Court, now stood beside me, darkness leaking from him like ink in water.

He angled his head, his blue-black hair shifting with the movement. Those violet eyes sparkled in the golden faelicht as they fixed on Tamlin, as he held up a hand to where Tamlin and Lucien and their sentries had their swords half-drawn, sizing up how to get me out of the way, how to bring him down –

But at the lift of that hand, they froze.

Ianthe, however, was backing away slowly, face drained of color.

“What a pretty little wedding,” Rhysand said, stuffing his hands into his pockets as those many swords remained in their sheaths. The remaining crowd was pressing back, some climbing over seats to get away.

Rhys looked me over slowly, and clicked his tongue at my silk gloves. Whatever had been building beneath my skin went still and cold.

“Get the hell out,” growled Tamlin, stalking toward us. Claws ripped from his knuckles.

Rhys clicked his tongue again. “Oh, I don't think so. Not when I need to call in my bargain with Feyre darling.”

My stomach hollowed out. No – no, not now.

“You try to break the bargain, and you know what will happen,” Rhys went on, chuckling a bit at the crowd still falling over themselves to get away from him. He

20 HHD 20–21.

21 Maas (2016) 42.

22 Maas (2016) 43–44.

jerked his chin toward me. “I gave you three months of freedom. You could at least look happy to see me.”

I was shaking too badly to say anything. Rhys’s eyes flickered with distaste.

The expression was gone when he faced Tamlin again. “I’ll be taking her now.”

“Don’t you dare,” Tamlin snarled. Behind him, the dais was empty; Ianthe had vanished entirely. Along with most of those in attendance.

“Was I interrupting? I thought it was over.” Rhys gave me a smile dripping with venom. He knew-through that bond, through whatever magic was between us, he’d known I was about to say no. “At least, Feyre seemed to think so.”

Snatching Feyre from her Spring, Rhysand, a lord of night and dark powers, brings her to his own court: the Night court, where a different reality from that she got to know in the Spring court awaits her. In the Night court, Feyre will meet new places and people, heal from her trauma, and learn how to use the powers hidden within her new Fae body.

A game of back and forth begins between the characters, and while Feyre does not know all the secrets of the Night court, she is allowed back to Spring and Tamlin. Deciding to know, however, is like eating the pomegranate seeds – there would be no turning back²³:

If you come with me, there is no going back. You will not be allowed to speak of what you see to anyone outside of my court. Because if you do, people will die – my people will die. So if you come, you will have to lie about it forever; if you return to the Spring Court, you cannot tell anyone there what you see, and who you meet, and what you will witness. If you would rather not have that between you and your friends, then stay here.

As Persephone ate the pomegranate, and was thus bound to remain in the underworld for part of the year, Feyre decides to go, to discover everything there was to know about the Night court, embraced a new life, learnt about her powers, and finally fell in love with Rhysand.

In the second half of the book, as they are well into the path of falling in love for each other, Rhysand speaks of his own view of himself, and how he feels to be perceived by his peers²⁴:

23 Maas (2016) 130.

24 Maas (2016) 421–422.

I am the dark lord, who stole away the bride of spring. I am a demon, and a nightmare, and I will meet a bad end. He is the golden prince – the hero who will get to keep you as his reward for not dying of stupidity and arrogance.

If all the more subtle signs – the merger of weddings and funerals, the flowers, the dark powers, etc. – were not enough to place the reader within the realm of the myth of Hades and Persephone, the line above does the trick, showing us the author was well aware of her references while building her characters.

From then on, Feyre realises her feelings and ends up marrying Rhysand, becoming the High Lady of the Night court, not unlike the dreadful queen of the Greek underworld.

As Persephone, Feyre begins her story with few powers of her own, living in an idyllic world of flowers. A dark lord disrupts this reality, bringing her to a darker, more complex world, from where she will ascend as a queen. Feyre's meadow is the garden of her wedding day, from where she is somewhat forcefully removed, taken away from her Spring. Differently from the Greek goddess, though, it is not from a mother she is separated, but rather her fiancé.

As Hades, Rhysand is an older man, with dark hair to match his dark powers, who decides to abduct a girl from Spring and bring her to his secluded realm, from where she cannot be rescued.

The main differences between Hades and Persephone and Rhysand and Feyre (as shall also be the case in our next example) is the love shared between the protagonists and the consent surrounding the female character experience. Firstly, Hades and Persephone's myth is not a love story, but one of how an important divine marriage was carried out. Secondly, while Feyre is not taken away willingly, she chooses to remain at the Night court and allows herself to fall in love with its lord. Persephone, however, is abducted and then forced into a marriage with Hades. This adjustment, of course, fits the modern sensitivities of the books' audience. Written in the 2010s, it would be inconceivable for a love story to be developed following an actual rape.

In this version, Hades actually falls in love with Persephone, and abducts her in order to protect her from the threats of her falsely innocent Spring, offering her his realm and aiding her in the ascension of her powers so they can rule side by side as king and queen.

MIDNIGHT SUN: BELLA AND EDWARD

The *Twilight* saga was a worldwide phenomenon in the late 2000s, early 2010s, mostly because of its cinematic adaptation. Instead of a high fantasy world, here we have the story of a regular teenage girl, Isabella Swan, finishing her high school years, who ends up meeting a non-conventional vampire, Edward Cullen, and falling in love with him.

The very premiss of the story has its protagonist leaving her sunny reality and exchanging it for a darker, gloomy place²⁵:

In the Olympic Peninsula of northwest Washington State, a small town named Forks exists under a near-constant cover of clouds. It rains on this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America. It was from this town and its gloomy, omnipresent shade that my mother escaped with me when I was only a few months old. It was in this town that I'd been compelled to spend a month every summer until I was fourteen. That was the year I finally put my foot down; these past three summers, my dad, Charlie, vacationed with me in California for two weeks instead. It was to Forks that I now exiled myself – an action that I took with great horror. I detested Forks. I loved Phoenix. I loved the sun and the blistering heat. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city.

In this small town, constantly covered by clouds, where sparse sunlight shines, this perfectly ordinary human girl shall discover a darker reality: vampires – and potentially other supernatural beings – exist and walk among humans, a constant threat for their lives.

In the first book of the series, *Twilight* (2005), the myth of Persephone and Hades is not directly mentioned²⁶, but it is possible to catch some allusions to it, as can be seen in the examples below²⁷:

25 Meyer (2005) 3–4.

26 With one noteworthy exception: Hades's name is cited once, interchangeably with "Hell". "That's none of your business, Mike', I warned, internally cursing Jessica straight to the fiery pits of Hades" (Meyer 2005, 221). It is a curious word choice, since it is never repeated, and the character do use the word "hell" in other instances with similar meaning.

27 Meyer (2005) 87–88.

“I think your friends are angry with me for stealing you.”

“They’ll survive.” I could feel their stares boring into my back. “I may not give you back, though,” he said with a wicked glint in his eyes.

Edward alludes to stealing Bella away from her friends and not returning her to them, such as Hades did to Persephone. Another possible clue is Bella describing Edward’s beauty as that of the Greek gods²⁸:

But outside the door to our Spanish class, leaning against the wall – looking more like a Greek god than anyone had a right to – Edward was waiting for me. Jessica took one look, rolled her eyes, and departed.

The most important allusion to the myth, however, is the fact that the culmination of the characters’ romance happens in a flowery meadow. After some incidents, long talks, and the revelation of Edward’s true nature, one big secret remain to be unveiled: what is it that happens to him under direct sunlight? To show her, Edward takes Bella to a secluded place in the city’s woods²⁹:

I reached the edge of the pool of light and stepped through the last fringe of ferns into the loveliest place I had ever seen. The meadow was small, perfectly round, and filled with wildflowers – violet, yellow, and soft white. Somewhere nearby, I could hear the bubbling music of a stream. The sun was directly overhead, filling the circle with a haze of buttery sunshine. I walked slowly, awestruck, through the soft grass, swaying flowers, and warm, gilded air. I halfway turned, wanting to share this with him, but he wasn’t behind me where I thought he’d be. I spun around, searching for him with sudden alarm.

In this idyllic location, kept apart from the eyes of the human world, filled with flowers and the loveliness of nature, not only shall Bella see with her own eyes the extent of Edward’s dark nature – contradictorily, the fact that his skin sparkles under direct sunlight –, but she shall also witness his physical strength and have explained to her the lust he has for her blood.

28 Meyer (2005) 206.

29 Meyer (2005) 259.

This knowledge marks a threshold: she can either walk away from him forever or accept to enter this darker reality. Out of love for Edward, Bella decides to stay.

If in *Twilight* we have but allusions to the Greek myth, in *Midnight sun* (2020), the reference becomes rather explicit. This book, the latest addition to Meyer's saga, is not exactly a new story, but a retelling of the events of *Twilight* in Edward's first person point of view.

As in the first book, the first allusion comes in a mention of a kidnapping³⁰:

My rage dulled a bit with the sudden black humor. I tried to imagine how the girl would react to my kidnapping her. Of course, I rarely guessed her reactions right-but what other response could she have besides terror? I wasn't sure how to manage that, though kidnapping her. I wouldn't be able to stand being close to her for very long. Perhaps I would just deliver her back to her mother. Even that much would be fraught with danger. For her.

This kidnapping, however, is one that would return Bella to her mother – the mention of the mother-figure being quite significant –, and not take her away. Differently from *Twilight*, however, in *Midnight sun* we have more than one direct mention of Hades and Persephone's myth.

The first one happens in a restaurant, while Edward is watching Bella eat³¹:

Suddenly, as she ate, a strange comparison entered my head. For just a second. I saw Persephone, pomegranate in hand. Dooming herself to the underworld. Is that who I was? Hades himself, coveting springtime, stealing it, condemning it to endless night. I tried unsuccessfully to shake the impression.

As he gets closer to Bella, Edward is suddenly keenly aware that, by associating herself with him, Bella was stepping away from her sunlit Spring, and starting to thread into a darker world. This worry will follow him as he deepens the association with Persephone in his mind³²:

30 Meyer (2020) 98.

31 Meyer (2020) 236.

32 Meyer (2020) 374.

If only I could make myself safe for her, right for her, make myself fit into that happy picture for every second of the time that she allowed me. I wondered again how I could make this happen – be with her without negatively impacting her life. Stay in Persephone’s spring, keep her safe from my underworld.

With the myth now as the author’s explicit paradigm, the meadow scene gains an additional layer of importance, one even the characters are aware of – not Bella, as we already know that, in the story told in her point of view, there are no direct references to neither Persephone nor Hades. However, for Edward, the myth becomes the image through which he expresses and understands his feelings and misgivings concerning Bella’s safety³³:

In her thoughts, suddenly another vision replaced the first. A gasp of relief choked through my lips when the horror was removed. But this vision was not much better. Alice and Bella, arms around each other, both marble white and diamond hard. One too many pomegranate seeds, and she was bound to the underworld with me. No way back. Springtime, sunlight, family, future, soul, all stolen from her.

It’s sixty-forty... ish. Maybe even sixty-five-thirty-five. There’s still a good chance you won’t kill her. Her tone was one of encouragement.

“She’s dead, either way; I whispered. “I’ll stop her heart.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant. I’m telling you that she has futures beyond the meadow... but first she has to go through the meadow – the metaphorical meadow – if you catch my meaning.” (...)

All her paths are leading to one point – all her paths are knotted together. Whether that point is in the meadow, or somewhere else, she’s tied to that moment of decision. Your decision, her decision. Some of the threads continue on the other side. Some... (...) You know that I love you, so listen to me now. Putting this off won’t change anything. Take her to your meadow, Edward, and – for me, and especially for you – bring her back again.

Alice, Edward’s sister who can see the future, knows that the meadow is a pivotal point in his relationship to Bella. What happens there: whether Bella accepts him for what he is or not, whether he is able to keep his thirst for her blood at bay or not, shall shape the future.

33 Meyer (2020) 388–389.

Getting into the long-awaited meadow, therefore, it is impossible for Edward to avoid thinking of Bella as Persephone³⁴:

I wished I could see her face. I could imagine how lovely the place would be on a day like this. I could smell the wildflowers, sweeter in the warmth, and hear the low burble of the stream on the far side. The insects hummed, and far away, birds trilled and crooned. There were no birds nearby now – my presence was enough to frighten all the larger life from this place. She walked almost reverently into the golden light. It gilded her hair and made her fair skin glow. Her fingers trailed over the taller flowers, and I was reminded again of Persephone. Springtime personified. I could have watched her for a very long time, perhaps forever, but it was too much to hope that the beauty of the place could make her forget the monster in the shadows for long. She turned, eyes wide with amazement, a wondering smile on her lips, and looked back at me. Expectant. When I didn't move, she began walking slowly in my direction. She lifted one arm, offering her hand in encouragement. I wanted to be human so badly in that moment that it nearly crippled me.

They go through the meadow, and as we know, Bella accepts Edward's vampiric nature while he conquers the urge to take her blood. As a Persephone, Bella accepts to be taken away from her Spring and into the underworld of Edward's existence.

As their relationship progresses, the difficulties they have to face are no longer Edward's misgivings about being near her, but an actual foe: another vampire who decides he wants to drink Bella's blood. By the very end of the book, we can find Edward's last mention of Persephone and her myth³⁵:

"I promise you I will never do anything to hurt her." I said the words, and I meant them in the strongest way – I would give anything to keep Bella happy and safe – but I wasn't sure they were true. Because what would hurt Bella the most? I couldn't escape the truest answer. Pomegranate seeds and my underworld. Hadn't I just witnessed a brutal example of how badly my world could go wrong for her? And she was lying here broken because of it.

34 Meyer (2020) 429–430.

35 Meyer (2020) 759.

In a similar fashion as Rhysand, Edward sees himself as the villain of the story, especially in matters concerning Bella³⁶:

I owed her honesty. Still, I tried to smile, to make my words sound less threatening. “What if I’m not a superhero? What if I’m the bad guy?”

Consequently, what he desires is to step away from his role as Hades, avoiding taking Bella away from her Spring – he would rather stay away and, most definitely, he does not desire to see her turned into a creature like himself³⁷:

When I’d poured out my heart to her distant God, I’d begged for strength. This much he’d given me: I felt no desire at all to see Bella immortal. My only want, my only need, was to have her life untouched by darkness, and that need consumed me.

While his wish is granted for the first three books in the saga (*Twilight*, *New Moon*, and *Eclipse*), by the fourth and final book (*Breaking Dawn*), after defeating many foes, graduating high school, and getting married, Bella is finally turned into a vampire. Her descent was slower than Persephone’s and even Feyre’s, but eventually Bella fully embraced her darker side, gaining and strengthening her own powers.

As in the case previously analysed in this paper, the decision to enter this underworld is made by the female character of her own free will, in a desire to stay together with the person she loves. This decision allows Bella to stay with Edward, and to outgrow her human frailties as well, tapping into her own supernatural potentials.

FINAL REMARKS: BELLA, FEYRE, PERSEPHONE, AND THE HEROINE’S JOURNEY

In 1949, Joseph Campbell would develop, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a model for the common heroic narrative, popularly known as “the hero’s journey”. In several steps, this model describes how heroes (especially male

³⁶ Meyer (2020) 157.

³⁷ Meyer (2020) 828.

ones) leave their homes, set out to have transformative adventures and then return. Years later, in 1990, confronted with the fact that this model did not suit the female experience, Maureen Murdock would develop a new model, focused on women.

Questioning Campbell himself about the place of women in the journey, his answer was, as Murdock describes, “deeply unsatisfying”³⁸:

In the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realize that she’s the place that people are trying to get to. When a woman realizes what her wonderful character is, she’s not going to get messed up with the notion of being pseudo-male.

Saying women are “there” denies them their own journey of self-discovery, and their reconnection with their own womanhood as well embracement of their feminine nature, which, for the author, is the main goal of this task. Loosely based on Campbell’s hero’s journey, Murdock developed a “heroine’s journey” which, in its composition, has a pivotal stage that resonates deeply with the myth of Persephone: a “descent to the underworld to meet the *dark feminine*”³⁹. By plunging into this underworld, the heroine can reconnect with a darker side of her identity, and thus be ready to rise and face the other challenges of life.

In the myth, as shown to us in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, we can summarise Persephone’s journey as follows: once an innocent *parthénos*, who plays and gathers flowers in an idyllic place, she is abruptly removed from this environment by the god of the dead, who takes her to a world of darkness. There, she is forced to become his wife and is given, in return, darker powers which she never had before. As she reemerges to the world of light, Persephone is transformed: no longer a child, she is the queen of the underworld, with her very own attributions and marked identity.

We can observe similar paths for the two contemporary fantasy heroines analysed in this paper.

Feyre is a human girl forcefully removed from her human world, and taken to a magic world where she starts to learn about other realities and love. Once settled into this world and even having become magical herself, she is forced, by a lord of darkness, to plunge deeper, learning more of the world’s politics and

38 Murdock (1990) 18.

39 Murdock (1990) 19.

starting to control her own powers. Ultimately, she married the lord of darkness, becoming a lady of darkness herself, hence ready to face the other intricacies of her world.

Bella is a teenage girl who leaves her sunny city and mother behind to live in a gloomy town where she will be faced with creatures she did not know existed in her world. Falling in love with a vampire, she is forced to embrace this new reality, dealing with the dangers that are now inevitable – even if her vampire boyfriend will not take her blood, maybe other, evil vampires will. In the end, she will become a vampire herself, developing new powers and being ready to face dangers in order to protect her new family.

Each series, *A court of thorns and roses* and *Twilight*, deal with the myth in different perspectives, but the patterns – the *topoi* – are visible: an oblivious girl whose innocence will eventually end; a male character with known associations to dark powers; references to meadows and flowery environments; a kidnapping – either real or metaphorical; and finally the ascension of the female character as someone more powerful.

For Persephone, this ascension was achieved by leaving her mother and marrying Hades, an union that grants her a whole new realm of influence. For Feyre and Bella, heroines for a 21st-century audience, these ascensions are enabled by their falling in love with the men who dwell in those darker realms and choosing to be with them, and not by being kidnapped or victims to violence. Even if Rhysand and Edward feel like they are forcefully snatching the girls away from their comfortable Springs, Feyre and Bella use their own two feet to walk to their metaphorical underworlds.

Maas and Meyer use the paradigms of the myth, adding their own creative twists, in order to craft narratives in which new versions of Persephone and Hades fall in love and rule together in their very own underworlds. But mostly, these new stories focus on the female experience and the journeys of the female characters to find a place in their worlds. If before Feyre and Bella did not quite fit in their realities, after meeting and falling in love with Rhysand and Edward, now they do.

If Persephone was given front stage in her myth, what would be the story she would tell? Did she also feel dislocated and only found a place to belong once in the underworld? Although they are not strictly Persephone, Feyre's and Bella's narratives seem to tell a version of the story in which Persephone would have answered "yes".

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Solving Problems through *Katasterismos*: Classical Reception in New Zealand author Sabrina Malcolm's *Zeustian Logic*

Abstract New Zealand writer Sabrina Malcolm's 2017 novel *Zeustian Logic* is a contemporary school story about a family struggling to deal with grief. This text follows in a decades-long tradition of New Zealand YA literature employing Classical reception. The novel illustrates how Classical myth helps a contemporary New Zealand teenager (Tuttle) come to terms with his father's death and his own feelings of helplessness, frustration and anger. This chapter examines the role of Classical reception in this novel, discussing how the author uses star mythology to underpin the depiction of the protagonist's coming-of-age. More than that, Malcolm compares Tuttle's feelings with ancient perceptions of anger and grief and skillfully casts Tuttle, in his quest for knowledge, as a modern-day Telemachus. The chapter concludes with a look at how Tuttle's attitudes towards Zeus change, as he matures.

Keywords *katasterismos*, death, grief, bullying, family relationships

For over 2500 years have Classical myths provided humans with coping-mechanisms to deal with adversities which life might throw at them, such as the death of a loved one. Aotearoa New Zealand writer Sabrina Malcolm's 2017 coming-of-age novel for children and young adults, *Zeustian Logic*, illustrates how Classical myth helps a teenager come to terms with his father's death and his own feelings of helplessness, frustration and anger.¹ *Zeustian Logic* is a contemporary school story about a family struggling to deal with grief. This chapter will look at the role of Classical reception in this novel, mostly in the form of the protagonist's retellings of Greek myths.² Of particular interest is the question how the author uses star mythology to underpin the depiction of the protagonist's coming-of-age.

With its use of Classical Reception, *Zeustian Logic* follows a long tradition of Classical allusions in New Zealand literature. In particular, New Zealand Young Adult literature tends to engage frequently with Classical mythology.³ *Zeustian Logic* retells a number of Greek myths, in fact, the entire novel and the character development of its protagonist are structured around these stories. Unlike in other New Zealand Young Adult novels (such as Beckett's *Genesis* or Mahy's *The Changeover*), Malcolm's use of Classical reception does not problematise issues of colonialism or biculturalism,⁴ but the focus is firmly on mythology's role in the development of the novel's main character.

Zeustian Logic's troubled young protagonist Tuttle (Duncan) Theodorus is fascinated by astronomy and the Greek myths behind the names of the constellations. Mythology helps him escape and, eventually, come to terms with his

1 I would like to thank Elizabeth Hale and Geoff Miles for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

2 So far nothing except a short survey entry (Pütz (2019)) and some online interviews and reviews have been published on this quite recent novel. Excerpts from the reviews are collected here: <https://geckopress.com/bookshop/zeustian-logic/> (accessed: 3 March 2020).

3 Mythology appears in the shapes of retellings in adventure stories, such as Ken Catran's novels, more allusive uses, both in realist and supernatural fiction, as in Margaret Mahy's books, and in dystopian science fiction, e.g. that by Bernard Beckett. Examples are Mahy's *The Changeover*, *The Catalogue of the Universe*, *The Tricksters*, *Dangerous Spaces*, *Memory*; Catran's *Neo's War*, *Golden Prince*, *Voyage with Jason*, *Black Ships Ablaze*, *Odysseus* and Beckett's *Genesis*. For a short overview of Classical reception in New Zealand literature, see Parry and Perris (2019) 159–186.

4 Māori mythology does not feature in this novel.

problems. Tuttle is particularly impressed with Zeus' ability to transform his enemies into stars. As he puts it: 'It was a bit of a habit with Zeus, putting stuff in the sky.' (Malcolm (2017) 1). After Tuttle's frustration leads him to commit a violent act, however, he starts to see Zeus' methods more critically and to use mythology creatively to help him deal with his problems.

After a short author portrait, a plot summary and a brief look at parallels of *Zeustian Logic* with Margaret Mahy's *The Changeover*, this article will analyse and interpret Malcolm's work in regard to Classical reception, looking at ancient perceptions of anger and grief, discussing in some detail the myths employed in *Zeustian Logic* and comparing Tuttle's quest for knowledge to that of Telemachus from the *Odyssey*. It will conclude with a look at how Tuttle's attitudes towards Zeus change, as he matures.

AUTHOR PORTRAIT

Sabrina Malcolm was born in the United States in 1962 and immigrated to New Zealand with her parents when she was eight years old. She now lives with her family in Wellington. Following a career as a graphic designer and illustrator for scientific publications, the *School Journal* and picture books,⁵ in 2013, Malcolm wrote and illustrated a children's picture book entitled *Blue Moon Bird*, a story about loneliness, finding a friend and the power of a child's imagination. *Zeustian Logic*, published in 2017, is Malcolm's first novel. Like *Blue Moon Bird*, it deals with a boy who feels isolated, though this time it is a teenager, and the story is written for older children.

⁵ See Sabrina Malcolm's profile at bookcouncil.org.nz: <https://www.read-nz.org/writer/malcolm-sabrina/> (accessed: 7.6.2024). The *School Journal* is the main instructional series used to teach literacy in New Zealand schools to students in years 4–8.

SETTING AND PLOT SUMMARY

The novel is set in contemporary Wellington, in the suburb Kelburn, where its 14-year-old protagonist Tuttle Theodorus lives. As in real life, there is an astronomical observatory in Kelburn, where Tuttle likes to spend much of his time.⁶ *Zeustian Logic* also includes scenes elsewhere in Wellington and the Wellington region, in particular at Wellington College, a boys' high school in downtown Wellington.

The story takes place a year after Tuttle's father Jamie died in a mountaineering accident on Mount Everest. He was a famous mountaineer and climbing guide, known for his skill and his high principles regarding safety. However, after his death, Jamie Theodorus has become infamous because it seems that he left a client to die in the storm in which he himself disappeared. Tuttle finds it hard to deal with his father's death, but even worse is his worry that his father might have been a coward – and that he, Tuttle, might have inherited his cowardice.

Tuttle lives with his mother, Rose Cornelius, and his seven-year-old brother Fen. When her husband died, after a brief period of frantic activity (in which Tuttle compares her to Zeus in her efficiency (Malcolm (2017) 25)), Rose has almost completely withdrawn from the world, including from her sons, which leaves Tuttle in charge of running the household and of taking care of his younger brother.

Fen is not talking much nor engaging with others, but Tuttle, even though he finds this frustrating, is fiercely protective of him, taking on the parent role, which may be facilitated by the seven-year age gap between the siblings. In this respect, Tuttle reminds one of the protagonist Laura in *The Changeover* (1984) by Margaret Mahy, a New Zealand author, who is prominent for her use of Classical reception in YA literature already in the 1980s and is hence a predecessor on whom Malcolm builds in her work.

After Laura's father has left the family, her mother has to work long hours and has a new romantic interest, the sixteen-year-old is straining under the responsibility for her four-year-old brother Jacko but is extremely protective of him. Like Laura, Tuttle struggles with all this responsibility for his brother and

⁶ In the novel, it is named Bentham Observatory (Malcolm (2017) 193), presumably after Bentham Science, the science publisher that includes works on astronomy. A connection to Jeremy Bentham (1747–1832), the philosopher, jurist, social reformer and founder of modern utilitarianism is unclear.

the household.⁷ So, it is remarkable, and refreshing for the readers, that even though Tuttle feels sad, angry and frustrated, his voice (which is the voice of the first-person narrator telling the story of the novel) is mostly humorous and often sarcastic.

Like Mahy, Malcolm interlaces New Zealand contemporary everyday life with Classical myth. In *The Changeover*, the protagonist Laura is threatened by a Classical villain, a *lemur*, and in order to fight him, undergoes a magical Changeover, which in turn is based on ancient myths of *katabasis*, a journey to the underworld.⁸ Tuttle's relationship with Classical myth is more complex: on the one hand he heavily depends on it to help him make sense of the world and deal with his problems and feelings, on the other hand, in the course of the novel, he learns to view the mythical stories he is fascinated with more critically, which helps him find more productive ways of coping with his anger and grief.

As the anniversary of the well-publicised death of Jamie Theodorus nears, Tuttle gets more and more obsessed with the question of his father's responsibility for the death of his client. He tries to find out more from his father's friend and colleague Mike, who also was on Mount Everest when the accident occurred, and by reading blogs about the accident, but all this leaves him none the wiser. When a journalist unexpectedly appears at his house, Tuttle lets himself be tricked into admitting that the family is not coping. Soon after, an article about the dysfunctionality of the Theodorus family appears in a women's magazine. Consequently, not only is Tuttle bullied at school, but Social Services get involved. This throws the family into further upheaval. Tuttle overhears his mother speaking on the phone and misinterprets her words as that he and Fen

⁷ *Zeustian Logic* has even stronger similarities to New Zealand author Kate De Goldi's *The 10pm Question* (2008), although the actual stories are somewhat different. They are similar in tone, their playing with language and imagery and in their hopeful endings, as well as their topics including dysfunctional families, mental health issues, friendship and overwhelming domestic responsibility. In the end, both Tuttle and De Goldi's protagonist Frankie understand that they may have similar character traits to their parents, but that they need to accept their parents as who they are. They also realise that they themselves can make different choices from their parents. Malcolm changed the ending from having Tuttle find out that his father was not at fault for the death of the other climber to an ambiguous, but hopeful ending, as fitting for a YA novel. See her online interview for *The Sapling* (2017).

⁸ For a detailed analysis see Hale (2019) 144–5. Mahy was very conscious of how much she was influenced by stories from overseas, including Classical myth. She refers to this as 'imaginative replacement' (Mahy, (2000) 32). On 'colonial displacement' in New Zealand literature see Johnson in: Johnson (2019) 2–3.

will be sent to a foster family. Finally, his petrol-head neighbour Boyd (a bully) one night drives his sports car at high speed directly at Tuttle and his little brother, giving both a terrible fright. Moreover, Tuttle suspects that Boyd put the women's magazine with the article in the Theodoruses' mailbox for Rose to find and may have given the reporter information on the family. At this point, Tuttle can cope no longer with his anger and at night vandalises Boyd's car. Shocked at his own behaviour, he turns himself in to the police a few hours later.

The turning point of the story is when Tuttle's mother, after picking him up from the police station, clarifies that he and Fen will not be fostered out and confides in Tuttle about her debilitating feelings of guilt for her husband's death and infamy, as, before he left, she had insisted that he made his own safety his top priority. This gives Tuttle a new understanding of his mother's depression and, together with the realisation that he himself has made a terrible mistake in damaging Boyd's car, makes him see that it does not matter to him anymore whether his father made a mistake on Mount Everest or not. He imagines talking to Jamie and telling him that he still feels the same about him as he used to, before the accident (Malcolm (2017) 167 and 203). The conversation between Tuttle and Rose is the trigger of the family finding together again and starting to move on: Rose realises how much her children need her, Tuttle finds a job to earn the money to pay off the damages to Boyd's car, explains everything to his best friend and even asks out the girl he has liked for a while (who happens to be Boyd's very pretty and nice half-sister).

Tuttle distracts himself from his grief and anger by playing video games with his friend Attila and by focussing on his hobby astronomy. He is not only interested in the celestial phenomena themselves, but also in the Greek myths after which many of the constellations are named. He entertains and distracts his little brother with humorous retellings of Greek myths (much in the colloquial, joking style of the Percy Jackson books by Rick Riordan) and feels quite hurt when Fen, in a moment of anger, claims that he was not enjoying these stories (Malcolm (2017) 145).

Tuttle starts out admiring the power of the Greek gods, especially their ability to turn human characters into constellations to control them. Here it is obvious that Tuttle is not just dealing with grief, but also with his feelings of shame (because he worries that his father may have acted cowardly and that he might have inherited this character trait) and anger (because he is being bullied about his father). In this way, he reminds one strongly of Electra in Sophocles' eponymous play. Electra grieves her father's death but is mostly driven by her anger and wish of revenge for his murder (Sophocles, *Electra* 86–99). Aristotle, *Rhe-*

toric, II.2.1, 1378a36–38 defines anger as a wish for revenge which is caused by a slight. The same idea is expressed by Achilles Tatius, *Clitophon and Leucippe*, II.29 in a more detailed way, reflecting on the causes and connections of shame, grief and anger:

Shame, grief, and anger are three waves in the soul: shame enters through the eyes and takes away their freedom; grief diffuses itself about the breast and extinguishes the flame of the soul; while anger, roaring around the heart, overwhelms the reasoning with its foam of madness. Speech is the father of all these: like a bow shooting and aiming at its mark, words send their arrows against the soul and wound it in many places. One of its arrows is abuse (λοιδορία), the wound it causes, anger. Another is the exposure of one's misfortunes, and the wound caused by it grief. The third is the reproach for one's failures, and the wound is called shame.⁹

These definitions fit Tuttle's reaction towards Boyd, after a series of slights. He deals with his anger by taking revenge through vandalising his enemy's car, i.e., like his role-model Zeus, he uses violence to deal with the unwanted behaviour of an opponent. However, towards the end of the novel, as Tuttle finally comes to terms with his own situation, he starts employing his interests in astronomy and Greek myth to help him remember his father in a positive way which he can share with his family: He recalls how his father had encouraged him in his interest in astronomy and explained his first constellation to him by painting it. Tuttle takes this a step further, by inventing his own constellation in memory of his father, which he calls Viator the Explorer (Malcolm (2017) 202–3).

MYTHOLOGICAL CHAPTER HEADERS

Of the fifty-two chapter headers in *Zeustian Logic*, twelve contain references to Greek mythology: 'Aquila the Eagle' (referring to the eagle who, on Zeus' orders, abducted Ganymede), 'Aquarius the Water Carrier,' 'The Andromeda Galaxy is Very, Very Big,' 'Altair & Superpowers' (Altair being another name for Alpha Aquila, the brightest star in the night sky), 'The Tree of Zeus,' 'Giant Jupiter and

⁹ The translation is based on Gaselee's (1917) but includes changes of my own to clarify the meaning.

Sirius the Dog Star,' 'Serpens the Serpent,' 'Asclepius (a.k.a. Ophiuchus),' 'Orion the Hunter,' 'Lycaon the Werewolf,' 'Castor & Pollux' and 'Saturn in Your Bathroom.' These chapter headings tend to be related to constellations which Tuttle observes and comments upon (though not necessarily always in the same chapter), including the relevant astronomical facts and sometimes retellings of the related Greek myths, such as the myth of Asclepius (Malcolm (2017) 107–8) in the chapter 'Asclepius, a.k.a. Ophiuchus' or the myth of Lycaon the Werewolf in the eponymous chapter. The chapter 'The Tree of Zeus' does not refer to a constellation, but to an oak in Tuttle's garden. Some of the chapters with mythological titles contain Greek myths which are unrelated to the chapter title, for instance the chapter 'Giant Jupiter and Sirius the Dog Star' unexpectedly gives a summary of the myth of Orion (Malcolm (2017) 69). The chapter 'Orion the Hunter' (Malcolm (2017) 109 ff.) refers to Tuttle's own actions in this part of the novel: He is hunting down Mike for information. Similarly, in 'Saturn in your Bathroom' Tuttle and Fen remember Tuttle and Jamie building a model of the solar system (Malcolm (2017) 164 ff.).

TUTTLE'S VERSIONS OF THE MYTHS

All retellings of myth in this novel are by Tuttle. He tells most of them to his brother Fen, generally as bedtime stories or to reassure him in his anxiety. He sanitises the myths of any too violent or upsetting aspects to make them suitable for a seven-year-old and tells them with much humour. In this way, Tuttle is shown to do the same as the novel's author: introducing Greek mythology to a younger audience in a way that will appeal to their tastes and levels of maturity.

The focus is on stories of *katasterismos*, aetiological myths which explain the origins of the constellations through tales of humans or gods undergoing metamorphosis into stars, usually as a reward given by a god.¹⁰ In fact, *katasterismos*

¹⁰ We do not find out from which sources Tuttle has accumulated the information about *katasterismoi* but it is highly likely that his main sources will be the retellings of star-related myths by his father (as when he helped Tuttle draw his first constellation), information he has found at the observatory (where he spends much time) and books, as we hear of his regular trips to the library.

was seen as one form of *apotheosis*. While similar explanations of the origins of the constellations already existed in Egypt and the ancient Orient, Greek mythology stands out for the great number and variety of myths of stellification,¹¹ hence the great number of constellations with names alluding to Greek myths.

The first myth mentioned, at the very start of the novel, is a retelling of the story of Ganymede. This myth is referred to repeatedly by Tuttle throughout the novel (Malcolm (2017) 1, 16, 29–30, 37, 203). The first mention is one of the few instances in which Tuttle does not retell a myth for Fen's sake, but here he rather mentions it for the benefit of his readers, first to explain his fascination with Greek mythology and, later, to indirectly reflect on his own situation.

The novel starts with a short, modernised retelling of the myth from Ganymede's point of view: a large eagle swoops down, snatches him up and brings him to Mount Olympus to become cup bearer of the gods (Malcolm (2017) 1).¹² Tuttle comments that he likes 'the randomness of Greek mythology' (Malcolm (2017) 1), but it quickly becomes clear that what really fascinates him is Zeus' absolute power when the god turns Ganymede into the constellation Aquarius, the Water-Bearer.¹³ Tuttle himself thinks that he would not mind if Zeus' eagle would take his obnoxious neighbour Boyd and his car and 'shove them up in the sky' (Malcolm (2017) 4). Tuttle views *katasterismos* as a way to dispose of annoying people and completely ignores Zeus' motif for granting Ganymede immortality as a reward.¹⁴ In addition to the focus on Zeus' superpowers, the god's depiction on top of a mountain might be meant to create a connection to Jamie, as a mountaineer, though this is not spelled out.

A more explicit reference to Tuttle's father, in connection with this myth, appears when Tuttle tells his friend Attila that Ganymede's constellation Aquarius plays a role in Chinese astronomy as the Black Turtle of the North, which Attila knows as a Manga character, also known as the Black Warrior (Malcolm (2017)

11 Loehr, 2018 s. v. 'Katasterismos'.

12 Just like in the variations on this myth, it is unclear in Tuttle's retelling whether Zeus had sent the eagle to abduct Ganymede or whether the god had transformed himself into the bird.

13 Chapter 2 returns to this myth: it is called 'Aquarius the Water Carrier.' Tuttle has just seen a meteor shower that looks like it was shooting out of Aquarius' pitcher (Malcolm (2017) 9).

14 The same attitude becomes obvious when Tuttle comments on Zeus turning Castor and Pollux into constellations, claiming that Zeus did this *instead* of giving them both immortality (Malcolm (2017) 144), whereas in the ancient Greek view, *katasterismos* leads to immortality.

16). Attila tells him about this character (Malcolm (2017) 37) and mentions that he is a human warrior with crazy black hair. This makes Tuttle think of his father (Malcolm (2017) 37) and results in him pondering how far away the Aquarius constellation is. Tuttle reflects that you would not be able to travel there in a lifetime – just like Tuttle cannot reach his father.

The story of the abduction and *katasterismos* of Ganymede has had varying ancient and modern interpretations: as a story about a god honouring a human for his physical beauty with immortality and a life among the gods (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 202–217),¹⁵ as an amusing story for entertainment (Lucian, *dialogue of the gods* 8) or as a description of a violent kidnapping (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X.155–161 or Rembrandt's 1635 oil painting *The Abduction of Ganymede*). Tuttle mentions that Zeus is attracted by Ganymede's beauty (Malcolm (2017) 1 and 203), but he passes over any more explicit sexual elements in the story for the sake of his younger brother. Rather than imagining Ganymede as the lucky favourite of Zeus who is honoured with immortality, Tuttle highlights the negative consequence of his *katasterismos*: He imagines how Ganymede felt 'stuck on Mount Olympus for all time' (Malcolm (2017) 29) and was forced to live 'a life of enslavement' (Malcolm (2017) 30).

The focus on Ganymede's supposed loneliness hints at Tuttle's own situation after his father has died, his mother and brother have become withdrawn, and family-friends have stopped offering help. Tuttle's friend Attila tries to cheer him up but does not really understand what Tuttle is going through, and neither do his classmates. Ganymede's loneliness may at the same time hint at Tuttle's image of his father's dead body, completely alone in the snow on Mount Everest, which he visualises at the beginning of the novel, in comparison to NASA's Pioneer 11 space probe that is still flying in space but does not have enough power to transmit images back to earth:

There's a mental picture I have of Dad, alone like that space probe, on the mountain with the wind screaming around and snow covering him and sometimes, I guess, uncovering him. Wherever he is.

It's not one of my best-loved images. In fact it's worse than lousy, but I don't suppose I'll ever get rid of it.

(Malcolm (2017) 2)

15 In this version of the myth, Ganymede is swooped up by a whirlwind, instead of an eagle.

Tuttle's first mythological bedtime story for Fen is about Helios and Phaeton (Malcolm (2017) 35). This myth is not about *katasterismos*, but, being about the sun, fits the astronomical theme. Tuttle tells this story as that of a teenager nagging his parent to let him drive until his father gives in. However (Tuttle continues): 'Wouldn't you know it, Phaeton was a dozo and a crap driver, and he lost control of the horses.' (Malcolm (2017) 35) Tuttle tells this myth as a story of a parent not looking properly after his child: Helios gives in to his son's demands for 'a few minutes' peace' (Malcolm (2017) 35). It is also a tale about risk-taking resulting in death, and the connection to Jamie is obvious, though it is not stated. Even though Zeus responds in a violent manner to the situation, by shooting down Phaeton, he is a hero who rescues humankind.

Tuttle tells Fen the next myth, when he takes him to the observatory to help him overcome his nightmares, which started after Fen looked at a library book with frightening illustrations of the mythological creatures the constellations are named after. Looking at the night sky, Tuttle tells Fen a 'watered-down' (Malcolm (2017) 69) version of the myth of Orion and Scorpius.¹⁶ The hunter Orion 'gets too full of himself' (Malcolm (2017) 69), Earth sends a huge scorpion, the two fight and Orion is killed.

Even though this is a somewhat frightening story, Fen feels better after the visit to the observatory. The fact that Tuttle consciously sanitises and simplifies the myths he tells his younger brother shows how much he has taken on the parent role for Fen. This is also hinted at through an echo of an earlier scene in Tuttle's life: his father had explained the constellations to Tuttle when he was little, by painting and drawing a picture of the same constellation (Orion) that Tuttle has now shown and explained to Fen. This memory will later in the novel become the inspiration for Tuttle to invent and draw a special constellation to commemorate his father.

The following story for Fen is another bedtime story, which Tuttle tells him just before he secretly sets out to question Mike. It deals with Asclepius (Malcolm (2017) 107) who was such a good healer that he started to bring back the

¹⁶ Orion had boasted that he was so good a hunter that there was no animal he could not kill. After his death, his hunting companions Artemis and Leto asked Zeus to transform Orion into a constellation. The scorpion was also turned into a constellation as a reward to his service to animals, saving them from Orion. Close to Orion are several animal constellations: his hunting dog (*Canis Major*), and animals he would have hunted: hare (*Lepus*), bull (*Taurus*) and bear (*Ursa Major*). This is only one version of Orion's death, but he always seems to have died violently.

dead.¹⁷ The topic of this myth, resurrection from death, alludes to Tuttle's wish he could bring back his father and perhaps refers to Jamie's inability to save his client's life on Mount Everest. The story also, like the myths about Ganymede and Phaeton, demonstrates the absolute power of Zeus, while Tuttle feels rather powerless in his search for information on his father's last hours. In particular, at the time he tells the story, Tuttle is worried about how he can make Mike give him information.

Zeus is shown to violently punish unwanted behaviour, which he cannot control and feels threatened by, blasting Asclepius and Phaeton with his thunderbolt. This sort of inappropriate reaction is imitated by Tuttle vandalising Boyd's car when his bullying and interference become too much¹⁸ – only that, unlike Zeus, mortal teenager Tuttle soon realises that he will not get away with such behaviour.

One myth Tuttle chooses to retell is given a special New Zealand flavour. Tuttle tells his schoolfriend Attila, who is trying to write a novel involving werewolves, about the first of this species, Lycaon (Malcolm (2017) 122–3), who was transformed by Zeus as punishment.¹⁹ Tuttle narrates the story of the king's

¹⁷ *Zeustian Logic* contains no references to the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice nor Alcestis, even though they deal with the idea of bringing a loved one back from death. The popularity of the Orpheus myth in international children's literature is discussed in detail by Kümmerling-Meibauer (2006) 305–6. There is a constellation called Lyra which represents the lyre of Orpheus, and an asteroid called Alkeste, after Alcestis, but neither appears in *Zeustian Logic*. The main reason will be because Tuttle's focus is on the Greek gods, not mortal heroes from Greek mythology. Also, Orpheus was unsuccessful in his mission to return Eurydice to life and the myth of Alcestis is about her sacrificing herself to die instead of her husband (so it is about an exchange), though eventually Heracles manages to rescue her from the underworld. There is also no reference to Persephone, even though she is divine, possibly because she can only return to the underworld for half a year before having to spend the rest of the year in Hades.

¹⁸ Tuttle's aggression contrasts his mother's and brother's withdrawal.

¹⁹ Lycaon places his grandson in the fire on the altar and challenges Zeus to save him. Zeus rescues the child (who was the god's son by Lycaon's daughter). This is yet another story about Zeus' power, a dysfunctional family and a prevented death. Another version of the myth of Lycaon involves his wicked sons serving Zeus the intestines of a murdered child as a meal. Zeus kills Lycaon and all his sons, except one, with his thunderbolts or brought the flood upon humankind to punish Lycaon's deed. In another version, Lycaon himself served Zeus human flesh. All these stories involve murder (or attempted murder) and Zeus' punishment.

challenge to Zeus in a similarly humorous tone as his bed-time myths for Fen, though as a slightly more grown up version, which includes references to alcohol and incest, imagining the two main characters having a drink at the sacrificial altar (like Kiwi mates around the barbeque), which immediately gets Attila's full attention and input, including a pun about the Great 'Beer' which only works with a New Zealand accent.

When Tuttle and Fen are worried about being sent to a foster family, Tuttle tells his brother the myth of the inseparable twins Castor and Pollux (Malcolm (2017) 144) to assure him that they will stick together. Fittingly, he chooses a story about (half) brothers refusing to be separated, the Dioscuri, one of whom was mortal, the other immortal. Pollux, like Tuttle, is very protective of his brother.²⁰ Tuttle tells Fen that these two brothers could not bear the thought of being separated by death and asked Zeus to be able to always stay together. So, Zeus put both as constellations into the sky. In another version of the myth, which Tuttle does not mention, Pollux dies, and Zeus lets the two brothers spend alternating days on Mount Olympus and in the underworld (*Od.* 11,300–4; *Pind., Nem.* 10,55–59; *Apoll., Bibl.* 3,11,2; Lycophron, *Alex.* 564–6). Tuttle does not mention Castor's death, presumably to not upset Fen. Still, Fen gets upset at the mention of a family-death and yells at Tuttle that he dislikes his stories.

The brothers' roles are reversed, however, when it is Fen who helps his older brother, who suffers an attack of vertigo, climb down a tree (Malcolm (2017) 158–162). Apparently to distract himself from his fear of heights, Tuttle tells Fen about stars connected with centaurs, in the context of the star systems Alpha and Beta Centauri (Malcolm (2017) 160), while climbing down the tree. He only mentions the myth of the wise centaur Chiron who taught many of the greatest heroes. Among the names of the centaur's students, Tuttle mentions Asclepius separately, drawing particular attention to him, reminding Fen that he is 'the guy who brought people back from the dead' (Malcolm (2017) 162). This may reflect his fear, after vertigo grips him high up in the tree. Chiron was an exceptional centaur, as, unlike his brothers, he was not prone to violence and drunkenness. Like Tuttle's earlier reflections on Ganymede's loneliness, his mention of Chiron thus may hint at Tuttle feeling like an outsider after his father's death, as nobody seems to understand his situation. Furthermore, Chiron's great wisdom may be

²⁰ Incidentally, the Dioskuroi wanted to marry the Leucippides. Pollux had a son with the one who was called Phoebe, like the girl Tuttle likes. See Apollodorus, *Library* 3,11,2; Pausanias 2,22,5; Ovid, *Fasti* 5,697–700.

meant to stand in contrast to Tuttle's unwise act of vandalism. However, Tuttle's inappropriate behaviour, which he almost immediately regrets, does have one positive outcome: Tuttle, feeling remorse about his own actions, now realises that everybody sometimes makes mistakes and stops resenting the fact that his father may not have acted to his usual standards. The role reversal between younger and older brother (with Fen having to help Tuttle down the tree, i.e. taking on the role of parent for his older sibling in this instance) is echoed later when it is Tuttle who helps his mother overcome her feelings of guilt for her husband's tragedy.

All these mythical retellings refer in one way or another to Tuttle's own situation and that of his family. As typical for the use of Classical reception in New Zealand and Australian literature, this is only hinted at, rather than explicitly spelled out. Tuttle's retellings of myths deal with themes of rescue from death, dysfunctional families, risk-taking as opposed to wise behaviour and Zeus' absolute power. On the negative side, it becomes clear that Tuttle imitates Zeus' violent behaviour towards people he cannot control, when he damages Boyd's car. On the positive side, the way in which Tuttle re-tells the myths to his seven-year-old brother, cutting out the scary or inappropriate parts and using humorous language, shows how deeply Tuttle cares for Fen. Both, Tuttle's immature side and his more mature side are thus depicted through his own interpretations of Greek myths.

As the stars and constellations are universal, so is Greek myth. Telling these universal stories helps Tuttle make sense of his own life and he uses his gift of storytelling to connect with and try to help his younger brother, just like his father used it to connect with Tuttle, when he explained the constellations to him.²¹

The title of the novel, *Zeustian Logic*, of course refers to Greek myth, too, as does Tuttle's last name Theodorus.²² 'Zeustian Logic' is the gamer tag which

²¹ There also are two shorter mythological references, which are both (like Lycaon) unconnected to astronomy. On the school bus, Tuttle dreams himself away from the rambunctious behaviour of the younger students, imagining a food fight between Zeus and the Olympians against the Titans. The reference is to a battle of succession, here referring to older and younger highschool students. When Tuttle remembers how his father had built a treehouse for him in an oak tree in their garden (Malcolm (2017) 33), this makes Tuttle think of the story of the founding of Zeus' oracle at Dodona where a black dove landed in an oak tree.

²² Theodorus can either mean 'present of a god' or 'present to a god.' This matches Tuttle's interest in the Greek gods.

Tuttle has given himself, fitting the way in which the novel starts and ends with Tuttle reflecting on Zeus' ways to solve problems by creating constellations.²³ Phoebe, the girl next door whom Tuttle likes, is through her name connected to Phoebus Apollo, standing for a small amount of brightness in Tuttle's grief and anger. It is probably no coincident that Tuttle, in the myth about brothers supporting each other, is associated with Pollux who, in another myth, 'marries' a woman called Phoebe. Tuttle's mother's last name Cornelius may refer to Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi who was famous for her unwavering support of her two sons and was a widow, like Rose. Boyd could refer to the Northern Irish actor Stephen Boyd who is best known for his role as the villain Messala in the 1959 movie *Ben-Hur*.²⁴ The connections to Malcolm's boy-racer character Boyd are both, his villainy and his risk-taking when driving a car/chariot at high speed at Tuttle and Fen.

MYTHOLOGY AS ESCAPE

Tuttle is unable to deal with his problems in real life, so the stars and the stories of Greek mythology are a means of escape for him. The fixed visual patterns of the night sky and the recurrent narrative patterns of Greek myths of *katasterismos* are clear and straightforward to Tuttle, in contrast to the irrational and maddening behaviours of his mother, brother and schoolmates and the uncertainty about his father. The Greek gods mentioned in these stories have powers a fourteen-year-old troubled teenager can only dream of – just like the characters in video games, another of Tuttle's obsessions: they can solve any problems through their special powers, in the case of the Greek myths, which Tuttle favours, by eliminating enemies through *katasterismos*.

Astronomy and Greek mythology allow Tuttle to temporarily forget his anger, grief and shame. However, this works less and less, the more he is being bullied.

23 In an email of 8 May 2020, Malcolm answered my question about her choice of 'Zeus-tian' over 'Zeusian': 'With Zeusian, the word Zeus felt a bit submerged. It could even be read as "Zyoo-shin", and I wanted the "Zeus" part to pop out. (...) I also thought the sound of it, with the explosive "t", had more impact than Zeusian. It isn't really logical (there's irony...) in terms of the English language, but I felt I had some latitude in that its creator was a 14-year-old.' She was also concerned about the similarity to 'Seussian'.

24 I would like to thank Stephen Harrison for pointing out this connection.

In his frustration, Tuttle takes on the meanest bully, his neighbour Boyd, who touches a very sore nerve when he calls Tuttle ‘[a] cowardly [*sic*] mouse. Just like your famous dad.’ (Malcolm (2017) 12). It is exactly Tuttle’s worry that his father may have been a coward in the night of the mountain accident and that he might be one, too. This becomes clear when Tuttle, talking to his best friend Attila, lets these words slip out:

I didn’t mean to say the rest. It came out anyway.

“He says I’m a coward like Dad.”

(Malcolm (2017) 76)

It is striking that the key scenes in the novel (Tuttle damaging Boyd’s car, his confession to the police and the conversation with this mother in the car, during which she finally confesses her predicament to Tuttle) do not contain allusions to mythology. These scenes show the sad reality of Tuttle’s life, without any means of escape into the imaginary world of ancient mythology.

After vandalising Boyd’s car, Tuttle climbs up very high into a tree, despite his vertigo, presumably to prove to himself that he is no coward, to get away from all his problems and to be close to the stars for comfort and distraction. He is upset and imagines Social Services taking Fen and him to a foster home. It is striking, that even imagining this scenario, Tuttle makes a comparison to Zeus:

Social Services would say, “I’m sorry, but it’s time to go.”

Like Zeus, basically: This is how it’s gonna be. Get used to it.

(Malcolm (2017) 156)

The portrayal of the father of the gods in this scene indicates a shift in Tuttle’s judgement of Zeus’ authoritative approach. Here, Tuttle imagines himself in the role of Zeus’ victim, the emphasis being on Tuttle’s feeling of powerlessness, both against the authorities and against his own anger, which led him to commit a criminal offence.

In the end, it is all three, astronomy, mythology and storytelling, which help Tuttle overcome his uncertainty and shame regarding his father’s reputation. They also are the catalyst for reuniting the Theodorus family, after each family member had been so wrapped up in their own feelings of grief, guilt and anger, that they had been unable to grieve Jamie’s death together. When Tuttle shares his Viator-constellation with his mother and Fen, they together make up their own myth to match it, imagining Jamie in the sky, inventing new varieties of

home-brewed mead and telling everybody what to do, in the opinionated way for which he was famous when he was alive (Malcolm (2017) 206–207).²⁵ The fact that they stress his strong opinions is important here, as it refers back to Tuttle helping his mother deal with her guilt by telling her that Jamie would never have done anything, like leaving a client to die, because Rose had told him to concentrate on his own safety, but that he would always have made his own decisions. Here, myth works as consolation.

TUTTLE AND TELEMACHUS

Astronomy and mythology, as I have mentioned above, connect Tuttle closely to his father, who supported his son's interest in astronomy from an early age, and would himself have had a good knowledge of the constellations for purposes of orientation, just like any ancient Greek travellers, especially seafarers. In this way, Jamie can be likened to the greatest traveller of Greek myth, Odysseus, who, like Jamie, is missing and leaves a young son behind who believes him to be dead (*Od.* 3,241–2). In *Odyssey* books 3 and 4, Odysseus' son Telemachus, now a young man of about twenty years of age, travels to visit first Nestor and then Menelaus and Helen, who all were at Troy, together with his father, but have managed to return home. Telemachus wishes to speak to them to find out more about Odysseus and help him find his own identity. Telemachus travels to Pylos by ship, Tuttle sets out to Silverstream²⁶ by train to see his father's old friend and climbing partner Mike and his wife Meg to hear what really happened that night on Mount Everest. Unlike Telemachus, Tuttle takes this journey secretly, unbeknownst to his mother.

Telemachus' visit to Nestor in particular has a number of points of comparison with Tuttle's visit to Mike (Malcolm (2017) 109–117). Both youths arrive unexpectedly at the houses of old friends and colleagues of their fathers to extract some information from them. Tuttle opts for the same tactic for finding facts as the reporter used on him: by showing up surprisingly at Mike's front door. But,

²⁵ Rose used to compare him to a Greek philosopher because of his strong convictions (Malcolm (2017) 20).

²⁶ Silverstream is approximately 30 km North-East of Wellington.

since Tuttle is a teenager and not an experienced journalist, he has no success with this trick.

Both, Telemachus and Tuttle are worried about what to say to the older men they are visiting:²⁷ Telemachus is lucky to be accompanied by Athena in the disguise of Mentor, with whom he is able to share his worry and who gives him much encouragement (*Od.* 3,21–28; 3,76–7). Tuttle is alone, agonising about the right way to start the conversation. He explains: ‘Along with the route [to Mike’s house], I’d tried to memorize what I’d say to Mike. The trouble was, it kept changing.’ (Malcolm (2017) 110). He is trying out various openings in his mind, but at the end of his train ride still does not feel ready and when he reaches Mike’s house he stands ‘on the welcome mat (...) for a long time, shuffling.’ (Malcolm (2017) 113). His hesitation ends abruptly when Mike crashes out of the door in the middle of an argument with his wife Meg. Tuttle blurts out that he would like to ask him about his father (Malcolm (2017) 113). Inside the house, it takes a while and some prompting for Tuttle to utter a rather rambling explanation of what he exactly would like to know, and even then, he does not directly mention his question whether his father indeed left his client without helping him, but just asks if Mike or anyone he knows had remembered anything new about the disaster (Malcolm (2017) 115).

Telemachus’ conversation with Nestor takes a much more formal and structured shape. After a prayer to Poseidon, the young man first introduces himself because Nestor has never met him. Next, Telemachus without hesitation states the reason which brings him to Pylos: ‘I seek news of my father which has spread from far away, if I will hear it anywhere’ (πατρὸς ἐμοῦ κλέος εὐρὸν μετέρχομαι, ἣν πού ἀκούσω, *Od.* 3,83). He asks for any information Nestor himself may have witnessed or heard from somebody else (*Od.* 3,92–5), just like Tuttle asks Mike if he or anybody else has remembered more details about the accident on Mount Everest. Heroes in the *Odyssey* tend, of course, to speak in an elevated and clear style²⁸ and Telemachus, whom Nestor compares to Odysseus for his excellent

²⁷ Jones (1988) ²⁸ interprets Telemachus’ public engagement with Nestor as a kind of test, through which the young man may achieve *kleos*.

²⁸ The occasional *anacoluthon* does not change this impression. An example is Nestor using an *anacoluthon* at *Od.* 3,103–8. This shows how absorbed he is in his description of the *nostoi* of the Greek heroes from Troy (see de Jong (2001) 75). This way of speaking, leaving some sentences unfinished, may also be a hint at Nestor’s old age.

way of speaking (*Od.* 3,122–5)²⁹ and being a young royal supported by a goddess, unsurprisingly manages to pose his question in a much more confident and coherent way than modern teenager Tuttle in his worry and confusion.

The relationship of guest and host becomes clear when one looks at the way the two address each other. Since Tuttle never directly addresses Mike and Meg, this analysis will focus on the way the hosts address their young visitor. Nestor repeatedly calls Telemachus ‘friend’ (ὦ φίλ’, *Od.* 3,103; 3,199; 3,211; 3,375), while Telemachus addresses the king very formally and politely for a while (*Od.* 3,79; 3,202; 3,247) until he also calls him ‘friend’ (*Od.* 3,313). Even though the two have never met, Telemachus is seen as a friend because his father Odysseus was one. Nestor also twice calls Telemachus ‘child’ (τέκνον, *Od.* 3,184; 3,254). This address may on the one hand refer to the great age difference between host and guest, but also at Telemachus’ insecurity in how to behave in this situation, as a guest of a king. He heavily relies on Athena/Mentor’s encouragement, and she scolds him, at *Odyssey* 3,230, for an inappropriate remark. Strikingly, here she addresses her mentee by name, Τελέμαχε (*Od.* 3,230). This single address by name, highlights that Nestor never in the conversation addresses his guest by name. When Telemachus visits Menelaus and Helen in book 4 of the *Odyssey*, accompanied by Nestor’s son Peisistratos, the king, before the young men have introduced themselves, calls the pair ‘dear children’ (τέκνα φίλ’, *Od.* 4,78). After the recognition, because Helen notices the similarity in Telemachus’ appearance to Odysseus, Menelaus refers to Telemachus as ‘my best friend’s son’ (φίλου ἀνέρος υἱός, *Od.* 4,169), but in a general exclamation of pleasant surprise, rather than a direct address toward Telemachus. Now that they know who their guest is, Helen addresses him and Nestor’s son formally as ‘cherished and noble youths’ (διοτρεφεῖς ἠδὲ καὶ οἶδε | ἀνδρῶν ἐσθλῶν παῖδες, *Od.* 4,235–6), showing how she takes Telemachus seriously as a grown up, noble guest. Menelaus, in contrast, addresses him as ‘hero Telemachus’ (Τηλέμαχ’ ἥρωος, *Od.* 4,312), using a name and an epithet. This is the first time that one of Telemachus’ hosts addresses him by name. One reason for this will be that Menelaus here speaks to Telemachus in a private setting, whereas all the other conversations mentioned are formal occasions with other people present. The epithet ‘hero’ con-

²⁹ Merry and Riddel (1886) about *Od.* 3,124 discuss how this line can either be interpreted as Nestor expressing his amazement in that Telemachus’ way of speaking is ‘like what it should be’ or that his manner of speaking is ‘like to his (Odysseus)’. The comparison to Odysseus makes most sense in this context.

nects Telemachus to his heroic father and is a way for Menelaus to express his respect for his friend's son.

Tuttle is, due to the modern context, addressed by first name more often than Telemachus, sometimes the name is affectionately shortened to 'Tut.' When Mike first sees Tuttle, he utters a surprised 'Tuttle?' (Malcolm (2017) 113). Meg warmly greets him with 'Tut' (Malcolm (2017) 115). When saying goodbye, they again use both forms of the name (Malcolm (2017) 116). This is not surprising as they know Tuttle and his family well, even though they have not seen them for almost a year. However, during Tuttle's time at their house, they twice talk about Tuttle in the third person, as though he was not present (Mike: 'Look what [not: whom!] the owl sent in.' Malcolm (2017) 114) and by the pronouns 'him' and 'he' (both Malcolm (2017) 115),³⁰ 'But sometimes you [as in the impersonal 'one'] have to just ... move on.' (Mike), 'The poor boy!' (Meg) and, again, 'You have to move on.' (Mike) (all quotes: Malcolm (2017) 116). The impersonal talk shows how uncomfortable Mike is with the conversation, in which he does not wish to engage, and how Meg does not agree with her husband's insensitive approach, which just adds to their general air of disagreement.

Both young men are greeted and offered refreshments by their host's relatives, but while Nestor and his sons and sons-in-law all seem to be respectful and helpful to each other and their host, the mood at Mike's house is overshadowed by his quarrel with his wife. For Tuttle it is almost as much of a disappointment as the lack of news about his father that his image of Mike and Meg as the perfect couple (as opposed to his own dysfunctional family) is shattered. For this reason, even though both, Nestor and Mike, are unable to provide their guest with the information they are looking for,³¹ their answers and the outcome of the conversations differ. Nestor gives Telemachus a long answer about the homecoming of several of his and Odysseus' companions, invites him to stay overnight and recommends that Telemachus visit Menelaus and Helen to ask them for more information. He even has one of his sons drive him there in a chariot. He treats Telemachus like a grown up and honoured guest, comparing him to

30 'Don't push him,' said Meg. 'He's here for a reason. Let's hear it.' (Malcolm (2017) 115).

31 Frame (2009) 174, 180–1 and 182 with n. 78 points out the irony that, even though the name Nestor means 'he who brings home,' Nestor does not bring Odysseus home. The two men, who used to always be united, quarrel on the island of Tenedos, after which Odysseus leaves Menelaus' army and returns to Agamemnon, whereas Nestor continues to stay with Menelaus: see *Od.* 3,159–66.

his father Odysseus (*Od.* 3,123–5; 4,141–54)³² and praises Odysseus as a favourite of Athena (*Od.* 3,221–2) and his soul mate (*Od.* 3,126–9). He emphasises this connection between himself and Odysseus by using the dual in line 128 (ἔχοντε νόω). This sets the tone for the way Telemachus will be treated by Menelaus and Helen in book 4 of the *Odyssey*.

Telemachus is received hospitably by Menelaus and Helen, they tell him about his father being a great warrior and friend at Troy (*Od.* 4,169–82) and Helen presents Telemachus with a wedding gown for his future wife, treating him as an adult man, an honoured guest and the son of a famous hero. All this helps Telemachus find his identity, even with his father still missing. Menelaus also tells Telemachus that Proteus had told him that Odysseus was being held against his will by Calypso on her island (*Od.* 4,555–60), which, even though this information is now three years old,³³ gives Telemachus hope that Odysseus might still be alive after all. Tuttle is not so lucky. When he arrives at Mike's house, Mike is so preoccupied with his anger at his wife³⁴ that he does not even try to make his friend's son feel better but brushes him off.

The sentiment that, after a certain period of mourning, it is time to overcome one's feelings of grief is a commonplace in ancient literature. As Heracles says at Euripides, *Alc.* 1079: 'But what good will you accomplish if you lament forever?'³⁵ There even were laws in ancient Rome determining the appropriate lengths of time to grief different family relations.³⁶ However, in a modern context, such a sentiment appears very heartless, especially coming from a family friend. After a brief conversation, Mike sends Tuttle on his way home as quickly as he can. Mike and Meg treat Tuttle like a child, worrying about him travelling at night without his mother's knowledge. They give Tuttle a ride to the train station, reminding us of Nestor's son driving Telemachus. However, while Telemachus is travelling to other people who, even though they cannot give

32 Heubeck, West and Hainsworth (1988) on *Od.* 3,141 ff. rightly note the oddness in Helen comparing Telemachus to her 'mental picture' of Odysseus' son, rather than directly to his father. She clearly expects him to look very similar to Odysseus.

33 See de Jong (2001) 111.

34 In contrast, Menelaus and Helen are now presented as a quite happily married couple. Their past troubles seem to be forgotten.

35 For a detailed discussion of this sentiment in ancient literature see Konstan (2006) 250 and 254–6.

36 Konstan (2006) 252. Mourning is the ritualised aspect of grief.

him up-to-date information about Odysseus' current whereabouts, still give him some hope and make him feel welcome and support him, Tuttle has no other friends of his father's to go to and leaves frustrated. In his own words, at this point: 'I was pretty done with adults.' (Malcolm (2017) 117).

TUTTLE AND ZEUS

At the beginning of the novel, Tuttle is impressed by Zeus' way of solving problems by exerting his unbeatable powers over everyone else. When Tuttle is at his lowest, unable to find out more about his father, having damaged his neighbour's car and thinking that he will now be surely forced to go to a foster family, he realises how powerless Zeus' victims would feel. In the end, he finds his own way to use Greek myth to deal with his problems in a positive, constructive way. Tuttle explains:

There's something I figure Zeus never quite worked out.

You can get the world's most loyal dog, like *Canis Major*. Or the fastest hare, like *Lepus*. Or the greatest hunter, like *Orion*, or even the toughest warrior-scorpion, like *Scorpius*. Or maybe just someone who's pretty good-looking, like that shepherd Zeus turned into a drinks waiter. And you can shove them all up in the sky, like Zeus did in those stories – for being fast, or loyal or fierce.

Which is fine.

But there's other stuff, too.

Stuff that makes a person – well, just extremely impressive. Worthy of being in stories. Or whatever. That kind of thing.

And that's I reckon Zeus never really got.

(Malcolm (2017) 203)

The Greek gods, because they are immortal and do not suffer like mortals, do not understand empathy and have no need for it. However, the myths highlight that mortals, in contrast to the gods, can and need to be empathetic and supportive of each other. An example for this is Achilles, who in his anger is responsible for terrible suffering, including the death of Patroclus. Here the hero's divine side is overpowering his humanity. Only when the hero learns to understand human suffering and mortality, he becomes capable of showing empathy towards Priam, the father of Hector, whom he had slain in revenge for Patroclus' death. This re-

stores Achilles' humanity.³⁷ Tuttle is focussed entirely on the Greek gods, in particular on Zeus, and does not consider the mortal heroes of Greek myth and the lessons he might learn from their stories. Like Achilles (though, of course, on a much smaller scale) Tuttle first needs to make his own mistakes to start seeing the Greek gods' behaviours and attitudes in a critical light. It turns out that Tuttle resembles his father because both are stellar storytellers, not because they are cowards. The question whether Jamie indeed abandoned his client on Mount Everest is not solved in the novel, but it becomes unimportant to Tuttle.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Malcolm's novel, as we have seen, is part of a tradition of New Zealand YA novels engaging with Classical reception, while containing their distinct New Zealand flavour. The title of the novel and Tuttle's gamer tag, *Zeustian Logic*, refer to the change in Tuttle's understanding of how the Greek god Zeus solves problems. Super-powers can only get you so far as a mere mortal. In fact, violence only increases Tuttle's troubles. This change in Tuttle's attitude reflects his maturation as a character, with his anger and grief turning into acceptance. Even though Tuttle's focus is on the Greek gods, his journey of maturation displays strong similarities with that of the mortal hero Telemachus. Furthermore, like Achilles, Tuttle learns through his own mistakes the importance of controlling his anger and showing empathy. Greek mythology plays a central role *Zeustian Logic*, as the connection between astronomy and storytelling, Tuttle's two main interests. The novel's design around star-mythology is intricately connected with Tuttle's coming-of-age story. Tuttle's changing reflections on the Greek myths of *katasterismos* help him find his own way to creatively overcome his grief and re-unite his family.

³⁷ On this see also Katz (2017) 186.

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The *Lore* of It All: A Female Twist on the Homeric Hero

Abstract *Lore* (2021) is a young-adult novel that tells the story of a young woman by the name of Lore, a descendant of the Greek hero Perseus. Once every seven years, the Greek gods are forced to wear a human form and be hunted by descendants of different Greek heroes in the deathly Agon. When a hunter kills a god, he becomes a New God and gets their powers. Traumatized Lore is forced back into the Agon to protect Athena and avenge her family's murder. Bracken uses elements of Greek mythology and current trends from YA literature to create the heroine of her novel. Lore demonstrates characteristics similar to those of the Homeric hero while portraying her role as a 21st-century woman warrior, aka Girl on Fire. A comparison is drawn between Lore and the Homeric hero, with particular attention given to the masculine-feminine dichotomy.

Keywords Lore, Girl on Fire, The Homeric Hero, Classical Reception, Masculinity

INTRODUCTION

*Lore*¹ tells the story of Melora “Lore” Perseous, a young woman in modern New York City who is the last descendant of the mighty Greek hero Perseus. In this version of events, Zeus punished the Greek gods for their rebellion and decides to instate the Agon – every seven years they become mortal for one week and are being hunted by the descendants of the bloodlines, who wish to become gods in their place and strip them of their power. Lore, traumatized by the murder of her family in a past Agon, vows never to compete again but is forced into the current Agon by Athena.

Lore matches the mold of the Girl on Fire,² a strong female heroine that has been taking center stage of YA literature for a little over a decade now. By doing so, she is deviating from the archetype of the Homeric hero, the character she supposedly represents in the world of the Agon.

This contribution seeks to explore the differences and similarities between Lore and the Homeric hero, while demonstrating her Girl on Fire traits. Moreover, a special attention will be given to the other aspects of Classical Reception used in the novel, such as the Agon, the gladiator games, and the character of Medusa.

CLASSICAL RECEPTION

The current contribution lends itself to the field of Classical Reception Studies³. The accepted definition of Classical Reception consists of “the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented”.⁴

1 Bracken (2021).

2 Hentges (2018).

3 I wish to thank Ayelet Peer from the Department of Classical Studies at Bar-Ilan University for her notes.

4 Hardwick/Stray (2008) 1.

More specifically, it follows James's⁵ approach. Based on Bowman's⁶ distinction, James⁷ argues that within the framework of Classical Reception Studies, scholars can analyze different types that are drawn from antiquity. Such types can include for example the theory of Greek heroic myth or the heroic figure. These types serve as an inspiration for different characters in modern popular media and culture, "without being a direct retelling of a myth".⁸

THE HOMERIC HERO

For the purpose of this paper, I regard the Homeric hero as an archetype. Of course, there are some differences between the heroes presented in the Homeric epics, but in order to show the deviation presented in *Lore*, there should be a standard to deviate from.

A Homeric hero is defined as such simply by the fact that he is born during the generation of heroes. The heroic generation has a "greater capacity for self-propelled vigor".⁹ Since it is the next generation after the generation of Gods, their action, thought and emotion heights are similar to those of the Gods. The heroic generation reflects the decline of mankind, characterized by their divine parentage. The men of the heroic race are characterized by strength and sometimes by wisdom. They are fierce and skilled orators.

Secondly, the Homeric hero is motivated by the need for status, respect and honor.¹⁰ Most of all, the Homeric hero seeks fame and glory (κλέος), the hero's actions will grant him *gloria mundi*.¹¹ Due to that, they are often pushed to extremes of anger, passion and even recklessness. Another important distinction

5 James (2009).

6 Bowman (2002).

7 James (2009).

8 Rea (2022).

9 Clarke (2006) 80.

10 Clarke (2006) 77.

11 Clarke (2006).

is made by Graziosi and Haubold,¹² suggesting that the Homeric hero “displays little or no sense of solidarity, collaboration or self-restraint”.

Thirdly, and most importantly to the current contribution, is the manhood of the Homeric hero. The Homeric hero is first of all a man, one who possesses an extreme level of male energy. The driving force behind manhood is the need for praise and admiration.¹³ The Homeric hero is the restorer of order.¹⁴ He is anti-social, and so the restoration of order includes his expulsion from society. He has no place in the restored society.

THIS GIRL IS ON FIRE

Over the past decade, the Girl on Fire has taken the center stage of young adult dystopian literature. This character type is a strong female heroine who fights for injustice and advocates for the oppressed among their community.¹⁵ According to Hentges¹⁶ the Girl on Fire is a “complex, intelligent, brave and a triumphant survivor of impossible situations”. The Girl on Fire takes ownership of her destiny while advocating for herself, and in some cases, her community.¹⁷ One other aspect of the Girl on Fire is that she is a political and transformative figure. She exudes empathy and compassion, and often aligns herself with vulnerable and socially marginalized people.¹⁸

Hentges¹⁹ describes the norms prevailing in the rebellious character of the Girl on Fire. In most cases, she is a young white woman. She is most likely poor or from a lower class, and she fits the model of the ordinary girl. Additionally,

12 Graziosi/Haubold (2003) 74.

13 Clarke (2006).

14 Rubino (1994).

15 Connors/Szwydky (2020).

16 Hentges (2018) 5.

17 Connors/Szwydky (2020).

18 Connors/Hentges (2020).

19 Hentges (2018).

“all of the Girls on Fire are an amalgamation of their identity traits, shaped by their life experiences and the dystopic conditions they live through”.²⁰

A prime example of this archetype is of course the character of Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* trilogy.²¹ Katniss is a “though-minded young woman who, throughout a mix of gumption and luck, challenges authority [...] strategize, make demands, and even hunt and kill”.²² The use of violence by Katniss throughout the series is seemingly justified. It is meant for self-defense and to fight the oppressor. It is especially important to notice she is struggling and grappling with her murderous actions and their consequences.²³

Death and trauma are interwoven into *The Hunger Games* universe, and Katniss is very much affected by it. Katniss carries deep trauma, which only exacerbates throughout the series. Growing up in Panem’s District 12, starvation is the main danger Katniss faces. Her father was killed during work, and she grew up with the loss of a parental figure which led to graver trauma in her life. Already traumatized, Katniss participates in two consecutive hunger games followed by a civil war.

Katniss is a paradoxical character; she is both a savior and a killer. In the first two volumes she is “causing death, defying death and acting to prevent death”.²⁴ Lore displays very similar characteristics to Katniss, and their journey is very much alike. The current contribution is not seeking to compare the two characters, or the two worlds, but it is important to notice that. A considerable amount of what scholars have written in the past decade about *The Hunger Games* and Katniss will aid the current analysis.

²⁰ Hentges (2018).

²¹ Collins (2008); Collins (2009); Collins (2010).

²² Broad (2013) 117.

²³ Finley (2019).

²⁴ Moffat/May (2021) 448.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO LORE

The first page of *Lore*²⁵ presents the reader with Zeus' order of instating the Agon:

The lord of sky stood bright against the fall
of twilight and spoke: Hear me, blooded heirs
of those proud men who ventured into the
darkness to slay those monsters and kings past.
I call you to a final agon to
win your own lasting glory. Nine gods have
betrayed me and now demand cruel revenge.
For seven days at the turn of seven
years will they walk as mortal so you men,
and all your heirs henceforth, may break your own
fated path and turn your thread of life to
immortal gold. Reveal your strength and skills and
I will reward you with the mantle
and the deathless power of the god whose blood
stains your bold blade. For this chance I ask much.
Gather at the navel of the known world
and begin your hunt when the day is born.
So it shall be until that final day
when one remains who is remade whole.

In this world, the gods have betrayed Zeus and tried to rebel against him. In return, he creates a punishment for them – the Agon. The Agon is a week-long “event” that takes place every seven years, where the gods are forced to walk the Earth as mortals, being hunted by the descendants of ancient bloodlines. If a hunter succeeds in killing a god, they gain their powers and immortality and become a New God.

Melora “Lore” Perseous is part of The Persides, the House of Perseus. Each house (i.e. bloodline) is named after its forefather, and so for example other houses are named after Achilles, Odysseus, Jason, Herakles and others. During the last Agon, Lore’s whole family (father, mother, sisters) was murdered, and so

25 Bracken (2021).

she swore to never take part in the Agon again and to leave it behind her. She becomes a caretaker of an old man named Gil (later revealed as Hermes) and lives in his house in New York City. Lore has to face the consequences of death once again when Gil dies, and instead of grieving and healing – she chooses to distract herself by participating in boxing fights.

At the start of the 211th Agon, two figures enter Lore's life. The first is Castor, Lore's long-lost friend, whom she believed to have died of leukemia. It is revealed that during the last Agon a wounded Apollo encountered Castor, and made the human kill the god. And so, Castor ascended as the New Apollo. The second character is a ruthless and cunning Athena. She hates the New Gods and wishes to kill them all. At the beginning of the book, she comes to Lore, pretending to be injured, and asks her to bond their lives together. Athena's plan is to "purify the lands"²⁶ and end the human race, who, according to her, poisons the world.

During the week of the Agon, Lore, together with Castor, Athena, Lore's roommate Miles, and Castor's cousin and messenger of the Achillides Van, search for Athena's aegis, which is believed to be stolen by the Kadmidés who are led by Wrath himself. In the meantime, Wrath is also looking for the aegis, because he believes it contains a missing piece of the order Zeus' gave when initially creating the Agon, which will tell him how he can harness the powers of more than one god at a time.

THE AGON

The Agon presented in *Lore* is inspired by the Greek word ἀγών (agon) and its various meanings. It is agreed by scholars that the meaning of the word is that of "gathering" or "assembly", and more specifically an "assembly to see games"²⁷ or "assembly with contests".²⁸ Scanlon,²⁹ who examined the occurrences of the word in Homer and Hesiod, found the word is used in various meanings that

²⁶ Bracken (2021) 515.

²⁷ Scanlon (1983).

²⁸ Ellsworth (1981).

²⁹ Scanlon (1983).

share a common element – a local sense. In other words, the word *agon* is used to describe a place associated with competition.

When examining the words of the Spartan legislator Lycurgus, a distinct connection between manhood and *agon* can be made.³⁰ Lycurgus discusses manhood being tested during a competition. Lycurgus explains that a legitimate *agon* contains a worthy field, a prize, mutually acceptable judges and an audience. These elements gave “courage, victory, and defeat their cultural meanings.”³¹ Lycurgus, like other Attic orators, articulated competitive values to validate valor and manliness.

Lore's *Agon* is the ultimate competition, designed to bring *kleos* to its winners. The prize of the *Agon* is becoming a god, which will bring along an immense *kleos*. When a hunter becomes a New God, he chooses a new name and loses his mortal name. This signifies him discarding his mortality. The new name is the one being known and the one being remembered. As *Lore* best explains to Miles, “For seven days, every seven years, the gods walk on earth as mortals. If you can kill one, you become a new god and take their power and immortality, but you’ll be hunted in the next *Agon* as well”.³²

Each cycle, the *Agon* takes place in a different location. The location of the *Agon* is selected by the place of the *omphalos*, a large stone known as the navel of the world. The *omphalos* is placed in the place in which the leaders of the bloodlines have the most power and resources, which is why it takes place in metropoli such as London, Tokyo, and New York City.

Lore's *Agon* is very reminiscent of the hunger games. The hunger games were formed as a punishment for the districts' rebellion. Each year, two children from each district compete for their lives. They are placed in an arena where the last person standing becomes the victor. The games are televised, and the Capitol's citizens watch this bloody event for their amusement.

Clearly, a comparison can be made between the hunger games and the gladiator games, as also confirmed by the author herself. One of the hypotheses on the purpose of the games suggests the gladiator games were used as a propaganda tool. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the first gladiators were prisoners of war, and so their failure in the arena served as a reminder of the

³⁰ Roisman (2007).

³¹ Roisman (2007) 394.

³² Bracken (2021) 59.

Roman victory.³³ As Moffat and May³⁴ explain, death is a political tool used by the Capitol as a control mechanism. And so, a line can be drawn from the gladiator games to the Agon.

IS THIS BURNING AN ETERNAL FAME?

In the world of *Lore*, the descendants of the bloodline are the “participants” in the Agon, and they are called hunters. Hunters are “trained to kill gods and anyone else that stands in their way.”³⁵ Similarly to the Homeric heroes, glory is one of the most important things for these hunters. As stated in the book, “the hunters believed that there was no greater honor than to die on the hunt in the pursuit of glory, rather than be taken by Thanatos, the god of gentle death.”³⁶

When speaking of people who are trained to kill, the author makes a connection to the Spartans. Lore tells Miles that “the hunters had adapted their training programs from those of the great Sparta, but they removed the things they didn’t like.”³⁷ In other words, the Agon is not solely based in the world of the gladiator games but also on the war-minded Sparta, which is known for its military force.

Additionally, throughout the book, the reader is reminded of the significance of honor and pride. Over the course of the book, the reader receives glimpses into Lore’s past and her training as a hunter at Thetis House. When she first starts her training, she is very eager. Her goal is to train hard and achieve areté – “the perfect combination of courage, strength, skill and success”³⁸ – and kleos. Her instructor tells the class what their true goal and aspiration should be:

“Pain is the essence of life. We are born into it and, if you are to be hunters, if you are to honor your ancestors, you will die in it [...] You will strive for areté, but there

33 Kaczmarek (2016).

34 Moffat/May (2021).

35 Bracken (2021) 73.

36 Bracken (2021) 437.

37 Bracken (2021) 92–93.

38 Bracken (2021) 96–97.

is no greater death than that of a warrior who has attained the immortality of kleos for himself and his bloodline. Honor. Glory.”³⁹

Evidently, these desired aspirations are the same ones desired by the Homeric heroes. Kleos lies in the center of the heroic values, and it is something to be won.⁴⁰ It is “the objectification of the hero’s personal survival in epic song, the ‘imperishable fame’ which lives among men and keeps alive the hero’s name”.⁴¹ Lore, like all hunters, wishes to gain kleos and honor her bloodline. Additionally, the hunters are very proud people, so much so that Lore says that the “hunters could always be counted on for their monstrous pride, and none more so than the Achillides”.⁴²

Most of the New Gods, the winning hunters, are men and not women. It is explained that the elders of the bloodlines do not believe the female hunters are supposed to claim a god’s power. When Lore discusses this with Athena, she points a finger at the goddess’ approach, dating back to her presence in the journeys of the Homeric heroes. “... but they also look to you. To the fact that you only ever chose to mentor male heroes on journeys. You only helped *them* attain battle-born kleos – the only kleos that matters to the elders.”⁴³ In this excerpt, Lore addresses one of the main arguments of this article. The Homeric heroes are all men, and the idea of kleos can only be related to the battlefield.

I would like to dwell upon Pindar’s use of kleos in his poems. Pindar, a fifth-century BC poet, is well-known for his poems praising the victors of the Olympic Games. Pindar views kleos as the aim of the effort of the athletic activity. Kleos, the eternal fame, is bestowed upon the victors through the poems written on them by Pindar, who immortalizes them. Pindar writes about the success achieved by individual men at the expense of others, by defeating their competitors.⁴⁴

When Athena confronts Lore on her decision to leave the Agon and her past life, she reminds her of the importance of kleos.

39 Bracken (2021) 100.

40 Segal (1983).

41 Segal (1983) 26.

42 Bracken (2021) 119.

43 Bracken (2021) 339.

44 Goldhill (1990).

“... this world bore you. You belong to it. That is your birthright. You were always meant for glory, but it was taken from you, and now you will never feel satisfied – never *whole* – until you possess what you deserve [...] You are no monster. You are a warrior [...] And were you not meant for some greater role, you would have perished with your family.”⁴⁵

Athena tries to enlist Lore to help her by reminding her of her aspiration for kleos. Athena’s statement, that Lore cannot be “whole” without it, can be interpreted as reference to the Homeric hero. Since the Homeric hero’s ultimate goal is to win eternal fame, they cannot actually truly complete their journey without reaching this goal. Lore knows that she cannot truly abandon the game without fulfilling her destiny. She is a warrior, and so she has to continue fighting until she meets her demise in battle.

YOU’RE A WOMAN, I’M A MAN

The tension between masculinity and femininity is ever-present in the *Iliad*. Ransom⁴⁶ suggests viewing the ideal masculine identity in contrast to the “other”, which in most cases is the feminine. For example, Hektor contrasts his masculinity to the strength of a child and the knowledge of a woman:⁴⁷

... μή τί μεν ἤυτε παιδὸς ἀφαιροῦ πειρήτιζε,
ἠὲ γυναικός, ἣ οὐκ οἶδεν πολεμήια ἔργα.
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν εὖ οἶδα μάχας τ’ ἀνδροκτασίας τε.

... in no way try to frighten me like some puny boy
or a woman who knows not deeds of war.

Hektor is highlighting his masculinity in these lines by contrasting himself with the woman, who has no knowledge of warfare and is ignorant of battle. The Homeric hero is thus the opposite of the feminine. The Homeric warrior is phys-

⁴⁵ Bracken (2021) 342.

⁴⁶ Ransom (2011).

⁴⁷ Hom. Il. 7,235–7.

ically attractive, which is evidence of his godly parentage and noble status.⁴⁸ Thus, according to the ideas presented in the *Iliad*, masculinity is based on concepts such as martial fortitude and civic responsibility.

Even from the look of the conception alone, Lore is already deviating from the classic definition of the masculine Homeric hero. The premise of her being a female warrior is an antithesis to the ideas presented by Homer that were prevalent in the Archaic society. As already mentioned, Lore fits with the model of the Girl on Fire, who exhibits many masculine qualities.

Similarly to Katniss,⁴⁹ the character of Lore can be analyzed according to the theory of Female Masculinity.⁵⁰ Female masculinity is a phenomenon in which women bodies do masculine performative acts, it allows a “glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity”.⁵¹ Lore, like Katniss, lacks feminine qualities and is depicted in line with hegemonic masculinity and violent hegemonic masculine practices. She exhibits traits that are associated with the masculine; she is independent, fearless, and skilled. Lore embodies the character of the masculine woman in fantasy literature, who has “the capacity for violence, ownership and proficiency with weapons, and mastery of the self and others”.⁵²

The patriarchal aspect of the ancient world lives on in *Lore*. According to the fundamental belief, only men are allowed to claim the power of a god. Over the centuries, they allowed women to hunt, but in the present of the book, only a select few are chosen to work in a pack on behalf of the archon – the leader of the bloodline. Those are the léainas or the lionesses,⁵³ who hunt the gods and bring them to their leader to kill. The other women, the parthénoi, exist solely to ensure the survival of the bloodline by giving birth.

This tension reaches its climax in a brutal sexual assault Lore experience. As already mentioned, in the beginning of the book, Lore is no longer a part of the world of the Agon. She had abandoned her path as a warrior. Gradually,

48 Ransom (2011) 40.

49 Parvathi (2017).

50 Halberstam (1998).

51 Halberstam (1998) 1.

52 Evans (2018) 15.

53 Greek tragedy and poetry compare women to lionesses to show their active role and sometimes the inappropriateness of their position of power. For a comprehensive analysis, see: Konstantinou, 2012.

the reader receives more information about her past trauma and her decision to turn away from the Agon. Lore tells Athena about her time with the Odysseides, and their new Archon. The Archon touched Lore inappropriately during her training and gave her special attention. One night, he invited her to his office and told her that from that moment on, she would only serve him. He forced himself on her.

Lore tells Athena that at that moment, she “understood what that world was”.⁵⁴ Lore realizes that in this world there will always be a man who decides her fate, who controls her. But then she realized she did have a choice – and she chose to kill him so he would not be able to hurt her or anyone else. As Athena best describes it, Lore “knows the darkness of men yet refuses to be afraid”.⁵⁵ This traumatic experience made Lore leave the world of the Agon behind her and create her own destiny.

Castor, Lore’s long-lost friend, is the New Apollo. Interestingly, while Lore exhibits more of a masculine characteristic, Castor is more effeminate. This kind of “reversal” is also present in *The Hunger Games* books. Katniss, which, as we have seen, is more masculine, while Peeta exhibits feminine traits. Peeta bakes and paints – things that are considered more feminine. Similarly in *Lore*, Castor trains to be a healer and not a hunter, an occupation that is considered to be more feminine. The effeminate character of Castor enhances the more masculine character of Lore.

When Lore first meets Castor, he is sick, and so he is described as very weak and lean. The instructor pairs them together, claiming they will be “evenly matched”.⁵⁶ In his view, representing the patriarchal overview of the Agon as a whole, a sick boy and a healthy girl are even. Throughout their training, they form a bond, but it is Lore who mostly helps Castor. All through the book, Castor cannot manifest a physical form. When Wrath is trying to enlist the Achillides to his side, he uses Castor’s incompetence to persuade them. “He is weak, the weakest of the gods. Unable to manifest a physical form. Unable to tap the depths of his power”.⁵⁷ Once again, Castor is depicted as weak. Even as a god, he is still the weakest of them all.

54 Bracken (2021) 344.

55 Bracken (2021) 348.

56 Bracken (2021) 98.

57 Bracken (2021) 117.

The main villain of the story is the New Ares, who chooses the name of Wrath. This is particularly interesting since an almost immediate association, when hearing the word “wrath” in this context, is the wrath of Achilles. Achilles is the “epitome of heroism, the mightiest and most glorious of all his race”.⁵⁸ Since viewing Achilles as a prime example of the archetype of the Homeric hero, a norm which the character of Lore deviates from according to this article’s main argument, it is of great importance that her counterpart is also tied to the Homeric hero. In other words, Wrath’s name and his place in Lore’s story further assist in presenting this dichotomy between Lore and the Homeric hero.

Another point of difference between Lore and the Homeric hero is related to the aspect of collaboration. As mentioned earlier, the Homeric hero shows no signs of solidarity,⁵⁹ while Lore is the complete opposite. Throughout her journey, Lore is working with a group. Interestingly enough, with the exception of Athena, all members of her group are male. Each member of the group has a different skill, and together they manage to help Lore in her journey.

Lore is also similar to the Homeric hero in her experience and journey. At the end of the book, when Athena is about to die by the hands of Wrath, she asks Lore to kill her herself, so Wrath will not get her powers. Lore hesitates at first but she accepts and gains the powers of Athena. She becomes a New God. In that perspective, she is similar to Herakles, who becomes a god after his death.

As discussed previously, the Homeric hero is considered the restorer of order. At the very end of the book, after Lore has already accepted the fact that in the next Agon she will be a target since she is now a goddess, she pleads to Zeus to end the Agon. Zeus agrees, and Lore and Castor become mortal again. Since the Agon is now over, so does the hunt and the killing. This is to say, Lore has succeeded in restoring the order of the world by putting an end to the deathly Agon once and for all.

58 Clarke (2006) 84.

59 Graziosi/Haubold (2003).

LORE AND OTHER WOMEN IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY

From the first moment the reader comes in touch with *Lore*, they know to expect a connection between Lore and Medusa. The cover of the book depicts a marble statue of a young woman with snakes coming out of her head. Each house bears a mark, and the house of Perseus, which Lore belongs to, bears the mark of the Gorgon. The hunters wear masks of their ancestors' greatest accomplishments and kills.

At one of their pivotal conversations throughout the book, Lore confronts Athena about the way she punished Arachne and Medusa. Athena, on her side, claims that she helped Medusa. She suggests she transformed her so she would be able to protect herself from those who wish to harm her. Athena blames men for perpetuating Medusa's depiction as a monster, stemming from their fear "to meet the true gaze of a woman, to witness the powerful storm that lives inside, waiting".⁶⁰ Medusa, just like Lore, is now a "being who could gaze back at the world, unafraid".⁶¹

Lore may be deviating from the classic mold of the Homeric hero, but she does resemble other interpretations of the modern Amazon. As Potter⁶² best describes it:

"In ancient Greek mythology the Amazons are the barbaric other, women who behave like men and ultimately exist to be defeated, subjugated and domesticated by male heroes like Heracles, Theseus and Achilles. Living on the edges of the civilised Greek world, their all-female society where girl children are prized and women hunt and fight without the need for men is in opposition to the Athenian patriarchal norm".

Hardwick⁶³ reviews the description of the Amazon in ancient literature and points at three major ways of portrayal throughout history – heroes, outsiders and women. Homer describes the amazons as "men-like", suggesting they fight and look like men. He compares the amazons to men in their fighting skills

⁶⁰ Bracken (2021) 347.

⁶¹ Bracken (2021) 347.

⁶² Potter (2018) 31.

⁶³ Hardwick (1990).

and emphasizes their military reputation. It is worth noting that depicting the Amazons as heroes makes them worthy opponents, and so it is worth defeating them. By highlighting the heroic nature of the amazons, Homer is also emphasizing the virtues of his male heroes. More modern depictions of the amazons stress their unusual nature and their deviation from “normal”. Lore is one of recent examples of heroines who invoke the Amazonian myth. These new depictions paint the amazons not as women who should be tamed and conquered, but as “young female warriors, designed as admirable heroines in their own worlds”.⁶⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main goal of this contribution was to highlight the similarities and differences between the traditional Homeric hero and a modern depiction of the archetype, embodied by the character of Lore in the YA novel by the same name. As a hunter, Lore exhibits the traditional traits of the Homeric hero: she seeks kleos, honor and pride. She is a skilled, strong warrior. The main deviation Lore has from the traditional Homeric hero concerns her gender – she is a female and not male. Although, as demonstrated above, she exhibits many masculine traits and is not associated with many traits that are considered feminine. The tension between masculinity and femininity is a central theme in this novel, and the contrast between the Homeric hero and the Girl on Fire enhances it.

⁶⁴ Graf (2015) 78.

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‘The Wide Canvas of Human Drama’

Fantasizing Antiquity Through Graphic Novel

Abstract This paper argues that representation of classical antiquity through graphic novel runs a risk of idealizing reconstructed antiquity. In a way similar to the archaic and classical Greek representation in visual arts of the content of heroic (fragmentary) epic, 21st-century retelling in *Age of Bronze* fantasizes with regard to both narratology and outlook. In 1998 Eisner Award-winning cartoonist Eric Shanower started *Age of Bronze*, a serialized Trojan War account, 34 episodes of which have appeared up to date. The graphic novelization aims to ‘present the complete story of the world-famous War at Troy, freshly retold for the 21st century’. Its format serves to have ‘all the drama of the ancient and thrilling tradition unfold before your eyes.’ As its sources it lists Homer’s *Iliad*, works from classical, medieval and renaissance literature, and archaeological excavations. The artist uses different styles for episodes from various sources, thus imitating the archaic and classical vase paintings’ attempt to stereotype the narrative in visual representation. Shanower’s detailed processing of contemporary visualization enforces a new standard of the heroic world’s representation. The decision to translate antiquity’s patchwork of stories, fragments and testimonia into a single all-encompassing thread echoes both ancient epics’ tendency to ‘contain’, and novels’ to work against *medias in res*. The series’ attempt ‘to be true to all traditions’ does cater ‘those who think visually’, but envisions, I argue, a fantasy rather than ‘Troy sprung to life’.

Keywords Graphic novel, *Age of Bronze*, Eric Shanower, retelling, idealized antiquity

RECONSTRUCTING ANTIQUITY

Classical antiquity has been reconstructed as many times as it has been received;¹ this goes for epic narrative as well as for any other cultural expression originating in the world of the ancient Greeks and Romans.² The earliest instances of reception of, for example, archaic Greek epic reconstructed what they received through imitation and elaboration.³ From there reception required more constructivism, as the gap between the received and the receiver grew wider, both in time and in conceptualization.⁴ Reception often equaled either idolization or demonization, deliberate use or abuse of what was considered the classical tradition or legacy. Only recently classical reception has evolved into an academic discipline, offering the incentive for scholars to move away from too modernistic approaches of ‘antiquity’.⁵ Such approaches remain very much

1 Hardwick (2003); Martindale (2006); Budelmann & Haubold (2008); Renger & Solomon (2012) 1–14; Hutcheon & O’Flynn (2013); Kallendorf (2017); De Pourcq, De Haan & Rijser (2020) 1–12; Quiroga Puertas & Olabarria (2024); Bakogianni & Unceta Gómez (2024).

2 Graziosi (2008); Hopkins (2008); Roisman (2008); Davis (2008).

3 Simms (2018); Hunter (2018); Manolea (2022).

4 Landfester & Hinz (2015); Tatum (2014) 90–91, discussing literary reception, refers to Martindale’s use of ‘vulgar historicism (the view that we can know the past as it really was, untainted by what came after) and an equally vulgar presentism (the view that everything is wholly adapted to what we think in the present)’: ‘The linking of two –isms and the repetition of “vulgar” is carefully crafted. Since Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* “historicism” has served as a term of abuse; it inspired the more recent “presentism,” coined to identify still another professional transgression that no reputable classicist would want to be guilty of.’ In retrospect, the same holds true for every receiver.

5 Greenwood (2016) 41 ‘In spite of connotations of classics and the classical as an established tradition based around a stable canon, Greek and Roman classical antiquity has never been a fixed object of study. It has changed as our knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome has grown and shifted, and as a function of history, intellectual movements, and taste. Classicists have turned to classical reception studies in an attempt to chart some of the different encounters that various historical audiences have had with Greek and Roman classics, and this wave of research poses interdisciplinary questions about the relation of Greek and Roman classics to world literatures and cultures. The emphasis on classical reception studies offers fresh ways of thinking about the cultural mobility of the classics without appealing to discredited, old-fashioned notions of “timeless importance” or “universal value”.’

alive, though, outside academia, in popular culture.⁶ This paper argues that representation of classical antiquity through graphic novel runs a continued risk of idealizing reconstructed antiquity – *inspired by academia*.⁷

ANTIQUITY IN NOVELIZATION

In itself, the idealizing of antiquity in graphic novelization is no novelty of course: in the various modern reception products of especially the epic tradition,⁸ there had been a century-long tendency to interpret epic, and mythologizing narrative in general, as ‘sword-and-sandal’.⁹ Especially in its visual representation in film, antiquity’s epic may be summarized as:¹⁰

6 Lowe & Shahabudin (2009); Lozano Gómez, Álvarez-Ossorio Rivas & Alarcón Hernández (2019) 9–24; Nisbet (2020).

7 Schein (2008).

8 Graphic novelization is a relatively newly developed reception medium. Though precursors have been acknowledged from as early as the 19th century, the term *graphic novel* was coined in the early 1960s and gained popularity from there, especially with the publication of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) (Couch [2000]; Schelley [2010] 117). As a reception medium of classical antiquity graphic novelization has concentrated primarily on representing mythology, e.g., in George O’Connor’s *Olympians* series (2010–2022), the *Promethea* series by Allen Moore, J. H. Willimas III, and Mick Gray (1999–2005), Ryan Foley’s *Zeus and the Rise of the Olympians* (2012), and *Greek Street*, contextualizing Greek mythology in a modern London setting (2009–2010) by Peter Milligan and Davide Gainfelice.

9 O’Brien (2014); Adriaenssens (2017) 137 ‘[...] the sword-and-sandal or peplum film, where a Greco-Roman or ersatz classical context provides the perfect backdrop for spectacular special effects, muscular heroes, and fantastic mythological creatures. The 1960s and 1970s proved a fruitful breeding ground, with stop-motion wizard Ray Harryhausen contributing heavily to the successful animation of mythical statues in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963), *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (Gordon Hessler, 1973), *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (Sam Wanamaker, 1977), and *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis, 1981); and after a second wave in the 1980s with sword-and-sorcery films such as *Conan the Destroyer* (Richard Fleischer, 1984), the trend surfaced once again in the 2010s with the action-packed Perseus chronicle *Clash of the Titans* (Louis Leterrier, 2010) and *Wrath of the Titans* (Jonathan Liebesman, 2012), and the teen updates *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Chris Columbus, 2010) and *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (Thor Freudenthal, 2013).’ Exhaustive listing of sword-and-sandal movies in Kinnard and Crnkovich (2017) and Simões Rodrigues (2021).

10 Gunsberg (2005) 97–132; Pomeroy (2008); Dumont (2009); Cornelius (2011) 1–13; Kon-

- Half-naked, bronzed muscle-men, usually black-haired;
- Half-naked, beautiful women;
- Gigantic, usually remarkably white gods and goddesses;
- High-rise marble-white palaces;
- High-rise steep cliffs and mountains;
- Burning sun and endless dust.

The genre has grown conscious of its inclination to idealize quite one-sidedly. This awareness has resulted in very diverse reception products. On the one hand, there is the over-the-top representation of sword-and-sandal as an equivalent for historical events that are deemed heroic, even on a par with the marvelous achievements from myth. The best known example is the 2006 movie *300*, visualizing the attempt of the Spartan soldiers under the command of their king Leonidas and with the aid of few allies, to halt the invasion of southern Greece by the Persian army.¹¹ The movie was itself a direct adaptation of a 1998 graphic novel by Mark Miller, and carefully imitated not only its depiction of both the Spartan and the Persian troops and individuals, but also copied the remarkable color scheme of the original: red and yellow, blood and dust are prominent, and practically the only colors used. (Fig. 1)

On the other hand, there is the attempt to steer away from the prototypical white-and-male rendering of both heroes and gods in, for example, the Trojan

stantinos (2013) 1–17; O’Brien 2014; but cf. Prorokova and Smith in Nicholas (2018) 195–207, 208–217.

11 Lauwers, Dhont & Huybrecht (2013) 89 ‘Snyder’s narration of the battle in Thermopylae lifts this event out of the field of history into the realm of mythology. Indeed, when considered from the consideration of genre, *300* bears closer resemblance to the fantastic mythological movies and series around heroes like Hercules than to historical television documentaries that purport to portray an event just as it “really” happened. The genre of these mythological movies calls for its own particular characteristics and stereotypes. *300* has modeled its gender image after these demands by highlighting the omnipresence of a hypermasculine perspective and by almost exclusively valuing typically male virtues. Nevertheless, *300* is more than just an artistic exercise in mythography. It also offers a piece of historical truth, albeit not a factual truth, but a truth of mentality history’; Beigel (2013) 73 ‘the entire film [...] makes selective use of single elements of the classical tradition mixed with modern conceptions, thus producing an unhistorical amalgam. And so, a large number of critics considered *300* historically inaccurate. On the other hand, such distinguished scholars as Victor Davis Hanson and Mary Bean insisted that a film which uses several more or less historical details cannot be that wrong.’



Figure 1 A still from the movie *300* (left) and the cover of the graphic novel *300* by Frank Miller (right).

War, as in the 2018 series *Troy: Fall of a city*. The casting of black actors to portray Achilles, Zeus, and Athena led to the allegation of ‘blackwashing’, but equally to revival of the debate on ‘Classical ignorance’. Tim Whitmarsh has argued that historical Greeks were ‘unlikely to be uniformly pale-skinned’, that ‘dark-skinned North Africans existed’ in ancient Greece, citing Memnon of Ethiopia as an example. He also stated that the ancient Greeks did not have a concept of ‘race’, adding that ‘[o]ur best estimate is that the Greeks would be a spectrum of hair colours and skin types in antiquity. I don’t think there’s any reason to doubt they were Mediterranean in skin type (lighter than some and darker than other Europeans), with a fair amount of inter-mixing’ and that there is no single, absolutely definitive version of the Trojan War story: ‘Homer’s poems are merely one version and the Greeks themselves understood the story could change... There’s never been an authentic retelling of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – they’ve always been fluid texts. They’re not designed to be set in stone and it’s not blasphemous to change them.’¹²

That Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were ‘not designed to be set in stone’ has of course been clear from the very start of the archaic Greek epic tradition¹³ and

¹² Cited in Ling (2018).

¹³ Finkelberg (2000) 1, citing Nagy’s stance that ‘up to the middle of the second century B.C.E., till the completion of Aristarchus’ editorial work on the Homeric text, this text was

its reception:¹⁴ both epics start at rather random points in time, as explained by their respective proems.¹⁵ Both epics reflect developments from a tradition that enabled epic narrative to grow and shrink, to incorporate stories from various sources and to cater to different audiences.¹⁶ For both epics, the completion, in the burial of Hector and the appeasement of the suitors’ relatives respectively, has been contested:¹⁷ are we indeed looking at the ending as Homer intended, or are both epics artificially brought to completion by a later editor or group of editors?¹⁸ In some manuscripts, tradition tells us, the *Iliad* was immediately followed by the *Aethiopsis*, an epic poem from the so-called epic cycle.¹⁹ What singled the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* out, in a broadly accepted approach among scholars, is their alleged panhellenism: as Gregory Nagy has argued, the two

undergoing a so-called “crystallization” process: it gradually evolved from a state of relative fluidity to one of relative rigidity, and it continued to preserve a certain degree of multiformity at each stage of this development, that is, even after it had been first fixed in writing. On this interpretation, the tradition of the oral performance of Homer continued to influence the written text of the Homeric poems, so that “the variants of Homeric textual tradition reflect for the most part the multiforms of a performance tradition”, allows for such fluidity only for the Cycle Epics: ‘the written transmission of the Cyclic epics displays the same multiformity at all stages of their existence, thus reflecting in the written form the multiformity of the oral tradition. But there has always been only one version of the *Iliad*. This can only indicate that at some early stage the history of the Homeric text became not simply a history of a written text, but a history of a written text that was also considered canonical in the civilization to which it belonged. In that, its status was closer to the status of the Bible than to that of the *Chanson de Roland* or the *Nibelungenlied*. We should continue, then, to speak of this text in terms of emendations, interpolations, scribal errors, and other phenomena that are characteristic of manuscript transmission’ (11).

14 Graziosi (2002).

15 Wheeler (2002) 41–43.

16 As well as allowing ‘rhapsodes to gain a competitive edge by branding their performances of the *Iliad* with their own identities through the unique interpretations of the Homeric epic that the proems generated’, Tomasso (2016) 379.

17 Overviews in Richardson (1993) 21–24 (no discussion in Brügger [2017]), and Russo, Fernandez-Galiano & Heubeck (1992) 353–355.

18 Kelly (2007) argues for the ‘decreasing doublet’, the compositional technique where the placement of a larger element directly before a smaller one emphasizes the significance of the prior, larger element, and signals closure of the text, as a consistent strategy of closure in early hexametric poetry.

19 Schol. T = *Aethiopsis fr.* 1 West; cf. Burgess (2001) 140–142; Wheeler (2002) 42–44.

Homeric poems might have been the only products of the epic tradition that appealed to all Greek audiences, throughout the Greek-speaking world of antiquity: modern-day Greece, Türkiye, and southern Italy.²⁰

But despite this panhellenism, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* remained fluid in performance throughout Greek antiquity, up until the first century BC.²¹ They inspired and influenced storytelling in other genres, like tragedy and mythography, and were possibly themselves inspired by other-genre narrative developments. It remains uncertain at what point in time the Homeric epics got their definite form – that is, more or less the form in which we have them now: reconstructions differ in their dating from the sixth century (the famous Peisistrean recension), the late third century (in Alexandria), to the first century. In the course of this formation process, numerous additional and alternative story lines appeared and disappeared, some of them fueling traditions the reception of which is much better known to us than the assumed originals: the love affair of Achilles and Briseis, the killing of Troilos, Troy's youngest prince, the provenance of Paris, the wooden horse, the fall of Troy.²² As in our day and age, the desire to construct a larger, complete story of Troy, beyond the truncated plots of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, was very much alive in antiquity.²³ The various story lines represented in early archaic and classical vase painting testify to this deeply felt wish for co-

20 Nagy (1996); Nagy (2004); cf. Ross (2004).

21 Bird (2010).

22 A number of them preserved in the extant remnants of the Cycle epics, cf. Fantuzzi & Tsagalis (2015) 1–40.

23 Aptly summarized in Fantuzzi & Tsagalis (2015) 2 n. 3 'Cypria (end): capture of Briseis and Chryseis and catalogue of Trojans and Allies – *Iliad* (beginning): strife between Achilles and Agamemnon on Briseis and Catalogue of Ships and Catalogue of Trojans and Allies; *Iliad* (end): death of Hector – *Aethiopis* (beginning): mention of Hector's funeral; the Trojans ask Penthesileia to help them to make up for the loss of Hector; *Aethiopis* (end): stasis between Odysseus and Ajax about the arms of Achilles – *Ilias parva* (beginning): stasis between Odysseus and Ajax about the arms of Achilles; *Ilias parva* (end): Trojan horse enters the city – *Iliou persis* (beginning): Trojan horse enters the city; *Iliou persis* (end): Achaeans insult Athena by raping Cassandra – *Nostoi* (beginning): Athena makes Agamemnon and Menelaus fight over the question of whether or not they must appease the goddess before sailing away; *Nostoi* (end): murder of Agamemnon by Clytaemnestra – *Odyssey* (beginning): the gods recall Agamemnon's fate; *Odyssey* (end): decision reached about the burial of the suitors – *Telegony* (beginning): burial of the suitors by their relatives. Repetitions in the beginnings and endings of Trojan Cyclic epics are however a rather complex phenomenon: a line must be drawn between original overlappings (which may go back to oral epic tradition in the manner of

herent and consistent novelization: from a narratological perspective, the collection and convergence of storylines motivated poets, scholars and scholiasts to continue puzzling together, and supplementing to, an overarching narrative. Their constructive effort has led modern scholars to introduce a new generic term, mythography, to describe and analysis this process and its workings.²⁴

EPIC IN GRAPHIC NOVELIZATION

Epic has proven a ready candidate for retelling in various and variant modern media.²⁵ Within Comics Theory, the specific suitability of graphic novelization for the retelling of epic has been duly noted.²⁶ In addition to, and partly in contrast with, the attempt to stay as close as possible to the presumed characteristics of the original,²⁷ the two trends in the novelization of antiquity as described above, the awareness of fragmentary and various provenance of epic material on the one hand and the wish for coherent and continuous storytelling on the other, apply to the retelling of archaic epic through graphic novelization. In a way similar to the archaic and classical Greek representation in visual arts of the content of heroic (fragmentary) epic, 21st-century retelling in *Age of Bronze* fantasizes aptly with regard to both narratology and outlook.²⁸

narrative doublets and dwindling pendants) and editorial reworking, the former aiming at connecting an epic that narrates a distinct phase of the war to the next one, the latter trying to create a more smooth and linear narrative progression.’

24 A summary and criticism of the development and use of the term in Calame (2023).

25 Including podcast dramatic retelling and the recent trend of epic mythology retelling from a feminine perspective (Haynes [2020]), cf. the acknowledgement as a reception work of the translation of the *Iliad* (2023) and the *Odyssey* (2018) by Emily Wilson.

26 Kovacs (2011).

27 The Marvel graphic novel by R. Thomas & M. A. Sepulveda, *The Iliad. Adapted from the Epic Poem by Homer*, Marvel Characters, Inc. (2010) reuses for both the narrator’s text and for all direct speech a translation of Homer’s *Iliad*.

28 Myrsiades (2008) xi ‘After 2700 years on the best seller list, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in English translation are still required reading in most college/university basic world literature courses, judging from their inclusion in most introductory world literature texts (The Norton Anthology, The Longman Anthology, The Bedford Anthology). Interest in Homer in

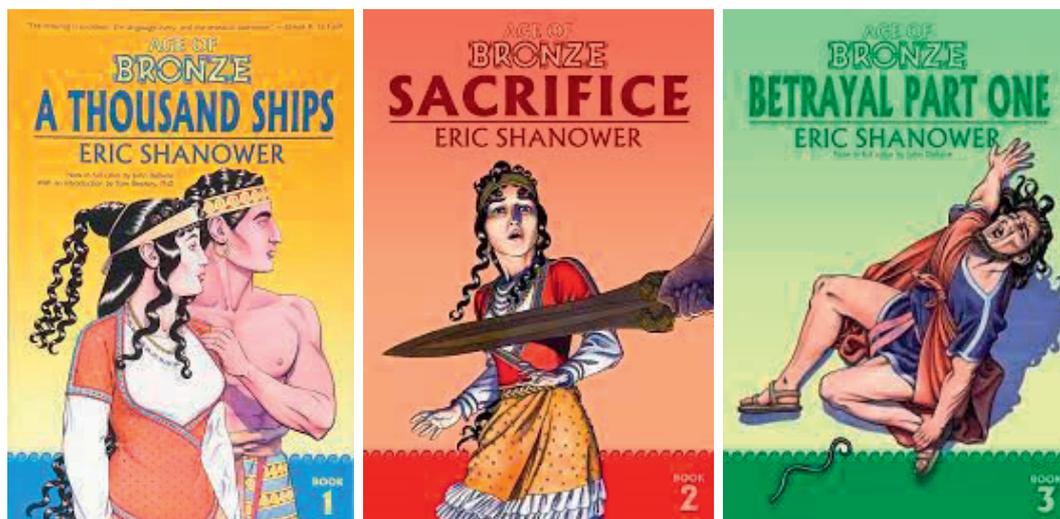


Figure 2 Installments of Eric Shanower's *Age of Bronze*.

In 1998 Eisner Award-winning cartoonist Eric Shanower started *Age of Bronze*, a serialized Trojan War account, 34 episodes of which have appeared up to date.²⁹ The episodes have been published online, and were later published in issues comprising several episodes. All the episodes are to an extent self-standing as suggested by their titles ('A Thousand Ships'; 'Betrayal'; 'Sacrifice' [Fig. 2]) and the foreknowledge required by the reader.

As the website of both the series and the author states, the graphic novelization aims to 'present the complete story of the world-famous War at Troy, freshly retold for the 21st century'. Its format serves, so the website claims, to

the 21st century seems to be stronger than ever. The most recent of the over two dozen translations of Homer's *Iliad* and/or *Odyssey* in the last 50 years has just been published (The *Iliad*, trans. Herbert Jordan, University of Oklahoma Press). Since 1990 there have been eight new English translations of the *Odyssey* and six of the *Iliad* [...]. New critical studies on Homer since 2000 seem to be on the rise [...]. A renewed interest by historians and critics questioning the authenticity of the Trojan War and Troy has generated a number of new books (Bryce, 2006, Burgess 2001, Castledon 2006, Latacz 2001, Lowenstam 2008, Strauss 2006, Thomas and Conant 2005, and Thompson 2004), which have appeared in the last few years [...]. Even the graphic novel has appropriated Homer in the projected seven volume series of Eric Shanower, of which three volumes (27 installments; see Works Cited) have already been published.' Cf. Jha (2016) on Indian epic.

²⁹ With emphasis on eroticism Sulprizio (2011). Shanower provided an extra in Kovacs & Marschall (2011) 195–206.

have ‘all the drama of the ancient and thrilling tradition unfold before your eyes.’ As its sources it lists Homer’s *Iliad*, works from classical Greece and Rome (notably Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Aulis*), medieval and renaissance literature (Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*), and ‘archaeological excavations of the places where the story took place: Mycenae, Knossos, and Pylos, among others, and especially Troy itself.’³⁰ Needless to say, however, *Age of Bronze* is not a graphic novelization of the literary works mentioned as its sources:³¹ ‘the final product is a version for the 21st century. All the comedy, all the tragedy, all the wide canvas of human drama of the Trojan War unfolds within the pages of *Age of Bronze*.’ ‘All the drama’ requires a lot of monology, dialogue, and explicit sexuality to cater to 21st century taste.³²

In many respects, the manner of storytelling in *Age of Bronze* resembles the epic storytelling of antiquity, while in some it runs counter to it. The result is an idealized remodeling of Greek epic’s highly idiosyncratic patterning and serializing of tales: as memorized above, archaic Greek epic is by no means a continuum from which to freely draw episodes.³³ On the contrary, Greek epic is itself a genre typology in which different subgenres are brought together: narrative, genealogical, and antiquarian hexametric tales and fragments. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* stand out as larger-scale narratives against a background of miscel-

30 <http://age-of-bronze.com/> (last accessed 27 February 2024).

31 As is, e.g., the Marvel graphic novel R. Thomas & M. A. Sepulveda, *The Iliad. Adapted from the Epic Poem by Homer*, Marvel Characters, Inc., (2010), see footnote 27 above.

32 Sulprizio (2011).

33 Ford (1992) 40 ‘stories belonging to the same general area of mythic history may be shaded into one another or isolated for individual treatment.’ Burgess (2004) 3 ‘Cyclic performance would have occurred long before the textualization of the Epic Cycle in the early Hellenistic age, when it appears that a collection of previously independent epic poems were gathered together to form an “Epic Cycle.” The Epic Cycle as we know it was manufactured by scholarly activity, quite independently of oral performance culture. Yet the texts used in this cycle must result from oral poetic traditions of the Archaic Age. From our earliest evidence it is apparent that mythological material was thought to cohere into certain units; a Heroic Age with chronologically arranged groupings of mythological tales, like the Theban wars and the Trojan war, is assumed in Homeric and Hesiodic poetry. So the Epic Cycle is a fixed and literate manifestation of a longstanding oral and notional arrangement of mythological material. Before the textualization of the Epic Cycle, then, oral performance of epic could on any given occasion be organized according to a notional “cycle” of myth. When the mythological cycle was actualized by epic performance, oral prototypes of the Epic Cycle would have resulted.’

laneous fragments and catalogue poetry, the latter of which are generally considered of inferior aesthetic quality when compared with the Homeric epics.³⁴ What brings the various epic types together under a single generic heading is primarily their metrical format, in combination with content that need not be considered as pertaining to actuality.³⁵ To illustrate the resemblances between archaic epic and Shanower’s novelization with regard to the evaluation and aesthetic appreciation of storytelling, as well as with respect for the expression in a different medium: The artist uses different graphic styles for episodes from various sources. Particularly interesting is his choice to depict embedded antiquarian narratives like the destruction of Troy by Heracles in the preceding generation. For this reminiscence Shanower draws in a more naïve style, using thicker lines, a more schematic build-up of the frames, and a caricatural style for his story’s characters, Heracles in particular.³⁶ (Fig. 3) Such style switching falls in with the acknowledged stylistic differences pointed out in embedded narrative in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*,³⁷ and with the assumed difference in style of the Cycle Epics.³⁸ The graphic style of Shanower’s ‘Heracles reminiscence’ is a

34 Martin (2005); Finkelberg (2020) 169–181; but cf. Sammons (2013). Negative evaluation of Cycle Epic when compared to Homer goes back to Aristotle *Poetics* 1459a37–b17.

35 Grethlein (2012) describes ‘heroic history’ as a ‘gravitational field’ that links the past to the present through causality, thought tradition, and in exempla.

36 The deliberate shift of style also imitates the archaic and classical vase paintings’ attempt to stereotype the narrative in visual representation (Tsagalis [2022]): vase paintings of the Eurytos-episode from the labors of Heracles are to such an extent stereotyped with regard to characters and the moment of action depicted, that they allow for the detailed reconstruction of the lost literary work that allegedly served as its inspiration.

37 Including ‘embedded’ taken as ‘inserted at a later time’, cf. the discussion of stylometric studies on *Iliad* 10 and their outcome in Hainsworth (1993) 154.

38 Griffin (1977) 52 ‘It is of course true that we have pitifully few of the thousands of verses which made up the Cycle, and that long epics are bound to contain weak passages. Yet we can form an impression of the treatment of Oedipus’ curses, of the adorning of Aphrodite, and of the killing of Astyanax, all of which might reasonably be expected to be striking incidents and to exhibit the poets at their best. The result of our inspection perhaps casts some doubt on the optimistic view which some moderns have taken of these lost epics. When Rzach says both the *Thebais* and the *Cypria* contained “many poetic beauties”, and Wilamowitz that the author of the *Iliou Persis* was “a creative poet of high rank” I suspect that in reality, while the opportunity for such beauties was certainly present, in the poems it was generally missed, and that they were very clearly inferior to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. After all, that was the verdict of antiquity.’ More nuanced and prudent approaches to the style of Cycle epic poems in



Figure 3 ‘naïve style’ in the Heracles-passage.

more comic rendering. We are reminded of the ironic depiction of, for example, Odysseus on Boeotian and Corinthian ‘burlesque’ pottery,³⁹ and of the out-

West (2013) and Tsagalis (2017; 2022). Fantuzzi & Tsagalis (2015) 405 ‘The aesthetics of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* represented something most probably unusual in the archaic age, with their detailed narrative pace, their selection of chronologically limited and unified time-spans, and their frequent deviations from the chronological order of events. In contrast to (what we now label) the ‘Homeric’ poems, the narrative strategies of the other poems in the Epic Cycle may have been the norm – strategies well suited to an audience’s horizon of expectations at the time when the poems were first performed. In the pages that follow, I will try to investigate when and why the Epic Cycle could no longer satisfy the aesthetic expectations of both later readers and post-archaic literary critics. As we shall see, the Epic Cyclic poems turned into a practical (and indispensable) reference for Theban and Trojan mythology, and yet they seem to have been less and less read; above all, they came to function as a poetic foil against which the different mechanics of Homeric narrative were defined. Of course, the fact that the poems were condensed into epitomizing summaries – transformed into easy-to-swallow pills that were widely consulted from the Hellenistic age onwards – does not by itself prove that the ‘originals’ were no longer read. But the phenomenon does demonstrate that – differently from the summaries – the original poetic form of the Cyclic poems ended up being seen as dispensable, at least for many post-classical readers.’

³⁹ E.g. Fairbanks, *Vases (MFA)*, no. 467; British Museum 1893,0303.1; Metropolitan Museum 1971.11.1; Ashmolean Museum G 259; Ashmolean Museum G 249.

of-date description of out-of-date events by the aged king Nestor in the *Iliad* (*Il.*1.262–273, *Il.*7.133–160, *Il.*11.670–761, *Il.*23.629–645, *Od.*3.157–184). It has been argued recently in the scholarly debate that the works of the Epic Cycle, a collection of shorter and longer epic narratives, some ascribed to Homer, that may originate from the environment of the Homeric epic and were intended to fill the narrative gaps before, between, and following the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,⁴⁰ allowed for a lighter, possibly more comic tone than the works of Homer.⁴¹ As the Epic Cycle epics are only transmitted and known in very short fragments, it is hard to determine the truth of this claim; what becomes clear at any rate is that the cyclic poems worked from a shared knowledge of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and opted for a different form of storytelling: one that depended more on telling than on showing, through, for example, featuring much less direct speech than the Homeric epic.⁴²

With regard to performance practice, the graphic novel is capable of suggesting and evoking narrative tension in ways that archaic Greek epic storytelling could not. *Age of Bronze* features quite a lot of 'silence', scenes without spoken words or dialogue to suggest psychological stress:⁴³ facial expression and position within the dramatic scene are suggestive of a cascade of unexpressed thoughts and memories going around the head of the character depicted, much of which is left to the empathy of the reader.⁴⁴ (Fig. 4) In the Homeric epic, however, thoughts and emotions only exist due them being spoken out loud: there is

⁴⁰ Cf. footnote 23 above.

⁴¹ Burgess (2001) 132–169.

⁴² Cf. Aristotle on the number of tragedy plots to be drawn from a single epic (*Poet.* 1459a37–b17). Burgess (2001) 12–33 discusses the possibility of the transmission of Cycle Epics' plots, but regards Photius' comment on Proclus (λέγει δὲ ὡς τοῦ ἐπικοῦ κύκλου τὰ ποιήματα διασφύζεται καὶ σπουδάζεται τοῖς πολλοῖς οὐχ οὔτω διὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν ὡς διὰ τὴν ἀκολουθίαν τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ πραγμάτων 'and he says that the poems of the Epic Cycle are preserved and of interest to most not for their worth but for the sequence of events in it' [transl. Burgess]) as indication for their transmission in verse.

⁴³ Within Homeric epic, silence contributes to narrative tension as a signifier of feminine chastity (Fletcher [2008]).

⁴⁴ An extensive example in the 23-page sample from Shanower *Age of Bronze: Sacrifice*, pp. 1–2, 18–19 on http://age-of-bronze.com/images/sac_sample.pdf. Kovacs (2016) comments on the way this fragment combines and contrast the taciturnity of the characters and the rising of the wind at Aulis.



Figure 4 From *Age of Bronze: Sacrifice*.

no inner emotional life that goes unspoken.⁴⁵ The performer can only evoke emotion through performing, there is no room for tension from silence of waiting.⁴⁶

Another important difference is the possibility within the graphic novel to shift scenes, and to show eventualities that occur simultaneously with others already depicted or yet to be shown. Homeric storytelling lacks this device:

⁴⁵ De Jong (2018) 33–34.

⁴⁶ Only for 'embedded focalization', cf. De Jong (2004) 14.

everything is told linearly without an explicit linking of possibly simultaneous events.⁴⁷ A famous example is formed by the gatherings of the gods in *Odyssey* books 1 and 5. So much has happened in between, in books 2 to 4, that it appears inconceivable that the gathering at the start of 5 is still the same as the one at the beginning of 1, though the story's internal logic demands as much.

The outcome of the novelization, however, result in a reception product that reflects an incomparably higher level of internal narrative logic than the Homeric epics or the cyclic poems displayed. The decision by the author of *Age of Bronze* to translate antiquity's patchwork of stories, fragments and testimonia into a single all-encompassing narrative thread does echo both ancient epics' tendency to 'contain', that is, to use the large epic frame to encompass and include as many single episodes as possible,⁴⁸ and novels' tendency to work against *medias in res*.⁴⁹ The latter principle defines ancient Greek epic storytelling, but is willfully traded in for chronological logic and episodic linearity, much like it

47 De Jong (2007) 30–31 'A specific Homeric device for handling time in connection with parallel storylines is what has become known as 'the law of Zielinski'. It consists of two parts. (1) The Homeric narrator does not retrace his steps: when he moves from one storyline to another, time ticks on and storyline B continues where storyline A left off; while one storyline is in the foreground, the other remain stationary, that is, time ticks on, but nothing important happens. (2) When two storylines are announced; for example, when a character issues two orders, their fulfillment is told successively, but they should in fact be thought of as occurring simultaneously; thus Zielinski reconstructs a real action, as opposed to the apparent action which we find in the text. [...] Of course, should he so wish, the narrator is perfectly capable of presenting simultaneous actions, for example in *Odyssey* 8.438–448, where he explicitly notes that the little scene of Arete handing over a chest to Odysseus takes place while the water for his bath is getting warm. Then there is the technique, already mentioned by Zielinski, of rapid changes of scene, which create an impression of simultaneity. An example is found in *Odyssey* 17.492–606, where the narrator switches rapidly between Penelope's upper room and the *megaron*, where 'the beggar'/Odysseus, the suitors, and Telemachus find themselves. Finally, there is the most frequent and the most inconspicuous form of simultaneity, namely that conveyed by changes of scene via *men ... de* or similar expressions: since the *men*-clause usually contains a verb in the imperfect, the suggestion is clearly that while we turn to another place or storyline, the action in the first place continues.'

48 Cf. Kovacs (2016).

49 Hudson (2010) argues for the more extensive narratological capacity of graphic novel as a reflection of its 'inherently dialogic' nature, cf. Dallacqua (2012) on the adaptation to reading strategies, and Mitchell (2014) on both comics and novel as a *medium* (as opposed to epic as a *genre*).

is found in the Greek and Roman mythographers, who were the first to line up both the epic format and the prose rendering as *media* for the presentation of mythological plots.⁵⁰

Together with the decision to also include practically all the story material from the rich and long reception tradition of Homeric poetry, mythology, and mythography, *Age of Bronze*, ‘a comprehensive retelling of the Trojan War legend, distilled from the many versions of the famous story and set against the archaeologically correct backdrop of the 13th century BCE’ ‘presents the complete story of the world-famous War at Troy’ in a manner unknown in antiquity’s epic: back then there was no ‘complete story’. The concept of thematic continuity and linearity is found for the first time in late- and post-antique epitomizers who take care to provide thematic ‘bridges’ between the various episodes.⁵¹ The desire to synthesize and chronologize now what explicitly resisted systematization then is equally found in other recent reception like *Troy* and *Fall of a City*.⁵² It addresses a modern ideal that does not resonate with aesthetic concepts of antiquity.

Another form of idealization elicited by graphic novel *Age of Bronze* lies in the artistic representation of the Homeric world, a representation that is, as the citation ‘set against the archaeologically correct backdrop of the 13th century BCE’ on the website confirms, backed up by the results of archaeological and historical scholarship. The artist Eric Shanower took further trouble to base his reconstruction in drawing upon his own viewing of the remnants of, among other locations, Troy, modern-day Truva in Türkiye, and Mycenae on the Peloponnese. A large number of extant finds, reconstructions, and modern phantasies⁵³ were used for Shanower’s reconstruction of the Homeric world. In scholars’ view, however, such reconstruction on the basis of the Homeric epic is already a heavily contested issue:⁵⁴ Homer appears to have mixed a plethora

50 Smith & Trzaskoma (2022) 3–6; cf. Mitchel (2014).

51 Fantuzzi & Tsagalis (2015) 1–40, and cf. footnote 23 above.

52 Shahabudin (2007)

53 Considered self-evident in comics, cf. Hudson (2010) 35 ‘graphic novel constitutes a carnivalesque and Menippean form of writing due to its regular and free blending of mundane and fantastical imagery, “slum naturalism”, and mythic symbolism’.

54 Köiv (2022) 1 ‘The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* give an apparently coherent view of the Heroic world, providing rich evidence for many aspects of social life and human activity. This evi-

of different environments from different eras in his world view.⁵⁵ Shanower's depictions are based on detailed processing of contemporary visualization. On the one hand, he uses authentic artifacts, like the Cycladic idols and the famous boar tusk helmet. On the other, he leans on often fanciful reconstruction of, for example, layer 6A of historical Troy, the inner quarters of a Mycenaean palace as drawn by Piet de Jong of the palace of Nestor in Pylos, and on Evans' reconstruction of the Minoan palace of Knossos on Crete to suggest the walls of Troy. In instances of uncertain reconstruction, Shanower operates with care: he does not accept that Minoan and Mycenaean female attire left breasts bare, nor does he dare to guess what type of heads (lions? lionesses? tigresses?) crowned the famous gate of Mycenae. (Fig. 5) Existing sword-and-sandal movies, however, and video games, are consulted to add to the reconstruction and vice versa.⁵⁶ Together the materials used enforce a new standard of the heroic world's representation, a standard that, like the systemization of the narrative, suggests a synthesis and internal coherence that cannot be found in the original stories.

What is kept in Shanower's 'complete story' is the nostalgic, modernizing idealization of the heroic world, and, with it, of the world of antiquity in general.⁵⁷ Almost everyone is physically intact and beautiful, almost everything is

dence is much richer than anything else we possess from before the Classical period, which makes it completely natural that it has regularly been used for reconstructing early Greek society. The way this evidence can be used is debatable. On the one hand, the epics did not purport to describe the present time of the poet, but rather a distant past which was supposed to be different from the present world. On the other hand, the world described must have been meaningful for the people listening to the poems, which suggests that the poet must have derived the evidence for this past world from the world familiar to himself and his public – thus presumably mainly from the realities of his present. In order to understand the value of the epics as a source for historical reconstruction, it would therefore be necessary to establish which was the present time of the poet, thus the time of the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and to what extent the world described in the poems could correspond to this specific historical period.'

55 Raaflaub (1998); Porter (2002) 65–71; Latacz (2004) 166–204, 283–285; Sherratt (2010); Prosperi (2016); Sherratt & Bennet (2017) viii–xvi.

56 *Total War Saga: Troy* (Creative Assembly Sofia/Sega 2020) is a good example of a video game influenced in its imagery by both the commonly accepted reconstruction of archaeological and historical items, and the reception of such imagery in visual representation like *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen 2004) and *Troy: Fall of a City* (Owen Harris/BBC One/Netflix 2018).

57 Parker (2011) 148 (and n. 5) 'An approach [of the concept of popular culture] with an eye to antiquity might prove fruitful, since Greece and Rome have played an important role in



Figure 5 From *Age of Bronze: Sacrifice*.

well wrought and impressive. Far away is the real world, in which human beings suffer from bad food, bad health, and bad hygiene, building ever poorer dwellings upon the remnants of previous generations – the real world where the heroic is the exception instead of the standard. The heroic world acknowledges this level of ‘reality’,⁵⁸ but its idealizing impulse has a normative influence on

the idea of “popular culture” ever since the term was first coined by Herder [...]. The ancients most often furnished scholars with dreams of a unified, organic *Gemeinschaft* predating the divisions of the Industrial Revolution. So, for example, Marx on Greek art and epic in *Grundrisse*’.

58 Raaflaub (2011) 624 ‘With the modern distinction between myth and history the historicity of Homeric society has become an important problem. If this society corresponds mostly not to poetic fiction but to historical reality and can be dated plausibly, historians gain a valuable literary source to illuminate a period for which they would otherwise have to rely on archaeology. Several scholars have used a commonsense approach and assumed that the poet would naturally model epic society on that of his own time. Others accept this only for part of the picture; they focus on real or perceived inconsistencies, treating the supposed “amal-

the details of what counts as the full ‘canvas of human experience’ in reception through graphic novelization: the toil of premodern daily life seems not even to be carried by the non-privileged and marginalized. What further transfers the *Age of Bronze* Trojan-War narrative to the 21st century is the synthesis of emotions and passions: characters act larger than life, even in this respect that is so scarcely elaborated upon by the ancient author. Graphic novel proves to be an excellent medium in order to add this layer of reconstruction and expression; a layer that is equally referred to when authors active in the recent trend of mythology-retelling from a feminine perspective motivate their choice of topic and characterization as ‘making marginalized voices heard’.⁵⁹ Modernity seems to require full absence of the gods to compensate for the newly added layer.⁶⁰

FANTASIZING EPIC

It is no wonder then that Shanower sometimes ‘over-reconstructs’ in his attempt to synthesize. His accuracy in rendering architecture, Homeric materiality, and the ‘archaeologically correct backdrop’ results in a narratological and visual coherence that overemphasizes and exaggerates the extent to which the observations concerning storytelling and the findings concerning Homeric re-alia and the Heroic world are generically applicable to the representation of epic beyond the restrictive focus of the heroic. The choice to fill in details of material environment, narrative sequentiality, and psychologically motivated human behavior on the basis of what the study of Homer and the context of his epic poems has yielded creates a version of epic ‘totality’ that is not only informed by scholarly reconstruction, but also itself informs future endeavors, both scholarly and non-scholarly, to reconstruct and represent antiquity. In the case of epic such cross-informing has already become apparent in, for example, the way

gamation” of heterogeneous elements as an insurmountable obstacle to the historicity of this society, which they consequently see as an artificial product of poetic tradition and imagination.’ Ondine Pache, Dué, Lupack & Lambertson (2020) 257–255, 278–286.

59 Nathalie Haynes in a 2019 interview on her novel *A Thousand Ships* in *The Guardian*.

60 Cf. Shahabudin (2007) 108 on ‘how cinematic narrative lets features of myth appear natural and how extra-cinematic factors encourage viewers to accept such a construction’ in the film *Troy*.

characters, costumes, and even facial features of Greek and Trojan heroes have become standardized in the influencing of video games like *Total War Saga: Troy* through a film like *Troy* (2004).

A particularly telling instance of Shanower’s over-reconstructing, built from the desire to synthesize at all different levels (and a personal favorite), is what happens when Agamemnon, forced by reluctant seers and angered gods, and under the pressure of the entire army, is forced to repent an insult to the divine by sacrificing his daughter Iphigeneia, a scene that is at the heart of many modern Troy-receptions.⁶¹ Without this sacrifice, the Greek army will never successfully sail from Greece to Troy. Agamemnon lures his daughter to the Greek army camp with the promise, transmitted through a messenger, of a last-minute marriage to Achilles, the greatest hero on the Greek side. The messenger having left, however, Agamemnon grieves his decision and secretly orders a scribe to write down a new message, telling Iphigeneia and her mother that the wedding is off, and that there is no need to come to the camp. But the second messenger is intercepted and his writings are smashed on the floor by an angry Menelaus, shocked by the secret and egoistic – though for us, understandable – change of mind by his brother. (Fig. 6) The writings are clearly clay tablets; the same

61 To the shock and horror of viewers of *Troy: Fall of a City*: Helen Daly (*Express* 25 February 2018) writes ‘Troy: Fall Of A City viewers in horror over extremely brutal sacrifice scene ‘B****y hell! TROY: FALL OF A CITY viewers were in complete horror after it aired an extremely violent sacrifice scene on the BBC One show yesterday. The BBC’s second instalment of the Greek mythology adaptation was incredibly brutal. Poor Iphigenia (played by Lauren Coe) was introduced this evening and for all intents and purposes, planned to get married in order to please the gods. However, Agamemnon (Johnny Harris) offended the goddess Artemis (Thando Bulane-Hopa) who in turn demanded that he sacrificed his daughter to allow for a safe passage to Troy. Naturally, it was a tragic affair, as Agamemnon took Iphigenia to the top of a mountain with a fiery pit in order to send her soul to the goddess. It seemed that everyone but the naive beauty and her mother, Clytemnestra (Emily Child), knew what was going on – and it made for difficult viewing. After begging to follow Iphigenia to her wedding, an aide held her back before she could stop the sacrifice. She was told: “The gods, they didn’t demand Iphigenia’s marriage.” Clytemnestra seemed confused initially, but when the realisation hit, her horror was palpable. Back on the mountain, Agamemnon was completely horrified as he toiled with the fact he was about to kill his daughter. “The wind blows hard against us, the goddess gave me no choice,” he reasoned. But Iphigenia insisted that she was his flesh and blood – but it didn’t save her life. “If it is to happen, let it be without struggle... Do it,” she begged, before Agamemnon slit her throat. The brutal scene was interspersed with shots of Helen (Bella Dayne) and Paris (Louis Hunter) having passionate sex. Viewers were completely horrified by the sacrifice and flocked to Twitter to discuss it.’



Figure 6 From *Age of Bronze: Sacrifice*.

clay tablets that have been dug up by the thousands, written and used in the Mycenaean palaces by a select guild of scribes to record the year's produce, trade, and goods' distribution. Clay tablets serve only administration and registration, and only for those working in the trade, without exception.⁶² To the frustration of scholars no trace of correspondence, either within the trade or within a wider community of users (like *wanakes* and other officials), let alone *literature* was ever entrusted to writing – Mycenaean seemed to have not even considered the possibility! In the heroic world of Homeric epic, writing, or perhaps better 'engraving', is limited to a single instance: the 'horrible signs', 'written on a wooden tablet' (σήματα λυγρὰ γράψας ἐν πίνακι *Il.6.168b–169a*) and delivered by an unknowing Bellerophon to seal his own doom. Shanower's fantasy of a Homeric king using the services of a scribe to deliver a word of warning in Linear B on a clay tablet, only to be frustrated by another Homeric king and interpreted as an indication of widely understandable betrayal, serves as a clear

⁶² Finlayson (2013).

example of the extent to which the application of the data available ticks all too many wished-for boxes.⁶³

It is thus also with a slight sense of regret that the conclusion must be that the series’ attempt ‘to be true to all traditions’ does cater ‘those who think visually’, but envisions, I argue, a fantasy rather than ‘Troy sprung to life’.

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⁶³ An interesting parallel with reference to the auditory rather than the visual aspect in Van Elferen (2013).

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The Golden Ass

Il romanzo di Apuleio nel *graphic novel* di Milo Manara

Abstract For some time, the debt – not merely literary – that Western culture owes to Apuleius' *Golden Ass* has been acknowledged. If the *Metamorphoses*, unlike other classical texts, have enjoyed a certain success in the landscape of the graphic novel, it is also thanks to the free rewriting composed by the Italian cartoonist Milo Manara (1945–). Devoted to erotic production, in 1999 he publishes his version of the novel, where he cuts, stitches together, and reinterprets many sequences of the novel. The contribution reconstructs the editorial history of the work and, by comparing it with its model, investigates its transmedial configuration through the analysis of structures, images, and language.

Keywords Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, Milo Manara, graphic novel, erotic comics.

PARTE PRIMA. EROTOGRAFI ALLO SPECCHIO*

Mi sia permesso un conciso *excursus* sulla situazione generale prima di venire ai fatti. La Getulia, questa colonia sirtica un tempo così ridente e prospera e pacifica, è oggi, nell'anno dodicesimo della illuminata guida del nostro imperatore Antonino Pio, avvilita, spaurita, soggiogata da quella che potrei definire – perdonatemi il bisticcio! – la psicosi di Psiche. Psiche! Questa maga ha fatto del deserto il suo regno, e con le sue magiche arti va trasformando la nostra più balda gioventù, i nostri militi, in un campionario animalesco...

Con queste parole il leguleio inaugura la scena dal sentore postribolare che dà il la a *L'asino d'oro: processo per fatti strani contro Lucius Apuleius cittadino romano*, ora disponibile su RaiPlay. Corre l'anno 1970 e il regista Sergio Spina (1928–2017), intercettata la figura storica dell'autore, la parabola giudiziaria del processo di Sabratha e le carni letterarie di Lucio, eroe delle *Metamorfosi*, ne fa un tutt'uno. Il film, che inclina a un gusto di stampo felliniano – il *Satyricon* usciva nelle sale soltanto l'anno prima¹ –, evidentemente vocato alla risata e messo insieme senza rispetto per il capitale culturale dell'opera di partenza – o delle opere, dato che al romanzo si unisce l'orazione *de magia* –, pur essendo indirizzato a un pubblico avvezzo al genere <decamerotico> genera un'emorragia di critiche, di cui resta ancora traccia su internet. Forse per la natura mai veramente oblativa della sua satira – senza indulgere a spaccati copulatori perde di eleganza e di *appeal*, bersagliando la figura femminile e il mondo omosessuale, ridotto a bozzetto da una scarsa vaporosità creativa –; forse per l'allestimento della struttura e la calibratura delle trame, caotiche e sfilacciate. Mai veramente *à la page*.

Per quanto poco brillante, quello di Spina non è che uno dei numerosi adattamenti, delle molte trasposizioni e riprese più o meno fedeli che certificano il rinascimento del capolavoro apuleiano, il cui *Fortleben* – esso conosce uno dei suoi

* Desidero ringraziare Gianluigi Baldo, Luca Beltramini e Francesco Lubian che hanno letto queste pagine offrendomi generosamente i loro suggerimenti. Sono molto grato, inoltre, a Domitilla della libreria *Dalet* di San Gimignano per avermi venduto, in un momento in cui sembrava pressoché introvabile, il fumetto in questione. Sono passati diversi anni ma non ho dimenticato la mia promessa. Nutro un debito di riconoscenza anche nei confronti degli uffici Feltrinelli e, in particolare, di Francesca Fedeli e di Maria Teresa che mi hanno aiutato a disbrigare le pratiche per domandare all'autore l'autorizzazione a riprodurre le immagini.

¹ Su Petronio e Fellini si vedano, tra i molti lavori, Lago (2006) 57–63 e Gianotti (2012) 565–584.

momenti chiave, per esempio, grazie al Boccaccio o al Manzoni² – riesce a penetrare varie forme di sapere e diversi generi dell'espressione culturale, complice, peraltro, l'incredibile risonanza della *bella fabella* di Amore e Psiche: dalla scultura alla pittura all'incisione – si pensi alle acqueforti di Max Klinger –, passando per la poesia, il teatro, la psicanalisi³. Da ciò deriva il notevole interesse della critica⁴ per la fortuna delle *Metamorfosi*, specialmente nella curva temporale che dalla tarda antichità si protende verso il 1800. Nondimeno, episodi «minori» della vita dell'opera non sono ancora stati messi bene a fuoco⁵.

La parabola di Apuleio nel (e oltre il) secolo breve, sembra dunque reclamare ulteriore attenzione. Se è rilevante il discorso sulla lingua e sullo stile delle varie traduzioni – una su tutte quella ancora scarsamente valorizzata di Bontempelli⁶, ideatore del «realismo magico» che affonda le sue radici nell'avanguardia artistica del Surrealismo –, lo è altrettanto quello sui canali e sui mezzi della diffusione stessa. Nella fattispecie, è poco noto e interessante il caso del *graphic novel* di Milo Manara che, consacrando come maestro dell'eros nel fumetto italiano a partire dagli anni Sessanta, pur attraverso le consuete difficoltà dell'adattamento transmediale – nel fumetto non si potrà parlare di un guardare fondato sul leggere, prerogativa specifica della narrativa, ma di un leggere fondato sul guardare, giacché la storia «invece di essere un racconto, diventa un'azione scenica»⁷ –, giunge nella sua riscrittura a una efficace sintesi di «conservatorismo» a tutela

2 Tra le molteplici figurazioni significative si ricordano la Peronella del racconto di Filostrato (*Decameron*, giornata 7, novella 2) che strizza l'occhio alla *mulier fedifraga* di *met.* 9, 5-7 e la vecchia governante al castello dell'Innominato nei *Promessi Sposi* (cap. 20), vicina all'*anus* custode dei briganti (*met.* 4, 7).

3 Si tratta, naturalmente, di un tema ampio e molto frequentato: riccamente discusso, e.g., in Bélim-Droguet, Gély, Mailho-Daboussi et Vendrix (2013) e, prima ancora, Acocella (2001). Per quanto concerne la psicanalisi, il mito di Eros e Psiche costituisce un cardine della psicologia archetipica di James Hillman, le cui opere, purtroppo, sono ancora poco battute dai filologi classici.

4 Oltre ai volumi già menzionati, si vedano, ad esempio, Gaisser (2008); Pasetti (2018) 27-48; Vannini (2018); Lubian (2021) 247-257.

5 Altro caso interessante è rappresentato dalle 13 litografie di Aldo Salvadori che illustrano la favola di Amore e Psiche a margine della traduzione di Ferdinando Carlesi, edita in tiratura limitata nel 1951 dalla casa editrice veronese Mardersteig.

6 D'ora in poi Bontempelli (1973).

7 Queste le parole del direttore dei progetti disneyani di Mondadori Antonio Rubino, riportate e commentate da Barbieri (2017), 21.

della trama e voluttuose atmosfere di gusto fellinian-sadiano. A *L'asino d'oro* di Manara è dedicato questo studio⁸.

Milo Manara⁹ (1945 –), all'anagrafe Maurilio, nasce a Bolzano il 12 settembre 1945. Dopo aver conseguito la maturità artistica a Verona si iscrive alla facoltà di Architettura dell'Università di Venezia – abbandonerà poi gli studi per dedicarsi completamente all'esperienza dell'arte – e, contestualmente, inizia a interessarsi al mondo del *pop*, da cui mutua la provocazione nei confronti del gusto corrente, l'interesse verso la produzione di consumo con diffusione di massa, ma anche le modalità espressive che gli saranno care nei decenni seguenti¹⁰. È quasi impossibile, infatti, imbattersi in una tavola, o in uno dei manifesti per festival e spettacoli da lui realizzati, non intrisa di quel larvato *savoir vivre* che alla fine degli anni Sessanta si coagula sul piano concreto della realizzazione estetica nelle pubblicità delle lattine di Coca-Cola e nei poster luminosi delle dive. Il suo forte interesse per la cultura popolare, a onor del vero, tradisce un vasto coinvolgimento e un'attenzione che si rinnova nel tempo per la dimensione sociale¹¹, come dimostreranno le tavole postreme della *Ballata in Si bemolle* (1997), della *Rivoluzione sull'imbarbarimento generato dalla televisione* (2000), e di *Tre ragazze nella rete* (2000), produzioni volte a scandagliare le pieghe dei mali contemporanei: l'usura; l'imperversante telecrazia della *tv trash* italiana; la pornografia online e il mondo delle webcam quando ancora non si parlava di *revenge porn*.

Sono però, tornando agli anni Sessanta, il desiderio di frantumare le tendenze delle *élites* e il bisogno di ampliare fasce di utenza esigue a instradare Manara sul sentiero dell'editoria illustrata¹². Inizia così la stagione di *Genius* – epigono del *Diabolik* delle sorelle Giussani – che muta la veste redazionale di fotoromanzo facendosi fumetto, e di *Jolanda de Almagiva*, albo capostipite del filone ero-

⁸ Contrariamente a quanto si potrebbe pensare, il fumetto esiste già nell'antichità. A questo proposito: Stramaglia (2005) 3–37 e (2007) 577–643. Sul rapporto tra fumetti e letteratura dal mondo classico in poi si veda, e.g., il recente volume curato da Moroni (2022).

⁹ Oltre al sito ufficiale dell'autore, è recentemente uscita sul mercato la sua autobiografia, cui si rimanda per una trattazione più approfondita: Manara (2021a).

¹⁰ Manara (2021a) 26–28; 49–50.

¹¹ Del resto, come ebbe a definirlo il *Corriere della Sera* (29 aprile 2010, articolo di Alessandro Trevisani), fu il «politico» di piazza Fontana», il disegnatore del PSI.

¹² Manara (2021a) 71 e 97–98.

tico-piratesco¹³ del quale Manara, a partire dal numero 14 (Aprile 1971), cura la veste grafica.

Bisognerà attendere il biennio 1976–77 per assistere al suo debutto nel mondo della produzione d'autore: a questo periodo risalgono *Alessio, il borghese rivoluzionario*, e *Lo Scimmiotto*; entrambi su sceneggiatura di Silverio Pisu. Il secondo inizialmente edito sul supplemento di *Linus*, quindi trasferito su *alter alter*, l'altro pubblicato direttamente su *alter alter*.

La fase creativa maggiore e i successi più significativi dell'illustratore si danno, in ogni caso, agli ultimi Settanta e ai primi anni Ottanta, quando *Il Gioco* (1983) – il *graphic novel* che egli crea su commissione del giornale *Playmen* – diviene il mito erotico di un'intera generazione, approdando sullo schermo nel riadattamento francese *Le Déclat* (1985) e sul mercato editoriale in cinque diverse edizioni uscite nello stesso momento¹⁴. Lo stile lussureggiante, sensuoso e insieme tumido del tratto e della trama dell'albo, da un lato sancisce la definitiva affermazione dell'erotografo sul piano internazionale – a tal punto che solo pochi decenni dopo sarà chiamato a collaborare con DC Comics e Neil Gaiman, ma anche con Marvel che lo cercherà per dare corpo ad alcune figure femminili sommatamente evocative, tra cui Wanda e Spider-Woman –, dall'altro gli attirano le recensioni caustiche di chi, come Luigi Bernardi, rifiutando la sostanza ammaliante e il *glamour* dei suoi lavori, lo declassa a pornografo da edicola. Icastiche, a questo proposito, furono le parole con cui Bernardi licenziò *Il Gioco* sulla rubrica di *Comic Art* (luglio 1989): «un fumettaccio senza pretese, sceneggiato alla boia di un giuda e disegnato spesso ricalcando fotografie di riviste superpatinate»¹⁵. Lungi dall'offuscarsi, la stella di Manara brilla però sempre più in alto, grazie al moltiplicarsi dei generi narrativi cui dedica attenzione; una *poikilia* che tradisce il fondo magmatico e inesauribile della sua ispirazione. Se nel 1986 Miele, la celebre eroina ispirata alla figura di Kim Basinger, protagonista di *Il profumo dell'invisibile* e delle sei strisce di *Candid Camera*, conquistava l'Italia con il suo arguto erotismo, tra il 1983 e il 1995 egli prosegue le sue incursioni nel mondo dell'avventura e del western, pubblicando a puntate per *Corto Maltese* e per *Il Grifo*.

Al 1987 risale l'amicizia con Federico Fellini, omaggiato, tra l'altro, in *Senza Titolo*, per il quale illustra la sceneggiatura di *Viaggio a Tulum* (1989), di *Il viaggio*

13 Per approfondire si veda Spinazzola (2008) 62.

14 Fontana (2022) 424.

15 Fontana (2022) 424.

di G. Mastorna, detto Fernet (1992) e le locandine fiabesche di alcuni film (*Intervista; La voce della luna*). Si tratta di una disposizione al meraviglioso che iniziava a esplodere in fantasmagorie di segni, figure e forme nelle illustrazioni dei racconti di Pedro Almodovar, *El fuego y las entrañas* (1981); che continuerà in quelle dei quattro albi sulla famiglia Borgia redatti da Alejandro Jodorowsky (2004–2011) e oltre, fino al *graphic novel* sulla vita del Caravaggio giunto, nel 2019, al secondo volume: dopo *La tavolozza e la spada, La grazia*.

In un quadro siffatto, stupisce poco che nel '98/'99 Manara, ribattezzato da Fellini Milone¹⁶ – ironia della sorte, proprio come il personaggio apuleiano –, decida di illustrare, in seguito ad altri due classici della letteratura: *Gulliveriana* (1996) e le *Lettere di una monaca portoghese* (1997), anche *Kamasutra* e *La Métamorphose de Lucius* (su commissione editoriale dell'editore francese *Les Humanoïdes Associés*, collettivo specializzato in *sci-fi* fondato da Jean Giraud, in arte Moebius, e collaboratori).

Per un artista che scopre precocemente il nodo centrale della sua vocazione nella rappresentazione della corporeità e dell'eros, quello con *L'asino d'oro* dovette di certo essere un incontro felice, data la rilevanza e la lunga durata di questi temi nell'architettura tematica del romanzo. Apuleio, del resto, scrive Pietro Citati, dischiude la «soglia del regno della metamorfosi»¹⁷ agli occhi del suo lettore attraverso «l'esperienza di Afrodite: la folgorante luce amorosa e l'onnipervasiva umidità erotica»¹⁸, facendo del proprio capolavoro uno scandaglio delle passioni dell'essere umano e del dio, parimenti lacerato da brame, trepidazioni e languori¹⁹. *Belle Dame sans Merci*, la donna delle *Metamorfosi* non esibisce solo una sensualità dominate e sfrenata, ma risolve spesso le sue brame in un domi-

16 Manara (2021a) 140.

17 Citati (2005) 405.

18 Citati (2005) 406.

19 Il tema dell'eros costituisce un ritornello dalla lunga durata e assume coloriture più *dark* man mano che ci si avvicina alla conclusione dell'opera, ove sono collocate le novelle di gelosia e assassinio (ad esempio *met.* 10, 2–12, la storia della matrigna innamorata, e 10, 23–28: la storia dell'assassina). In questo modo Apuleio rileva la natura ambigua e ingannevole dei rapporti umani, sottolineando la crudeltà del mondo prima di far approdare il suo protagonista all'ultima tappa del processo di redenzione. A tal proposito si legga anche Nicolini (2000) 58–59. Sulle passioni divine nelle *Metamorfosi*: Keulen (2000) 55–72 e Vesentin (2022) 147–174.

nio assoluto del corpo maschile che oggettualizza, smembra e castra²⁰, divenendo la reale protagonista di un mondo in cui l'uomo – Lucio *in primis*, soggetto all'evento traumatico che lo priva del sembiante – agisce in maniera casuale, gretta o onesta, che però lo attira e lo fa inciampare in ostacoli e fallimenti.

Laddove i «fumettari» dell'ultimo Novecento «intendono trasmettere al maschio adolescente, loro lettore elettivo, [...] per un lato l'idoleggiamento di una femminilità che rinnega la missione di angelo del focolare e libera la sua sessualità entusiasticamente [...]; per l'altro [...] l'assaporamento dei guai, le sventure, le umiliazioni, cui la loro intraprendenza le espone»²¹, Manara, in questo *graphic novel*, sulla scorta della caratterizzazione a tinte forti delle «matrone» apuleiane, fa un passo in avanti. Pur preservando la costante artistica della figura muliebre, sulla cui morbidezza il lettore maschio, cioè l'ideale fruitore-tipo, può continuare a lustrarsi gli occhi, dà corpo e sostanza a un figurino femminile lontano da quello *d'antan* dei colleghi coetanei: questi sono gli anni, va ricordato, dell'aliena Alike, della vampira Jacula, della lussuriosa Messalina e delle varie «oscenità pornoginecologiche»²².

È vero che la donna nel fumetto è più assoggettata al maschio rispetto a quanto non lo sia nel romanzo – si veda e.g. la riscrittura, nella parte conclusiva dell'albo, dell'episodio della matrona che concupisce l'asino (*met.* 10, 20–22) in cui spicca la figura inedita del marito *voyeur* a concerto della scena –, ma è anche vero che è colta con estro elegante e ironia mordace. Panfile ingiuria la serva e la picchia con un frustino, facendosi sadiana esecutrice di fantasie punitive; la

20 Il rapporto tra i ruoli di genere nell'*Asino d'oro* è assai interessante; ad esso ho dedicato larga parte delle mie riflessioni in alcuni lavori in corso di pubblicazione. Un buon punto di partenza sull'argomento è offerto da Spaeth (2010) 231–258. Senza addentrarci in una questione complessa che chiamerebbe in causa il mondo del rito e del simbolo, ci limitiamo a ricordare per sommi capi i contenuti della novella di Aristomene (*met.* 1, 5–19) e di Telifrone (*met.* 2, 21–30). Aristomene cade preda delle streghe che penetrano e profanano il corpo del suo amico Socrate (*met.* 1, 13, 4ss.) minacciando di evirarlo (*met.* 1, 13, 2). Telifrone, chiamato a custodire una salma per evitare che possa essere saccheggiata dalle *sagae* amanti dei cadaveri, durante la notte, complice un curioso caso di omonimia, finisce da loro deprivato di alcune parti del corpo (*met.* 2, 30). Nell'opera vi sono numerosi altri momenti in cui il femminile si impone sul maschile: Carite, nella sua *fabula*, acceca il malvagio Trasillo con uno spillone e lo maledice (*met.* 8, 12–13) – un gesto che riprende la simbologia della castrazione –; una donna crudele si rivolge a una fattucchiera e, attraverso un'evocazione diabolica, le fa assassinare il marito (*met.* 9, 29–30).

21 Spinazzola (2008) 63.

22 Spinazzola (2008) 63.

vecchia custode dei briganti non più mite e tremebonda (è così in *met.* 4, 7, 4) è ripugnantemente grifagna e scortese²³; l'avvelenatrice del pantomimo (*met.* 10, 23–34), destinata al corpo dell'asino, insulta brillantemente il soldato che la conduce al patibolo – «se fossi tu il mio marito di oggi, la pena sarebbe eccessiva persino per me!» –, dischiudendo le porte a un immaginario erotico che galoppa, seppur dimidiato dalla considerazione del *baloon* finale – «non sono dunque degna neanche di un asino», – contro il motivo *cliché* della sottomissione. La lettura «virilistica» della donna operata da Apuleio ha, insomma, pur con accenti diversi, una progressione nel fumetto di Milo Manara che la fa esibire nel pieno della sua esuberanza carnale in più di trenta pagine.

PARTE SECONDA. IL ROMANZO E IL «FUMETTACCIO»

Leggiamo il volume nell'edizione italiana uscita a settembre del 2021 per Feltrinelli Comics. Si tratta della divisione editoriale interessata al mondo del fumetto della casa editrice milanese diretta da Tito Faraci che, a partire dall'anno succitato, inaugura la collana *Biblioteca Manara*; una sede in cui i capolavori dell'artista sono tuttora in corso di stampa²⁴.

In un unico libro di formato A4 sono messi insieme *Gulliveriana*, riscrittura al femminile dei viaggi di Gulliver, disegnata a inchiostro, e *L'asino d'oro*, realizzato a matita e colorato a mezzatinta acquerellata, una tecnica nota al mondo dell'illustrazione che conferisce densità e spessore volumetrico all'immagine.

Il *graphic novel* si compone di 54 tavole²⁵; nello *specimen* che segue associamo le sue illustrazioni alle sequenze del romanzo, di modo che sia più immediato ca-

23 Si capisce così perché nella riscrittura manchi la *bella fabella* di Amore e Psiche, raccontata con dolcezza dalla donna, nell'opera originale, a Carite: la fanciulla impaurita che desidera blandire.

24 Analogo progetto è quello promosso dal Sole 24 ore a partire dal mese di ottobre dell'anno 2006, che pubblica opere di Manara al completo, in 21 volumi a cadenza settimanale. Sul recente «sdoganamento dei fumettacci» che passano «dai ripiani più defilati delle edicole provviste di *séparé*, ai banchi delle novità delle librerie del centro» sempre Spinazzola (2008) 61–64.

25 Nell'edizione Feltrinelli di cui mi avvalgo, cioè Manara (2021b), le tavole non sono numerate. La mia numerazione segue la regolare scansione di pagina, per cui alla p. 1 corrisponderà la tav. 1 e così via...

pire quali capitoli e quali sezioni delle *Metamorfosi* Manara scelga per il proprio lavoro. Laddove necessario, cerchiamo di porre l'accento su quei luoghi del riadattamento in cui la storia originale si spezza, mettendo a fuoco, di volta in volta, la sostanza e la forma della riscrittura.

Contenuti dell'albo

Tavole 1–3: viaggio verso Ipata; dialogo con la vecchia e arrivo alla casa di Milone. La focalizzazione interna del racconto – «Mi chiamo Lucio e la mia stirpe è assai antica...» – è introdotta da due riquadri.

Tavole 4–6: Lucio incontra Fotide – nel fumetto inspiegabilmente Potide – e dialoga Milone. In scena c'è anche la moglie Panfile, *kofon prosopon*.

Tavole 6–8: Lucio, che si trova alle terme, viene riconosciuto da un vecchio; questi lo conduce dalla parente Birrena che, presentatasi, lo mette in guardia «dalle arti malvagie e dalle lusinghe delittuose di Panfila». La madre di Lucio è nominata Silvia.

Tavole 8–9: *Flirt* tra Lucio e la serva.

Tavole 10–13: incontro erotico tra i due, preceduto da una ellissi temporale: in un riquadro in alto a sinistra si legge «più tardi, verso sera...». Lucio, prima di giacere con Fotide, chiede alla strega una lezione di magia.

Corrispondenze nel romanzo

Lucio si presenta in *met.* 1, 2 e descrive la Tessaglia in *met.* 2, 1. Il dialogo con la vecchia è in *met.* 1, 21. Allusioni alla lettera di Demea in *met.* 1, 22.

L'incontro tra Lucio e gli ospiti è descritto molto similmente in *met.* 1, 22–24.

Birrena fa la sua comparsa al mercato in 2, 2 in compagnia di un anziano servo, ma allerta Lucio raccontando di Panfile solo in seguito, in 2, 5, una volta che l'ha condotto a casa. La sequenza termale è accennata alla fine di 1, 25. La madre di Lucio è Salvia (2, 2, 8).

Il dialogo è collocato in *met.* 2, 7 e 10.

L'amplesso è descritto in *met.* 2, 15–17. Panfile non è mai direttamente interpellata dall'eroe che, piuttosto spaventato, distoglie da lei gli occhi (*met.* 2, 11).

Contenuti dell'albo

Tavole 14–16: la festa di Birrena, ambientata «l'indomani» durante i Lupercali, momento in cui «si festeggia Dioniso, Libero Bacco e il dio delle risate...», è riepilogata dal narratore, assente sulla scena, che impiega la tecnica del sommario. Il *baloon* è sostituito da una narrazione che procede per riquadri.

Tavole 16–18: duello con gli otri, Lucio torna sulla scena. Al riepilogo, che procede sempre per riquadri, si sostituisce il *baloon* nel momento in cui ricomincia la «presa diretta».

Tavole 19–20: come annunciato dal riquadro in alto a sinistra siamo «nella casa di Milone». Fotide, poi accudita da Lucio, viene frustata da Panfile e dal marito per la sua «lingua troppo lunga [...]». La matrona, infatti, «non vuole che si sappia che è una strega».

Tavole 21–25: focus sul serraglio di Panfile; metamorfosi della strega in gufo e di Lucio in asino.

Corrispondenze nel romanzo

Descrizione della festa e delle men-
se in *met.* 2, 19. Nessun riferimento
ai *Lupercalia*. Unicamente al termine
del banchetto in 2, 31, Birrena fa cen-
no alla festa del dio Riso: un evento
che unirà la cittadinanza il giorno se-
guente.

In *met.* 2, 32 Lucio incontra i briganti/
otri e li sconfigge. Poi rincasa. Il pro-
cesso/beffa, che si svolge il giorno se-
guente, è profusamente descritto in 3,
1–12.

Questa sequenza non è presente nel-
le *Metamorfosi*. Fotide giunge da Lucio
porgendogli il *lorus* in 3, 13–14 perché
accusa la responsabilità della beffa.
In 3, 15 la serva parla delle *malae artes*
della padrona. L'unica allusione alla
violenza di Panfile sull'ancella si legge
in 3, 16, 7: *meque verberare saevissime*
*consuevit*²⁶.

La *feralis officina* è descritta in 3, 17;
la metamorfosi di lei in 3, 21; quella di
Lucio in 3, 24.

²⁶ Dove non diversamente dichiarato leggiamo il testo Oxford curato da M. Zimmerman (*Apvlei Metamorphoseon libri XI. Recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit M. Zimmerman*).

Contenuti dell'albo

Tavole 25–26: Lucio, informato sulla natura dell'antidoto alla trasformazione, in attesa delle rose, è condotto nella stalla ove lo attende il suo cavallo. Qui viene rapito dai briganti.

Tavole 27–29: la tavola si apre con l'immagine di Aurora che cavalca nel cielo. Ostaggio dei ladroni, il protagonista incontra Carite; quindi scappano insieme, vengono riacciuffati e puniti.

Tavole 30–31: ingresso di Emo/Tlepolemo che droga i briganti, fugge con la sposa e l'asino. In lontananza si intravede il cadavere della vecchia morta impiccata.

Tavola 32: tramite un sommario l'asino racconta del breve soggiorno «al paese dei due sposi». Poi «la padrona ha un'idea» e chiede che sia condotto «a scorrazzare per i prati».

Tavole 32–33: nuovo sommario inframezzato da scene «a presa diretta»: Lucio è torturato dal pastorello che viene poi ucciso da un'orsa.

Tavole 34–35: l'asino, sottrattosi alla belva, è percosso dalla madre del pastore. Si salva scappando dopo averla imbrattata.

Corrispondenze nel romanzo

L'antidoto alla metamorfosi è menzionato in 3, 25, 3: *nam rosis tantum demorsicatis...* Lucio è condotto nella stalla in 3, 26, ove lo attende il suo cavallo. È rapito e portato sui monti in 3, 28–29.

L'immagine di Aurora si collocava nell'*ouverture* del libro terzo (3, 1). Lucio conosce Carite in *met.* 4, 23 e fugge con lei all'altezza di 6, 27–29. Vengono recuperati dai ladroni in 6, 30. Punizioni e minacce in 6, 31–32.

L'ingresso di Emo/Tlepolemo si colloca in *met.* 7, 5. L'allestimento del banchetto e la neutralizzazione dei briganti in 7, 11–12. La morte della vecchia veniva descritta in 6, 30.

Ripresa fedele di *met.* 7, 14.

La figura del pastore e le disavventure alla macina cominciano in 7, 15. All'altezza di 7, 17–20 Apuleio descrive i supplizi cui è sottoposto l'asino. L'orsa fa la sua comparsa in 7, 24.

La donna (*met.* 7, 27–28) picchia l'asino e lo tortura per vendicare il figlio. L'episodio si chiude nello stesso modo.

Contenuti dell'albo

Tavole 35–37: dopo un'ellissi temporale rivelata dal solito riquadro, si chiarisce la situazione: «...vengo catturato da un banditore che mi mette all'asta nella piazza del mercato...». Lucio, acquistato quindi da un cinedo, va incontro al destino. Nuova ellissi: l'asino è condotto nel postribolo in cui questi, in compagnia delle sue «bambine», opera. Sommario: la narrazione procede per spaccati in cui mette a fuoco il loro tenore di vita dissoluto. Un capannello armato irrompe infine nel covo, e un mugnaio – si scopre la sua identità nella tavola seguente – sottrae l'asino.

Tavola 38: Lucio, ora «proprietà di un mugnaio», assiste al tradimento della moglie che nasconde l'amante sotto una damigiana. Lo smaschera pestandogli una mano.

Tavole 39–40: nuovo sommario inframezzato da momenti <in presa diretta>. Lucio, messo ai lavori forzati presso la macina, sottrae cibi alle «cucine del padrone». La moglie del mugnaio lo smaschera e lo condanna. Un patrizio romano, di passaggio, basito dal suo strano appetito, lo salva dalla morte e lo porta a casa con sé.

Corrispondenze nel romanzo

Lucio viene condotto al mercato dai pastori profughi in 8, 23. Nel capitolo successivo è acquistato dal *senex cinaedus*. È condotto a casa dell'uomo in 8, 26.

Le avventure dei sacerdoti della dea Siria sono descritte in *met.* 8, 27–29. Si segnalano alcuni evocativi particolari ripresi fedelmente nelle illustrazioni: l'autoflagellazione del servo invasato (8, 28) e la seduzione del giovane maschio (8, 29).

Nel romanzo i cinedi vengono arrestati in 9, 10 per gli inganni e i crimini che hanno ordito ai danni dei cittadini.

Nel romanzo di Apuleio la storia della giara si colloca all'altezza di 9, 5–7: coinvolge un fabbro, sua moglie e l'amante che, tuttavia, riescono a beffare l'uomo. Diversi sono invece i racconti che prendono forma nella sequenza del mugnaio (*met.* 9, 11–31): la storia di Barbaro e Filesitero (9, 17–21) e della moglie del tintore (9, 24–25).

La descrizione alienante dei lavori alla macina si colloca all'altezza di *met.* 9, 11–13. Ai furti di cibo si fa riferimento, invece, molto più tardi in *met.* 10, 13: coinvolgono dei cuochi presso i quali Lucio è alloggiato, non la moglie del mugnaio. Il patrizio di Manara corrisponde al padrone dei cuochi, il magistrato Tiaso di Corinto. Fa la sua

Contenuti dell'albo

Tavole 41–45: Lucio è sedotto dalla moglie di questi, «una Pasifae asinina senza pudore». Il marito, che assiste al rapporto, desidera che lo si replichi all'indomani, «nel circo, davanti a tutti...». La *mulier* rifiuta, e il patrizio, pur dovendo optare per un'altra donna, dà ordine che l'asino sia condotto al circo.

Tavole 46–47: come suggerisce il riquadro in alto a sinistra alla tavola 47: «dopo i gladiatori, c'è la rappresentazione del <Giudizio di Paride>».

Tavole 47–51: solito riquadro – in basso a sinistra –: «il banditore annuncia l'arrivo di una donna. Si tratta di una assassina, accusata di aver dato una morte atroce a ben... cinque persone, tra cui una bambina e una ragazza, uccisa cacciandole nei genitali un tizzone ardente». Preparazione di «un enorme letto musicale» per il rapporto. L'asino fugge, spaventato dalle belve feroci.

Tavola 52: preghiera a «Cerere, regina del cielo»; in lontananza si vede una «strana luce» che «non sembra la luna e nemmeno il sole...». La dea

Corrispondenze nel romanzo

comparsa in 10, 15; ospita Lucio a cena in 10, 17; lo porta a Corinto, ove si imbatte nella lussuosa matrona, in 10, 19.

Gli amplessi con la donna si collocano in *met.* 10, 20–22. Il custode rivela tutto al proprietario dell'asino (assimilato da Manara al marito di lei) che decide di darne mostra in un momento di pubblica esibizione (*met.* 10, 23).

Il pantomimo del monte Ida è in *met.* 10, 29–34.

Lo spettacolo coinvolge la matrigna avvelenatrice, la cui storia nefanda è stata riferita in 10, 23–28. Il soldato la preleva dal carcere pubblico all'altezza di 10, 34 al fine di condurla al <talamo nuziale>. Spaventato dalle fiere, Lucio, però, guadagna la fuga (10, 35).

Il disco pieno della luna emerge dalle onde del mare in 11, 1. L'apostrofe a Iside/Cerere–Venere–Diana–Proserpina si colloca in 11, 2. La rivelazione

Contenuti dell'albo

appare dal nulla e rivela al protagonista che, l'indomani, durante una processione, potrà mangiare le rose cogliendole dalla corona di un sacerdote.

Tavole 53–54: Lucio si imbatte, come profetizzato, nella processione; mangia le rose e si trasforma di nuovo in uomo. Contempla con ritrovata meraviglia la natura.

Corrispondenze nel romanzo

della dea, in sogno, nei capitoli 3 e 4, anche se ella dichiara il suo nome in 11, 5. La profezia e le coordinate di salvezza sono elargite in 11, 5–6.

All'altezza di 11, 7 Lucio si risveglia; seguono gli *anteludia* della processione (11, 8), quindi inizia il corteo vero e proprio (11, 9–17). La ritrasformazione dell'asino in uomo è descritta in 11, 13. La contemplazione della natura, invece, era in 11, 7.

Dall'immagine al testo, dal testo all'immagine

Come si vede, le modifiche più significative all'«originale» apuleiano si collocano nella seconda parte dell'albo, a partire dalla tavola 37 che corrisponde all'ultima metà del libro ottavo. Manara, del resto, è chiamato a dover stringere in poco meno di venti pagine tre interi libri ad alta densità – si pensi all'undicesimo, il *liber isiaco* –, con una notevole concentrazione di accadimenti. Lucio, infatti, ormai libero dalla prigionia dei briganti (*met.* 7, 13), entra nel vivo del suo viaggio: viene rimpallato qua e là passando per le mani di diversi proprietari, ascolta e riferisce numerose storie che incidono la cornice diegetica di primo grado conducendo a una miriade di sentieri narrativi altri. Trattasi di «novelle» in cui è boccaccianamente – e boccaccescamente – ritratto il caleidoscopio degli affari del mondo: storie di gelosia, adulterio e vendetta, ora lievi ora gravi, che spingono a meditare sullo spettro eterogeneo delle passioni umane. L'eros, la radice comune di quasi tutte queste digressioni, è dipinto da Apuleio come un'onda che si sprigiona al di là di ogni condizionamento morale: Trasillo, nella *fabula* di Carite (*met.* 8, 1–14)²⁷, tradisce l'amico e lo uccide per fare sua la moglie; una matri-

²⁷ Il commento di riferimento è curato da Nicolini (2000).

gna si innamora del figliastro e cede alle brame senza riuscire a frenarsi (*met.* 10, 2–12)²⁸; una donna teme di essere usurpata del talamo e, «resa folle dal pungolo di una furia sfrenata» (trad. Nicolini 2005), sevizia la presunta rivale prima di ammazzarla in maniera atroce (*met.* 10, 23–28)²⁹.

È sorprendente come, di tutta questa sequela di narrazioni seconde, i cui protagonisti sono gli schiavi, gli avidi, i giovani ribaldi e le svergognate, ma anche i ricchi e i potenti, ognuno ricondotto da Apuleio a una comune radice istintuale, Milo Manara, che disegna per «raccontare l'avventura», cioè per «riuscire a parlare di tutti, senza barriere», giacché «il fumetto (è) arte popolare, in senso politico ed etico»³⁰, non trattenga quasi nulla. Resta la micro-storia della giara (*met.* 9, 5–7) parzialmente rielaborata – nel romanzo *l'uxorcula* è maritata con un fabbro e riesce a beffarlo –; rimane un'esile epitome del racconto dell'assassina (*met.* 10, 23–28), referenzializzato nella battuta che abbiamo trascritto a commento delle tavole 47–51. Insomma, c'è solo lo stretto necessario: quelle poche righe che occorrono a giustificare l'illustrazione contestuale del Pantomimo del Giudizio di Paride. La ragione della scelta, che resta comunque poco chiara, sarà da individuarsi, almeno in parte, in motivi di spazio: il principio della selezione influisce evidentemente, tra l'altro, sul taglio della lunga *fabella* di Amore e Psiche (4, 28–6, 24), una narrazione autosussistente che può essere recisa dalla cornice senza problemi. Forse, però, quando nel romanzo fanno il loro ingresso prepotente le forze dell'odio e della violenza, e la leggerezza vitale, naturale e ineludibile della pulsione erotica passa in secondo piano, l'illustratore preferisce alzare la matita.

Mancano, a questo proposito, anche le «novelle di magia» dei libri primo e secondo (*met.* 1, 5–19; 2, 21–30), in cui Apuleio, pur con l'intento di prendersi gioco della bontà dei creduloni, costruisce alcune feroci immagini corporee. Si tratta di *frames* in cui la sessualità acquisisce un valore semantico stratificato: bramosia, vendetta, travolgimento e piena inarrestabile della violenza erotica.

Insomma: sadomaso sì – fruste e catene nel fumetto sono le benvenute – purché *light*. Il lettore vuole assaggiare il desiderio e non correre il rischio di spaventarsi.

28 Sull'argomento: Fiorencis e Gianotti (1990) 71–114.

29 Per un confronto tra le due novelle del libro decimo si veda l'appendice terza di Zimmerman (2000) 440–444.

30 Manara (2021a) 97.

Sebbene fin dall'inizio vi sia nella riscrittura un appiattimento monodimensionale, perché dalla tavola numero uno scompare la voce autoriale al centro del prologo e dell'architettura complessa delle *Metamorfosi*³¹, le stesse prime vignette basterebbero da sole, anche a chi non dovesse conoscere l'opera, a suggerire la situazione intrigante che Apuleio promette al suo *lector* nell'esordio del testo (*met.* 1, 1: *at ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram, auresque tuas benivolas lepido susurro permulceam*). Il *setting* è costruito, nelle illustrazioni in questione, dalla voce del personaggio che mette strategicamente in campo il suo <Sé> auto-diegetico: attraverso le didascalie nei rettangoli in alto e in basso a destra, Lucio, infatti, getta sulla pagina una veduta d'insieme, pur senza esprimersi per tramite del *balloon* a cui di norma spetta, nell'universo del *graphic novel*, il momento dialogico³². Grazie a una sorta di lento *panning* – la <camera> gira all'altezza della seconda tavola seguendo il fanciullo –, il dialogo comincia e la messa in scena si fa cinematografica.

Momenti di sommario, scanditi dal pulsare di una voce interna o da pochi cartigli (e.g. tav. 10: «più tardi, verso sera...») alternati a spaccati <in presa diretta>, costituiscono in generale, per quanto attiene al rapporto tra narrazione verbale e narrazione visiva, la cifra stilistica del lavoro, nonché un espediente intelligente che consente a Manara di bypassare ciò che non gli interessa senza per questo rinunciare a quei raccordi che, se assenti, pregiudicherebbero la coerenza della struttura.

Subentra a questo punto la figura della vecchia (la stessa di *met.* 1, 21) – ha la faccia impastata dal trucco e appesantita dagli *ornamenta* come certe maschere del *Satyricon* felliniano – ed ella trasporta il lettore in «una Roma prima dell'avvento del cristianesimo»³³. Inserita in un contesto di dissolutezze, la donna siede sotto un'epigrafe: G. (o C.) VINTILIA TIMELE FELLATRIX EXTALIOSA che eruditamente riprende e unisce insieme due iscrizioni *osé* del Lupanare pompeiano (VI, 11, 16): *CIL* IV 1388 (TIMELE FELATRIX) e *CIL* IV 1388a (TIMELE EXTALIOSA).

Il senso di continuità tra le tavole, oltre che dal *lettering* sempre uguale, dalla dimensione costante dei *balloon* e dei riquadri, collocati spesso in alto e comun-

³¹ Il prologo delle *Metamorfosi* è forse uno dei testi più letti dell'intera letteratura latina. Per orientarsi nel dibattito: Graverini e Nicolini (2019) 138–149.

³² Sui tipi e sulle forme dei *balloon*: Barbieri (2017) 81–82.

³³ Manara (2021a) 176.

que mai in un punto di disturbo per il disegno, e dall'assenza di *splash pages*³⁴, è rafforzato dalla distribuzione planare dei colori. La tecnica – come dicevamo è quella della matita e dell'acquerello mezzatinta –, non conferisce solo un ampio spessore all'immagine, sviluppando in nitide costruzioni visive fondali gremite di figure e di edifici in cui lo spettatore ha la sensazione di finire intrappolato, ma consente l'accumulo virtuosistico di dettagli e particolari, ad esempio la grana degli assiti e delle pietre, degli affreschi, del vapore e delle ombre, che si sovrappongono tra loro senza mai confondersi.

A pagina 27 fa la sua comparsa una figura diversa dalle altre:

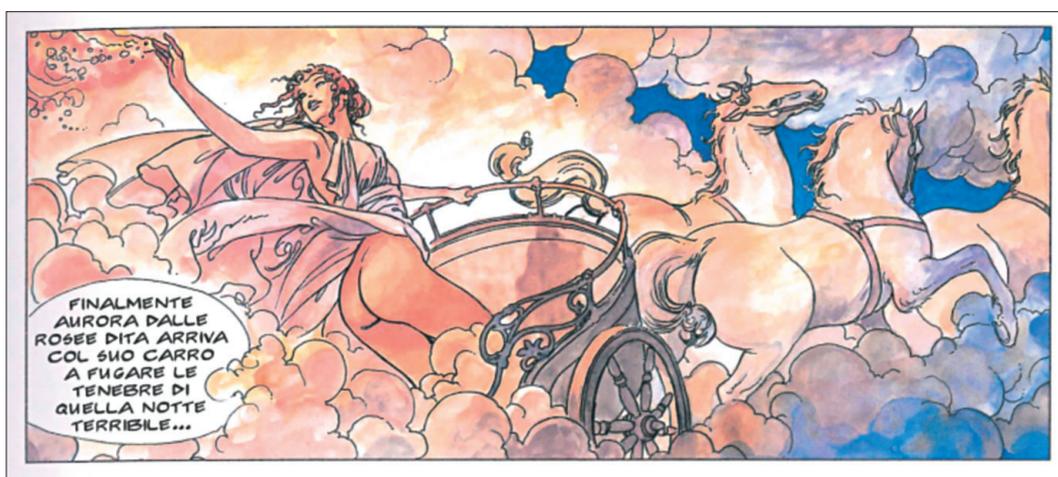


Figura 1 Milo Manara, da «*L'asino d'oro e Gulliveriana*», Feltrinelli 2021, tav. 27.

È la personificazione dell'aurora che apre, nel romanzo, il libro terzo (3, 1):

Commodum punicantibus phaleris Aurora roseum quatiens lacertum caelum inequitabat, et me securae quieti revulsum nox diei reddidit.

[trad. Nicolini 2005] Da poco l'Aurora, agitando le rosee braccia, cavalcava per il cielo sui suoi cavalli bardati di rosso, quando la notte, strappandomi al mio sonno tranquillo, mi consegnò a un nuovo giorno.

34 Pagine, cioè, a pannello unico e con un forte impatto visivo che, catalizzando l'attenzione del lettore, lo rallentano.

Il disegno di Manara, celebrando l'*allure* erotica della creatura celeste, diviene un modo per introdurre nel tempo di un singolo scorcio un profilo femminile differente, provvisto di una sensualità magnifica e solenne: ora la *palette* dei colori si accende, a dimostrazione del fatto che la carne divina è inesorabilmente altra. E si può dire che l'eccezionale impressione visiva del dettato apuleiano³⁵ sia ben preservata da questa immagine: il rosso è appena percettibile, ma il ricorso sapiente al giallo e all'azzurro consente all'artista di modificare e rendere più vivida la sua «sintassi cromatica». Unicamente in questa tavola e in quella di Cerere/Iside signora della notte (tav. 52), del resto, sono presenti simili tinte, che avranno la funzione di richiamare da un lato le profondità del cielo immerso ancora nell'atmosfera notturna del sogno, dall'altro lo splendore dell'oro, la *nuance* che domina l'intero undicesimo libro delle *Metamorfosi*³⁶; la cifra cromatica inconfondibile del divino in cui è facile riconoscere l'elemento estetico che gli è proprio: la luce. Per contro, negli orpelli estetici che decorano i corpi degli esseri umani, per esempio quello della lussuosa matrona (tavv. 41–45), l'oro è sostituito dal bianco, come se potesse sottolineare il vuoto del gioco di apparenze, sofisticazioni e artifici che corrisponde alla società del cosiddetto «barocco imperiale». Quel mondo *kitsch* innamorato del pleonasma decorativo che Federico Fellini portava sullo schermo nel 1969, insegnando a Manara come «ripensare alla romanità»³⁷.

A Lucio mutato in asino resta il grigio: un colore così presente nel fumetto in tutto il suo campionario di sfumature – si unisce al viola dei riflessi e delle luci, al nero delle ombre e al bianco delle campiture, virando ora al marrone ora al rosso cupo del sangue – da contribuire direttamente alla costruzione del profilo

35 Nelle *Metamorfosi* non sono tanto le braccia rosee (*roseum lacertum*), che rimandano alla consolidata topica omerica e.g. di *Od.* 2, 1 (Costantini (2021) 47), a conferire vividezza alla scena, quanto più le *phalerae*, rilevate dal participio *punicantibus* di conio apuleiano (Costantini (2021) 47), per mezzo delle quali l'autore trasferisce sulla pagina la suggestione visuale dei filamenti di porpora che striano il cielo dell'alba (Nicolini (2005) 205 n. 1).

36 Dorato è il vaso che la dea regge tra le mani nella sua manifestazione in *met.* 11, 4, 3; dorati sono gli strumenti del rito: la coppa portata dalla scimmia in *met.* 11, 8, 4; i sistri (*met.* 11, 10, 2); la lucerna (11, 10, 3); il vaso arrotondato da cui si versano libagioni di latte (11, 10, 6), la palma *auro foliatam* e il setaccio cui si fa riferimento in *met.* 11, 10, 4 e 6. È trapunta d'oro la tessitura sulle vele dell'imbarcazione (*met.* 11, 16, 7: *litteras [votum] <auro> intextas* [testo di Nicolini (2005)]) e nello stesso metallo è modellata la sua carenatura, come si precisa all'altezza di *met.* 11, 16, 8.

37 Manara (2021a) 176.

umano³⁸. Se è vero che la pelle degli uomini risplende di un rosa intenso quando, eccitati, sono fotografati nei loro amplessi (tavv. 11, 12), è vero anche che essa regredisce quasi subito al tono della pietra: una commistione di tortora e basalto tenuti insieme dall'azzurro freddo della china sfumata.

In questa scenografia del passato, insomma, il colore si fa strumento di realismo e di espressionismo, in un'atmosfera generalmente <pietrificata> che il controcanto erotico rende paradossalmente calda e suggestiva; raffinata, pur nella sua prosaicità.

La potenza visiva dell'insieme, ottenuta dall'elevato tasso di processazione della tavola, è ulteriormente intensificata dalla totale assenza di paesaggio sonoro: mancano, cioè, nel *graphic novel*, rumori e grida, «ovvero quelle parti di testo che non sono contenute in spazi appositi (didascalie o *balloon*) e devono la loro efficacia all'apparire direttamente nello spazio, come se fossero oggetti»³⁹; artifici catacresizzati che strappano il tessuto della scrittura richiamando le modalità espressive del cinema.

I suoni ci sono – non è difficile imbattersi nelle espressioni di sorpresa (tav. 24), dolore (tavv. 19, 34) e soprattutto godimento (tavv. 13, 43–45) –, ma sono privi di «invasività grafica»⁴⁰, stanno chiusi nelle vignette e vengono sfruttati *ad hoc*: abbondano, ad esempio, nelle scene degli amplessi di Lucio e sono assenti, invece, in quelle delle ammucciate, dei mercati e delle feste. L'impressione complessiva è quella di una corporeità che, pur eccezionalmente invereconda, attende muta e imbalsamata l'intervento del protagonista, grazie alla cui esuberanza vocale Manara conferisce pregnanza e rilievo ad alcuni momenti della narrazione anziché ad altri: vi sono immagini silenziose – coincidono spesso col momento del sommario – che vanno contemplate con la distanza dell'opera d'arte (tavv. 14, 15, 36, 39, 47) e spaccati da abitare. Il suono del piacere dà vita all'illustrazione e attira il lettore: calandosi *en abyme* nel personaggio egli trasformerà la pagina, muto oggetto passivo di contemplazione e degustazione erotica, in un coloristico *setting* a luci rosse cui accedere in punta di piedi.

38 Manca il colore anche ai gioielli di Birrena (tavv. 7–8) e a quelli degli altri personaggi (e.g. tavv. 14–15); al fuoco, che diventa spettralmente viola (tav. 33) o bianco (tavv. 34–35) e al cibo (tav. 40). Le rose, invece, una sorta di *continuum* della dea, sembrano preservare una tinta più accesa, soprattutto nell'ultima immagine (tav. 53–54) e nella tavola <isiaca> (52).

39 Barbieri (2017) 59–63.

40 Barbieri (2017) 59.

Lost in translation

Come dicevamo, l'opera di Manara è edita nel 1999 da *Les Humanoïdes Associés* – titolo: *La Métamorphose de Lucius*, in seguito *L'Âne d'or* –, sebbene la versione italiana esca quasi contestualmente sul mercato per i tipi di Mondadori. Non va taciuto, venendo ora alla questione della lingua, che abbiamo avuto accesso a un limitato numero di tavole in francese (1–8), digitalizzate dall'editore e messe a disposizione sul suo sito⁴¹. Il confronto tra la copia italiana (Feltrinelli Comics 2021) e quella straniera (*L'Âne d'or*; *Les humanoïdes associés* ristampa 2017), rivela, almeno per quanto concerne le pagine in questione, una corrispondenza linguistica serrata.

Trascriviamo ora, a titolo esemplare, il riquadro centrale che dà inizio alla storia (tav. 1):

[IT] Mi chiamo Lucio e la mia stirpe è assai antica. Da parte materna risale addirittura a Plutarco e quindi sono degno di fiducia. Sto finalmente lasciandomi alle spalle i monti scoscesi e le valli malsicure della Macedonia, diretto in Tessaglia per affari. Alcuni compagni di viaggio mi hanno raccontato cose terribili quanto meravigliose su questi luoghi...

[FR] Mon nom est Lucius et ma lignée est très ancienne. Par la branche maternelle, Plutarque est mon ancêtre, ce qui me rend digne de confiance. J'ai franchi déjà les monts escarpés et les périlleuses vallées de la Macédoine afin de gagner la Thessalie pour mes affaires. Mes compagnons de voyage m'ont raconté sur cette région des histoires à la fois terribles et merveilleuses...

Si tratta, chiaramente, di una libera riscrittura di *met.* 1, 2:

[1, 2] Thessaliam – nam et illic originis maternae nostrae fundamenta a Plutarcho illo inclito ac mox Sexto philosopho nepote eius prodita gloriam nobis faciunt – eam Thessaliam ex negotio petebam. Postquam ardua montium et lubrica vallium et roscida cespitum et glebosa camporum <emensus> emersi...

[trad. Nicolini 2005] Ero in viaggio verso la Tessaglia – di lì infatti è originaria la mia famiglia da parte di mia madre, e possiamo vantarci di discendere dal famo-

41 Questo il link: <https://www.humano.com/album/37190>

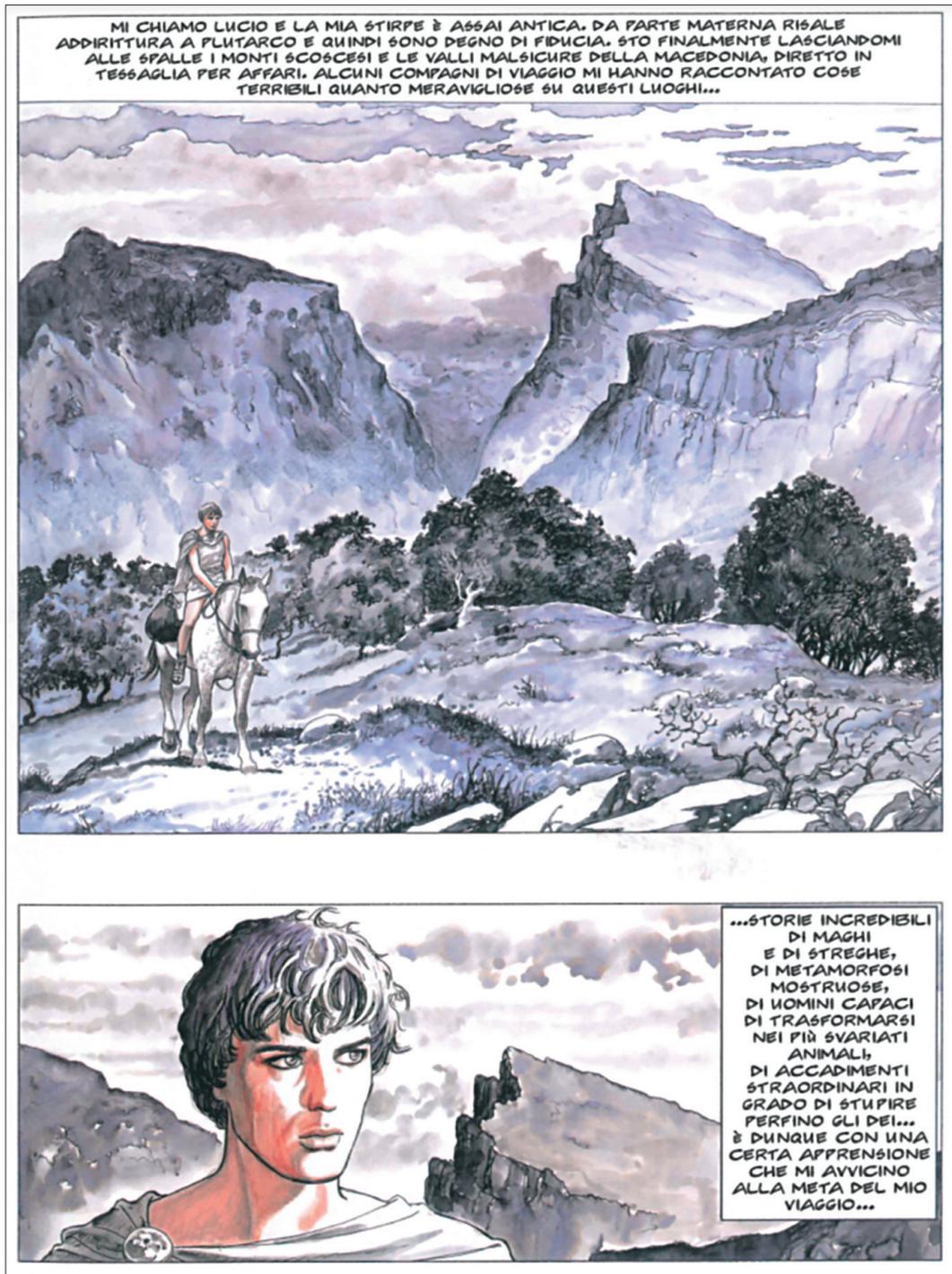


Figura 2 Milo Manara, da «L'asino d'oro e Gulliveriana», Feltrinelli 2021, tav. 1.

so Plutarco e da suo nipote, il filosofo Sesto; andavo dunque in Tessaglia per affari, e avevo già superato monti dalle cime altissime e valli dai pendii scivolosi, freschi prati e campagne arate...

Come si vede, si aggiunge al discorso di Apuleio il riferimento ai «compagni di viaggio»: un'integrazione che, fungendo da sutura con la vignetta seguente (essa riprende fedelmente *met.* 2, 1, ossia la sequenza in cui sono descritti gli accadimenti prodigiosi che si verificano in Tessaglia), consente all'autore di eludere la novella di Aristomene (1, 5–19) pur senza ometterne completamente l'esistenza. Mentre procede verso Ipata, il protagonista, infatti, nel romanzo è accompagnato da due pellegrini – i succitati sodali –: l'uno racconta la *fabula*, l'altro, più scettico, si sottrae rapidamente alla scena (1, 20–21).

Se è difficile pronunciarsi sul rapporto tra francese, italiano e latino, e ricostruire, pertanto, la storia della traduzione in assenza di informazioni che ci consentano di fare chiarezza sulla lingua della composizione originale, impiegata dall'autore nella sua «officina», pare piuttosto significativo, invece, rilevare il debito di riconoscenza che la versione italiana del fumetto, pur rimanendo una libera riscrittura, intrattiene con la traduzione di Massimo Bontempelli, pubblicata da Einaudi nel 1973⁴² e, prima ancora, nei due volumi per la *Società Anonima Notari* col titolo *Trasformazioni* (1928).

Confrontiamo adesso un paio di campioni dei due testi: il criterio della selezione è quello dell'ampiezza, perché il ricorrere di uno specifico sintagma o di un breve giro di frase – anche se sono davvero molti, in tal senso, i punti di convergenza – rischierebbe di non risultare probante.

[Apul. *met.* 3, 17, 5]⁴³ infeliciū avium durantibus, damnis defletorum, sepulorum etiam cadaverum expositis multis admodum membris; hic nares et digiti, illic car-

42 Sul rapporto tra Apuleio e Bontempelli: Bajoni (1989) 546–549.

43 Riproduciamo qui e nel passaggio seguente il testo latino che accompagna il volume Einaudi del 1973 con la traduzione di Bontempelli; è quello dell'edizione teubneriana di R. Helm: *Apulei Platonici Madaurensis metamorphoseon libri XI, recensuit* Rudolfus Helm, Leipzig 1907. Come spiega Nicolini (2005) 235, n. 16, *met.* 3, 17, 5 è un luogo problematico dell'opera: molte edizioni, alla lezione *infeliciū navium*, preferiscono la congettura proposta da Passerat *infeliciū avium*, resa interessante dal confronto con *Apol.* 58: *scripsit se... in vestibulo multas avium pinnas offendisse*. Torna recentemente sul problema Costantini (2017) 331–339.

nosi clavi pendentium, alibi trucidatorum servatus cruror et extorta dentibus ferarum trunca calvaria.

[trad. Bontempelli 1973] pezzi di navi miseramente naufragate, e membra dissotterrate di cadaveri piantati e sepolti, e qui narici e dita, e là chiodi con brandelli di carne di individui crocefissi, e più in là sangue conservato di persone trucidate, e crani tronchi sottratti alle zanne delle fiere.

[tav. 22] pezzi di navi miseramente naufragate... membra dissotterrate di cadaveri piantati e sepolti, e narici e dita, e chiodi con brandelli di carne di individui crocefissi, e sangue conservato di persone trucidate, crani e tronchi sottratti alle zanne delle fiere.



Figura 3 Milo Manara, da «L'asino d'oro e Gulliveriana», Feltrinelli 2021, tav. 22.

Nel diciassettesimo capitolo del terzo libro delle *Metamorfosi*, l'autore delinea, attraverso la voce di Fotide, il laboratorio infernale della maga Panfile, provvisto di tutti i feticci indispensabili a realizzare i sortilegi: erbe, laminette cerimoniali, lacerti di pelle umana...

Si tratta di una sequenza mimetica che a Manara fa gioco richiamare *verbatim* e che può facilmente venire inserita in un dialogo senza influire in modo stridente sul tipo di comunicazione che il *balloon* normalmente riproduce. Mentre nel romanzo, però, Lucio e l'ancella non si trovano nella *feralis officina*, cui accederanno solo alcuni giorni dopo (3, 21), nel fumetto stanno assistendo di-

rettamente alla metamorfosi della strega. La fanciulla che guarda di nascosto la scena, così, non descrive più da lontano il serraglio celato in soffitta⁴⁴, ma il contenuto dell'unguento che la donna si sta applicando sulla pelle. Membra, narici e dita, in altre parole, non compongono una macabra scenografia, ma sono macinati dentro al filtro. Si chiarisce in questo modo perché scompaiano i deitici (*hic-illic*) che, tuttavia, non sono l'unico elemento di difformità tra i due testi. Non è chiaro se la *iunctura* preziosa *trunca calvaria*, (letteralmente «teschi mutilati»), elegantemente resa da Bontempelli in «crani tronchi», ove l'aggettivo «tronco» è sfruttato aulicamente nella sua accezione di «reciso», sia fraintesa dal disegnatore – che scambierebbe in questo modo l'attributo con il sostantivo suo omonimo –, o se sia volutamente banalizzata per agevolare il lettore medio, non abituato alle coloriture lessicali di Bontempelli e certamente non avvezzo alle risonanze semantiche apuleiane. Vi è meno dubbio, invece, sul fatto che si tratti di una variante nata in seno alla citata traduzione Einaudi, perché il testo in francese, in questo preciso punto della tavola 22, mantiene il dettato apuleiano: «des crânes défoncés».

La seconda riproduzione fotografica è mutuata dall'ultima tavola del *graphic novel*, ove si ricopia, con alcuni tagli, *met.* 11, 7.

[Apul. *met.* 11, 7, 3 e 5] Tantaque hilaritudine praeter peculiarem meam gestire mihi cuncta videbantur [...] Quid quod arbores etiam, quae pomifera subole fecundae quaeque earum tantum umbra contentae steriles, austrinis laxatae flatibus, germinae foliorum renidentes, clementi motu brachiorum dulces strepitus obsibilabant...

[trad. Bontempelli 1973] Mi pareva che ogni cosa si rallegrasse di una immensa letizia, oltre quella mia particolare [...] E perfino gli alberi, sia quelli fecondi di fruttifera progenie sia quelli sterili, contenti solo della loro ombra, e ricreati dalle aure australi, rifulgenti di gemme e di foglie, come sussurravano con soave mormorio muovendo i loro rami dolcemente!

[tav. 54] Mi pare che ogni cosa si rallegrasse di una immensa letizia, oltre quella mia particolare... e perfino gli alberi, sia quelli fecondi di fruttifera progenie, sia quelli sterili, contenti solo della loro ombra, e ricreati dalle aure australi, rifulgenti di gemme e di foglie, sussurrano con soave mormorio muovendo i loro rami dolcemente...

44 Sul passo: Costantini (2019) 75–88.

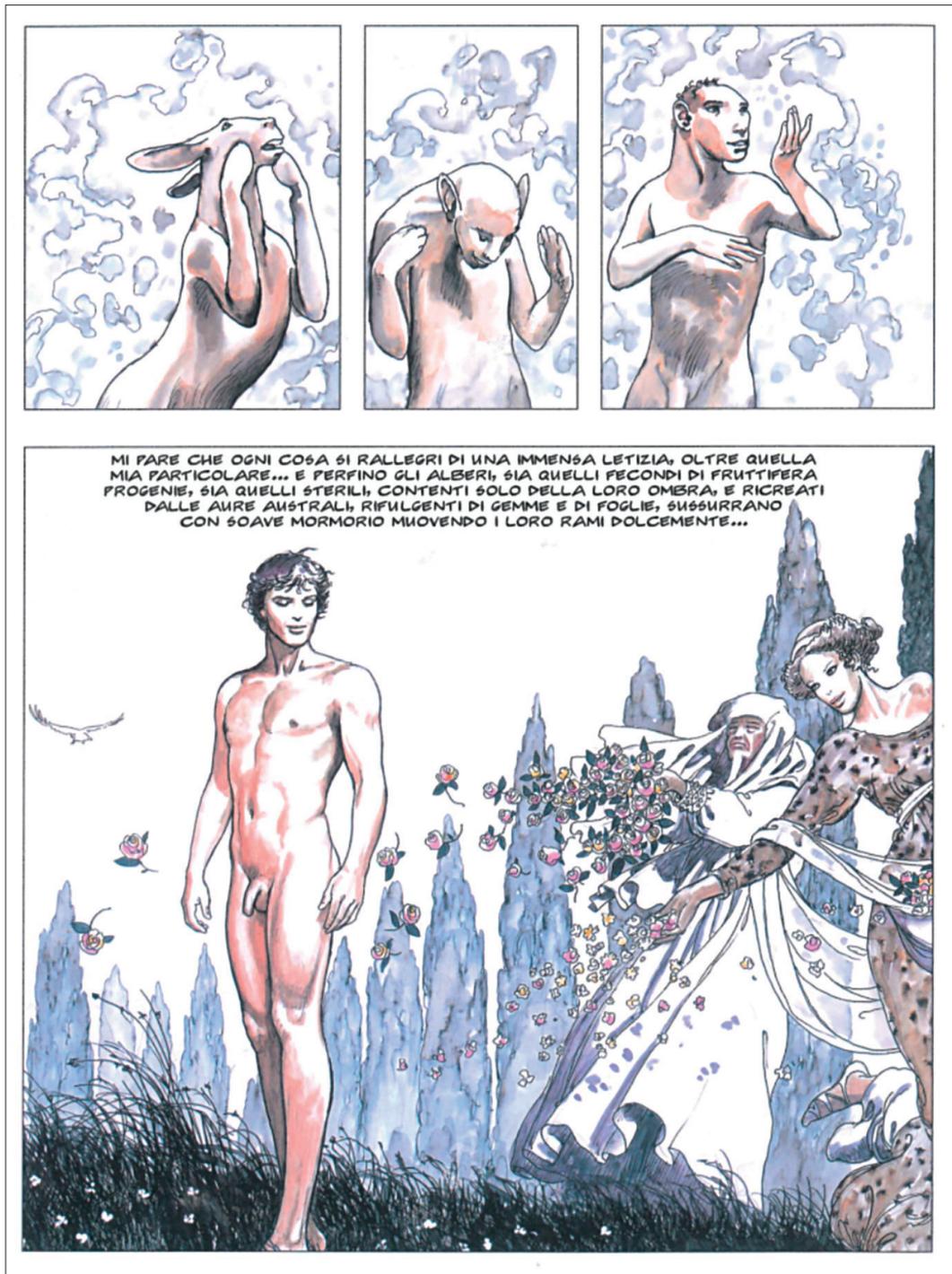


Figura 4 Milo Manara, da «L'asino d'oro e Gulliveriana», Feltrinelli 2021, tav. 54.

Se nel romanzo, però, Lucio, ancora asino, ridestatosi dal sogno <isiaco> contempla mesmerizzato la natura e sta per assistere agli *anteludia* della processione che gli restituirà la forma umana, nell'albo è ormai già un uomo fatto e finito.

L'unico scarto sta nel tempo dei verbi, perché Bontempelli preserva l'imperfetto del dettato latino mentre Manara sceglie il presente, che va a corroborare l'immediatezza visiva della pagina e occorre a una chiusa in cui è necessario esaltare il prodigio della trasformazione avvenuta.

CONSIDERAZIONI CONCLUSIVE

Non sorprende, credo, che a Milo Manara interessi Massimo Bontempelli, teorico del realismo magico: di quella poetica capace di distillare dal quotidiano il fantastico, il soprannaturale e il meraviglioso attraverso l'intelligenza e il garbo di una scrittura nitida pervasa dagli accenti dell'arte metafisica. Certamente non stupisce che entrambi, e soprattutto il primo, siano attratti da Apuleio: «il giovane desideroso di magia, l'asino... l'acrobata, il mistico»⁴⁵, lo scrittore che con classe sovrana, «tocchi fatui e leggeri, scherzi e arguzie, allusioni enigmatiche, note basse ed oscene»⁴⁶, allestisce un mondo in cui l'eros, sempre sospeso sul crinale tra divertimento e laidezza, si riplasma in diavoleschi ritratti femminili. Figure eroticamente ambigue, come quella della strega Panfile, pronte a eccitare l'immaginario maschile e a inquietarlo con il loro potere di incrinare i ruoli di genere.

L'Asino d'oro a fumetti è un vero e proprio <romanzo per immagini>: per quanto l'opera di partenza sia sfrondata, nulla è tradito della sua vocazione. Ogni scena persegue con coerenza il tracciato di una riscrittura di alto livello, squisita nei suoi affondi erotici, ma sempre chiara nel difficile processo di organizzazione e trasposizione delle parti. La tavola splendidamente curata, ripulita da rovine e macerie così presenti nel *peplum* italiano a basso costo, dà respiro al mondo della latinità pagana in chiave di esaltazione dell'antico con un tratto leggero e favoloso in cui si riconosce l'influenza felliniana.

45 Citati (2005) 416.

46 Citati (2005) 404.

Se nella società del manga e del fumetto statunitense⁴⁷, delle lettrici e dei lettori insonni e frenetici, assetati di ninja, robot e fantascienza, Manara viene ristampato, acquistato, letto, significa che nel Terzo Millennio c'è ancora spazio per un piacere che si nutre delle immagini e delle fantasie, che avanza per tramite della lettura lenta, che non conosce vergogna e non conosce tabù. Un tipo di piacere che incoraggia, in ultima istanza, la liberazione della sessualità dalle gabbie rigide della cultura repressiva, che permette agli uomini e alle donne di guardare con curiosità all'arte dell'erotismo, consentendo loro di ammettere serenamente: «io ero... il maschio e la femmina, facevo e ricevevo, agivo e venivo agita»⁴⁸.

APPENDICE. L'ASINO «IMPUDICO» DI GEORGES PICHARD

Nel 1985 usciva il numero 9 del periodico *2984* con un supplemento: *L'asino d'oro. Libero adattamento ispirato al testo di Apuleio*, del fumettista Georges Pichard, già edito in Francia dalla casa editrice *Glénat* con il titolo *Les Sorcières de Thésalie*. Il secondo volume, che conclude l'opera ed è stampato nello stesso anno, come l'altro sarà anonimamente tradotto, quindi pubblicato in albo nel '90.

Padre di *Paulette*, racconto erotico illustrato sulla vita di una seducente ereditiera, Pichard (1920 – 2003) è attivo in Francia negli stessi anni cui Manara opera in Italia. Professore presso l'Istituto di Arti Applicate⁴⁹, è noto per i suoi disegni in cui «l'erotismo viene ben condito dal sadismo»⁵⁰. In effetti, ci troviamo davanti a una riscrittura completamente diversa da quella che abbiamo letto fino a qui. Se per un verso i due albi di 50 pagine – il primo si conclude con la fuga di Carite in groppa all'asino (*met.* 6, 27) – gli consentono di recuperare molte più scene delle *Metamorfosi* – non rinuncia, per esempio, alla «milesia» di Socrate e Aristomene che occupa ben 11 tavole e gli dà occasione di esibire compiaciutamente il suo gusto *splatter* –, per l'altro l'impressione complessiva, tra lingue di

47 Sulle specificità del fumetto italiano (*osé* o meno) e sul suo mercato: Interdonato (2008) 119–126; Spinazzola (2008) 61–64; Gambaro (2012) 49–55; Giovannetti (2012) 29–34.

48 Sono le parole con cui apre l'albo Feltrinelli Valeria Parrella, a sua volta autrice di un romanzo con un protagonista di nome Lucio (*La Fortuna*, Narratori Feltrinelli 2022),

49 Fontana (2022) 282.

50 Fontana (2022) 282.

serpente, «lubriche locandaie», «sacripanti», «puttanelle» (cito dalla traduzione del 1985) e scenografie vagamente fauviste pregne di colori, vignette e *balloon*, è decisamente straniante.

A differenza di Manara che attraverso i disegni costruisce un aggancio intercomunicativo col mondo del cinema di Fellini, visionario eppure rispettoso della classicità e dei suoi corredi, Pichard, con le sue immagini bidimensionali e «flinstoniane» – Lucio a momenti è più irsuto da uomo che da asino – proietta il lettore in un passato imprecisato, in cui alle architetture quiriti (alla tav. 26 spunta un edificio simile al Colosseo) si uniscono fondali gotici in stile Transilvania; ratti e pipistrelli compresi (tav. 16, 38). La sofisticata introduzione dell'autore, a tratti cerebralistica, rivela immediatamente il tipo di sguardo che riserva alle *Metamorfosi*: «una finzione allegorica in cui regnano ovunque lo spirito e la varietà in una folla di descrizioni, di ritratti, di episodi che si succedono con grande scioltezza, ma anche le sagge lezioni di morale nascoste dietro ingegnose battute» (tav. 1). Ciononostante, sembra che la sola fissazione sessuale faccia da collante tra le parti: Panfile, legata dai briganti, «ha la bocca impegnata» e non può pronunciare incantesimi per «trasformare i suoi aggressori in bestiole meno esigenti» (tav. 40); la custode dei ladroni è una donna discinta «d'una quarantina d'anni» che non esita ad approfittarsi della bella Carite quando gli altri sono assenti (tav. 44); Lucio sorride sornione alla fanciulla che lo cavalca, strizzando l'occhio al lettore: «ora non mi resta che masticare qualche petalo di rosa e questa... desidererò senz'altro provarmi la sua riconoscenza» (tav. 47).

In effetti, uno degli elementi di maggiore interesse del volume sta proprio nel mondo in cui Pichard si appropria non solo del dettato, ma parimenti delle situazioni apuleiane riuscendo imprevedibilmente a ri-orientarle, anche quando il sottotesto erotico è assente o meno evidente, nella direzione della banalizzazio-
ne e della trivializzazione con effetti di comicità sguaiata.

⁵¹[Meroe] Stai tranquillo e ringraziaci... perché conosco gente che sarebbe fin troppo contenta di farsi pisciare addosso da due belle ragazze!

[Aristomene] Ah... era un piacere che fino a questo giorno mi era stato rifiutato... ma evidentemente...

[narratore esterno] Aristomene parlava così per ipocrita viltà, perché in verità la cosa non era di suo gradimento.

Così, per esempio, l'inquietante *Defixionszauber* compiuta da Meroe⁵², che in *met.* 1, 13 orina sul viso di Aristomene intrappolandolo magicamente nella locanda, si trasforma in un'occasione per mettere su pagina i *fetish* propri di uno specifico immaginario libidico... Ma questo è un discorso che affronteremo altrove.

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52 Graverini e Nicolini (2019) 189.

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Ovid zwischen Biographie und Roman

Diane Middlebrooks unvollendeter Ovid:

Der junge Ovid (2012) und *Young Ovid* (2015)

Abstract In 2012, *Der junge Ovid*, the unfinished work of the late Diane Middlebrook (1939–2007), was published in Austria. Various aspects make it a very special book: the translation was published more than two years before the original: The Augustan poet is brought to life in social and cultural history chapters and biographical, fictional passages that depict a possible reality. Middlebrook's widower, Carl Djerassi (1923–2015), widely known as the 'Mother of the Pill' and as the author of novels and plays belonging to the new genres he created, "science-in-fiction" and "science-in-theatre", asked me to check philological details before going to press. In close cooperation with the publisher Andres Müry, Djerassi's wishes came true: the publication was followed by a book launch, readings from the book and a major event at the University of Vienna (with keynote and round table): Ovid is shown as a newborn, as a child hanging on the lips of his mother, the first storyteller of his life, as a young man full of literary talent taking his first steps in the city of Rome, and as a famous author at the age of 46, surrounded by frescoes depicting scenes from his *opus magnum*, the *Metamorphoses*. The following pages retell the fascinating story of the publication of a modern book about an ancient author under unconventional circumstances and compare the translation with the original.

Keywords Diane Middlebrook, Carl Djerassi, Ovid, biography, novel

Art is not a luxury. It stands at the essence of our humanity, and it asks for no special protection except the right to exist. [...] The poet Ovid was exiled by Augustus Caesar, but the poetry of Ovid has outlasted the Roman Empire. The poet Mandelstam's life was ruined by Joseph Stalin, but his poetry has outlasted the Soviet Union. The poet Lorca was murdered by the thugs of General Franco, but his art has outlasted the fascism of the Falange.
Rushdie (2024) 168.

DER JUNGE OVID (2012) UND YOUNG OVID (2015)

Im Spätherbst 2012 erschien posthum *Der junge Ovid. Eine unvollendete Biographie*,¹ das letzte Werk der US-amerikanischen Literaturwissenschaftlerin, Literatin und Biographin Diane Middlebrook (1939–2007) bei Mury Salzmann.² Die Publikation weist mehrere Besonderheiten auf: Barbara von Bechtolsheims Übersetzung erschien mehr als zwei Jahre vor *Young Ovid. A Life Recreated* (so auf dem Schutzumschlag) resp. *Young Ovid. An Unfinished Biography* (gemäß dem Titelblatt).³ Offizieller Erscheinungstermin ist der 6. Jänner 2015; im Impressum findet sich der Copyright-Vermerk *The Estate of Diane Middlebrook 2014*.

Kultur-, sozial- und literaturgeschichtliche Abschnitte wechseln mit biographisch-romanhaften ab. Dies ist im Druckbild ausgezeichnet: Kursivdruck markiert in beiden Büchern die fiktiven Passagen und setzt sie von den (literatur- und kultur)historischen Ausführungen ab: Wer will, kann zwei Bücher in einem Buch lesen, wenngleich nur beide Stränge (Roman und Realienkunde) zusammen das von Middlebrook intendierte Gesamtbild ergeben.

Der Witwer der Autorin, der weltbekannte Chemiker („Mutter der Pille“)⁴ und Autor zahlreicher Werke der von ihm kreierten Genres ‚Science in Fiction‘

1 Middlebrook (2012).

2 <https://www.muerysalzmann.com/> (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

3 Middlebrook (2015).

4 Djerassi (1996). Vgl. Djerassi (1992). Djerassi (2013b) 38–50.

und ‚Science in Theatre‘,⁵ Carl Djerassi (1923–2015),⁶ trat an mich heran, um neben philologischen und realkundlichen Details den Anmerkungsapparat einer letzten Überprüfung zu unterziehen und – was sich während des Redaktionsprozesses ergab – bei der Auswahl aus dem umfänglicheren Manuskript (resp. deren deutschsprachiger Übersetzung) zu unterstützen. In enger Kooperation mit Andres Müry, Mitbegründer des Verlags und verantwortlichem Lektor,⁷ konnte Djerassis Herzensprojekt, die Drucklegung des Vermächtnisses seiner verstorbenen Frau, realisiert und in Lesungen (mit der Regisseurin seiner Theaterstücke, Isabella Gregor)⁸ und Buchpräsentationen (mit Vortrag und Podiumsdiskussion an der Universität Wien)⁹ einer breiten Öffentlichkeit vorgestellt werden.

Ovid als Baby und Kind, als junger Mann und als etablierter Autor erwacht in diesem besonderen Buch zum Leben – beginnend während seiner Geburt, später an den Lippen der Frauen hängend, die ihn auf- und erzogen und ihm Geschichten erzählten, früh beseelt von dem Wunsch, gegen alle Widerstände Künstler zu werden, in Lebenskrisen und Phasen der Zufriedenheit, schließlich vor einer *recitatio* aus den *Metamorphosen* in seiner *domus*, umgeben von Fresken, die ‚seine‘ mythischen Geschöpfe und ihn selbst in seiner *ἀκμή* zeigen.

Die vorliegende Form des Buches ist tragischen Umständen geschuldet: Diane Middlebrooks – in den Paratexten ausführlich thematisierte¹⁰ – Krebserkrankung hat die Fertigstellung einer kompletten Ovid-Biographie verhindert, die sieben exemplarische Tage in den Blick nehmen und 2008 (2000 Jahre nach der Publikation der *Metamorphosen* und dem Gang in die Verbannung) erscheinen

5 Gehrke (2008). 2009 hat der Träger zahlreicher Ehrendoktorate von der TU Dortmund seinen ersten kulturwissenschaftlichen Dr. h. c. erhalten: <https://kuwi.tu-dortmund.de/qualifikation/promotion/ehrenpromotionen/> (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

6 <https://www.djerassi.com/> (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

7 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andres_Müry (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

8 <https://www.isabellagregor.com/> (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

9 <https://medienportal.univie.ac.at/uniview/veranstaltungen/detailansicht/artikel/lesung-der-junge-ovid-unvollendet/> (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

10 Middlebrook (2012) 9–14. 137. 141. Middlebrook (2015) xi. xv. 94–97. Vgl. Djerassi (2013b) 124–125. Beide Bücher sind dem Chirurgen zugeeignet, der Diane Middlebrooks Leben operativ verlängerte (s. p.): „Gewidmet Prof. Dr. Rainer Engemann für die folgenden Worte nach der elfstündigen Operation: ‚Mrs. Middlebrook – now finish your book!‘ – To Professor Dr. Rainer Engemann [f]or the following words: ‚Mrs. Middlebrook – now finish your book!‘“.

hätte sollen. Vor ihrem unzeitigen Tod konnte sie noch wesentliche Abschnitte ihres ursprünglichen Plans umsetzen, indem sie Ovids Kindheit und Jugend beleuchtete.¹¹ Wenigstens diesen prägenden Lebensabschnitt ihren Vorstellungen gemäß darzustellen, hat ihr in ihrer letzten Lebensphase Kraft gegeben.

Diane Middlebrooks Zugang zu Ovid weicht von dem ab, was traditionelle Philolog*innen oder Althistoriker*innen gewohnt sind. In der *Einleitung* schildert sie dieses Verständnis von Ovid und die Konzeption des Buches:

Ich habe mich entschieden, beispielhafte Ereignisse aus Ovids Leben von seiner Geburt bis zum Alter von zwanzig herauszuarbeiten – eine Phase, die bisher wenig Beachtung fand. In jedes Kapitel habe ich einige illustrative Szenen eingefügt, die die entsprechenden Episoden veranschaulichen und sich in Ovids Leben so oder ähnlich hätten zutragen können. Ihr Kursivdruck verweist darauf, dass sie fiktiv sind. Sie basieren auf meinen Recherchen über römische Sozialgeschichte, den Bezug zu Ovids Leben habe ich selber hergestellt.¹²

Ein Vergleich dieses kurzen Übersetzungspassus mit Middlebrooks Worten zeigt ihren ganz eigenen, persönlichen Stil, der ihre tiefgehende Auseinandersetzung mit antiker Lebensrealität spiegelt:

To compensate for the unavailability of a full historical documentation of Ovid's existence, I have chosen to account for four exemplary milestones at the beginning of young Ovid's life – a period that has hardly been touched upon. To assist this effort, I have written a few illustrative scenes into each chapter, scenes that dramatize significant episodes that must or might have occurred in Ovid's life. Those scenes are presented in italic type, to signify their fictional status. They are based on my research into Roman social history, but the application to Ovid's life is my own.¹³

11 Ovids ‚Selbstbiographie‘ (*Trist.* 4,10) und die Aussagen von Seneca pater über ihn und seinen Bruder (*Controversiae* 2,2) integriert Middlebrook in ihre Darstellung.

12 Middlebrook (2012) 22. Die in diesem Beitrag zitierten fiktiven Passagen sind nicht kursiviert, da sich jeweils aus der interpretatorischen Einbettung ergibt, welchem der beiden Darstellungsstränge die jeweiligen Ausschnitte zuzuordnen sind.

13 Middlebrook (2015) xx–xxi. – In der amerikanischen Ausgabe ist die *Introduction* Teil der Paratexte und römisch paginiert. Das ergibt Abweichungen zur durchgehend arabischen Paginierung in der österreichischen Ausgabe.

Die Übersetzung versucht – wenngleich sie *per se* immer nur mittelbar sein kann – diesen besonderen Ton zu treffen und war im (bis zur Drucklegung der deutschsprachigen Ausgabe weiter überarbeiteten) Entwurf¹⁴ noch näher an Middlebrooks Stimme. Dieser deutsche ‚Urtext‘ ermöglicht Rückschlüsse auf das noch umfänglichere amerikanische Originalmanuskript, zumal der 2015 gedruckte englischsprachige Text demgegenüber gleichfalls (in unterschiedlicher Intensität, aber durchgehend mit Feingefühl) gekürzt ist.

Barbara von Bechtolsheim hat ein ansprechendes, gut lesbares Buch geschaffen. Diane Middlebrooks charakteristischen Ausdruck konnte und wollte sie nicht ‚kopieren‘, zumal Carl Djerassi betont hatte, dass auch im Amerikanischen

[t]rotz sorgfältiger Bemühungen von zwei verschiedenen Autoren [...] Dianes einzigartige Stimme [...] nicht zu treffen [...] war. Es wäre schlicht wie das unvollendete Gemälde eines Meisters mit einem einzigartigen Stil, das ganz andere Künstler fertigstellen. [...] Es blieb nur eine Antwort [...]: eine unvollendete posthume Biographie – Begriffe, die gleichermaßen auf Ovid wie auf Diane zutreffen.¹⁵

In spite of diligent efforts on the part of two different writers, it soon became obvious that Diane's uniquely distinct voice [...] could not be matched [...]. It was simply like an unfinished painting by a master of a unique technique being completed by other and totally different artists. [...] There remained only one answer [...]: an unfinished posthumous biography – terms that apply with equal force to Ovid as well as to Diane.¹⁶

Auf einer strukturellen Ebene beschreibt Maurice Biriotti die Umformung, der das Ovid-Buch aufgrund der äußeren Umstände unterworfen werden musste, im *Nachwort. Unterbrochen bei der Verwandlung*¹⁷ resp. (noch nuancierter) in *Foreword: Caught in Midtransformation*:¹⁸

14 Unpublizierter Entwurf von Barbara von Bechtolsheim, per E-Mail an mich übermittelt am 13. 05. 2012 durch Carl Djerassi. – Aussagekräftige Beispiele werde ich referieren, nicht zitieren. In das ursprüngliche amerikanische Manuskript hatte ich keinen Einblick. Es lässt sich über von Bechtolsheims Entwurf und *Young Ovid* zumindest zum Teil rekonstruieren.

15 Middlebrook (2012) 14.

16 Middlebrook (2015) 97.

17 Middlebrook (2012) 136–141.

18 Middlebrook (2015) xi–xv.

Mit *Der junge Ovid* liegt ein fragmentarischer, wenn auch in sich geschlossener Text vor. Natürlich kann es nicht der sein, den Diane Middlebrook aus der Hand gegeben hätte. Texte unterliegen wie Menschen Metamorphosen – Revisionen, Umarbeitungen, Variationen. Der Autorin war der kreative Prozess wesentlich.¹⁹

Young Ovid is a fragment, but it is also a self-contained text. Apart from the fact that some portions of the originally conceived piece were not attempted, the work in front of us is still not as Diane Middlebrook wanted it to be. Texts, like people, undergo metamorphoses – revisions, reworkings, variations. This was a process as familiar to Diane Middlebrook as to her hero, Ovid. Diane Middlebrook wrote like a poet, whether her medium was verse, biography, or an academic paper. The creative process mattered.²⁰

In beiden Ausgaben weggelassen ist Middlebrooks Danksagung an Fachkolleg*innen; die zahlreichen Referenzen und die ausführliche Bibliographie geben jedoch Einblick in die weitreichenden Forschungen, die sie für ihre neue Sicht auf Ovid unternommen hat. Geblieben ist dessen unerschütterlicher Glaube an sein Nachleben; er hat Recht behalten, wie die Literaturgeschichte und Middlebrooks Buch zeigen:²¹

But the instigating source of this biography was the remarkable confidence that Ovid had in his own survival. He knew that the artistic strategy by which he had created a narrator in his work was a guarantee that it would outlive him; he even believed that it would never die.²²

Die eigentliche Quelle dieser Biographie ist das bemerkenswerte Vertrauen, das Ovid in sein eigenes Fortleben hatte. Er glaubte fest daran, dass ihn sein Werk überleben, ja sogar niemals in Vergessenheit geraten würde.²³

19 Middlebrook (2012) 138.

20 Middlebrook (2015) xii.

21 An solchen Stellen bezieht sich Middlebrook auf Ovids Beteuerungen (u. a. *Met.* 15,871–879) und verwebt sie gekonnt mit ihrer Darstellung. Bezugnahmen sind im Haupttext oder Anmerkungsapparat ausgewiesen (hier *Trist.* 3,7).

22 Middlebrook (2015) xxi.

23 Middlebrook (2012) 22.

Unmittelbar davor schreibt sie über ihr Selbstverständnis als Biographin und darüber, wer ihr für und in Ovids *vita* zentral erscheint – die Frauen:

Als Biographin interessiert mich, warum Ovid Dichter wurde und eben nicht nach dem Wunsch seines Vaters ein römischer Magistrat. Antworten auf diese Frage finde ich in der reichen Symbolik, die sich in Ovids Meisterwerk, den *Metamorphosen*, verbirgt: in den Abschnitten über die Schöpfung, über Phaethon, über die Töchter des Minyas, über Daphne und Apollon,²⁴ über Minerva und die Musen, über Arachne und im Epilog. Wenn ich Spekulationen über die emotionale Dynamik anstelle, versuche ich, ihre psychologische Stimmigkeit aus dem Werk herzuleiten. Darin zeigt sich etwa ein ungewöhnlich starkes Interesse an Frauen, die ich auf den frühen Einfluss einer – hypothetisch angenommenen – jungen Mutter mit literarischer Bildung und Begabung zum Geschichtenerzählen zurückführe: Sie mag für Ovids Kreativität entscheidend gewesen sein. Zwar sind Hypothesen wie diese letztlich historisch nicht zu untermauern, aber, wie ich zeigen möchte, emotional stichhaltig.²⁵

Gemäß Biriotti wusste sie um das (kalkulierte) Risiko, Hypothetisches mit Belegtem zu verbinden, und hat daraus etwas Neues, Eigenes geschaffen:

Such an undertaking has many risks. Principal among them is the danger of descending into wild and unsustainable conjecture. That Diane Middlebrook was alive to this possibility is evident already from the existing manuscript. Her proposed solution was an ingenious balance of textual features that signaled a new departure for her. First, she realized that this undertaking put great emphasis on a principled and detailed reading of the text. Second, the undertaking had to be rooted in fact and scholarship. [...] Third, she would come clean about her guesswork, laying out the leaps, the doubts, the questions, for readers to see. The reader is left in no doubt as to the status or the provenance of the conjecture. And finally, Diane Middlebrook added outright fiction – or fictionalization – to her armory [...]. None of these features is unique. Perhaps their combination is not unique either. But the coming together of supreme authority in reading poetry, the rigor of a great scholar,

24 Für einen komparatistischen Zugang (mit einem zusätzlichen Schwerpunkt auf William Shakespeares *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; für die filmische Umsetzung in *Dead Poets' Society* vgl. Schreiner [2018]) vgl. Reichert (2010).

25 Middlebrook (2012) 22.

the shrewd psychological insight of a biographer at the height of her prowess, the writerly craft of a poet – it is this striking coming together of focus for one project that surely would have broken new ground in the field of biography.²⁶

Die Drucklegung hat sie nicht mehr erlebt. Einige Jahre vergingen, bis ihr letzter Text doch noch veröffentlicht wurde. Der *spiritus rector* war Carl Djerassi. Seiner Beharrlichkeit und Diane Middlebrooks darstellerischem Talent verdanken die an Ovid Interessierten ein Buch, auf das man ungern verzichten würde.

Manuskript – Redaktion – Buch

Am 13. Mai 2012, kurz vor der Verleihung des Ehrendoktorats der Universität Wien an ihn,²⁷ erreichte mich ein E-Mail von Carl Djerassi. Persönlich kenne ich ihn seit etwa vier Jahren. Er war Gast der Philologisch-Kulturwissenschaftlichen Fakultät in der Vortragsreihe *Fakultätsvorträge* gewesen und hatte in seinem bald danach publizierten (und von mir redaktionell betreuten) Vortrag sein Leben (von der Flucht aus Wien 1938 über seine Versöhnung mit und Rückkehr nach Österreich bis zur Entwicklung vom Chemiker zum Schriftsteller) Revue passieren lassen.²⁸ Der Abend war ebenso besonders gewesen wie die nachfolgende Veröffentlichung, hatte der Vortrag doch eine Lesung (mit Isabella Gregor und ihm selbst) aus einem seiner Stücke, *Phallstricke*,²⁹ enthalten und die gedruckte Version zusätzlich eine eigens gepresste CD eines Musikstücks, das er für ein anderes seiner literarischen Projekte in Auftrag gegeben hatte.³⁰ Der (frühere) Naturwissenschaftler fühlte sich unter Geisteswissenschaftler*innen sichtlich wohl und deckte mit dem, was er vortrug und niederschrieb, multi-

26 Middlebrook (2015) xiv. Vgl. Middlebrook (2012) 139–140.

27 <https://geschichte.univie.ac.at/de/personen/carl-djerassi> (letzter Zugriff: 15. 10. 2024). <https://medienportal.univie.ac.at/media/aktuelle-pressemeldungen/detailansicht/artikel/carl-djerassi-erhaelt-ehrendoktorat-der-universitaet-wien/> (letzter Zugriff: 15. 10. 2024). Vgl. Djerassi (2013b) 235.

28 Djerassi (2009).

29 Djerassi (2006).

30 Erik Weiners *Angelus Novus*-Rap (komponiert für *Four Jews on Parnassus*). Djerassi (2009) 32–33. Djerassi (2008b) 110. Djerassi (2008a) 103. Der amerikanischen Ausgabe, die *In memo-*

medial eine ganze Reihe der an unserer Fakultät vertretenen Fächer ab. Danach haben wir Kontakt über Lesungen, Aufführungen, Buchpräsentationen und Vorträge gehalten, dazwischen gab es E-Mail-Austausch, da Djerassi einen vollen Terminkalender (auf mehreren Kontinenten) hatte.

Diese enorme Energie und Arbeitskraft war Trauerarbeit, um den Tod seiner großen Liebe Diane Middlebrook besser verkraften zu können. Er hat daraus nie ein Hehl gemacht (und seine persönlichen Gedanken im Vorwort zu *Der junge Ovid* und im Nachwort zu *Young Ovid* niedergeschrieben).³¹ Djerassis Interesse für viele Literaturen, die antike eingeschlossen, war ebenso deutlich wie sein Wunsch, seiner Frau ein dauerhaftes Angedenken zu bewahren: Noch im Dezember 2012 sollte ihr letztes Buch präsentiert werden, den Titel *Der junge Ovid. Eine unvollendete Biographie* tragen und bei „eine[m] kleine[n] Salzburger Verlag, Müry Salzmann“ herauskommen. Die Verlagsvorschau schickte er mit. Der angepeilte Veröffentlichungstermin war der 22. November 2012 (gekoppelt an die Buchmesse *Buch Wien* in der Messe Wien): Am 14. Dezember 2012 war Diane Middlebrooks fünfter Todestag, und Klaus Albrecht Schröder, der langjährige Direktor der Albertina, hatte Carl Djerassi für den 12. Dezember 2012 „die offizielle Vorstellung des Buchs im Marmorsaal“ zugesagt.³² Als Dateianhang schickte mir Djerassi „das ganze Manuskript“ (bereits in deutscher Übersetzung), damit ich mir einen Überblick verschaffen konnte, und fragte, ob man an der Universität Wien an einer Veranstaltung interessiert wäre, „da doch fast gar nichts über den jungen Ovid bekannt ist“. (Eine Lesung mit Diskussion fand dann am 22. Mai 2013 statt.) Von Verlagsseite wäre vor September nicht mit der endgültigen Auswahl zu rechnen. Zunächst erhielt ich am 18. September 2012 ein Aviso von Andres Müry:

Carl Djerassi bat mich, als Lektor von „Der junge Ovid“ direkt mit Ihnen Kontakt aufzunehmen. Die deutsche Fassung wird Anfang kommender Woche fertig sein und geht Ihnen dann digital zu. Es handelt sich dabei um eine sehr gestraffte, kon-

riam Diane Middlebrook zugeeignet ist, liegt eine CD mit 9 Tracks bei: Neben dem Rap enthält sie für Djerassis Ausführungen wesentliche Musik von Arnold Schönberg, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Hiroshi Nakamura und Egill Ólafsson.

³¹ Middlebrook (2012) 11. Middlebrook (2015) 95. Djerassi (2012) gewährt überdies (dichterisch verarbeiteten) Einblick in eine Phase der Trennung in den 1980er Jahren.

³² https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20121211_OTSo202/carl-djerassi-praesentiert-das-letzte-buch-seiner-verstorbenen-ehfrau-in-der-albertina-bild (letzter Zugriff: 15. 10. 2024).

zentrierte Version des „Originals“ (das ja ein Torso ist) von ca. 130 Seiten; auch der Anmerkungsapparat, den die Übersetzerin Barbara von Bechtolsheim³³ gerade überarbeitet, wird überschaubar sein.

Das Verlags-PDF kam am 25. September 2012; Müry begründete darin die Entscheidung für den reduzierten Anmerkungsapparat damit, vermehrt Leser*innen auch außerhalb der Fachwissenschaft ansprechen zu wollen:

Eine eigene Problematik stellte die Erstellung des deutschen Anmerkungsapparats dar. Ich glaube, Sie kennen ja den englischen [...] [E]s war der Übersetzerin und mir um größte Vereinfachung zu tun, da es ja – in voller Übereinstimmung mit Carl Djerassi – eine farbige biographische Erzählung für das breitere, gebildete Publikum werden soll, keine Fachpublikation für Spezialisten.

Am 27. September 2012 teilte ich Andres Müry mein Bedauern über einige Kürzungen gegenüber der ursprünglichen deutschen Fassung im Haupttext mit und unterbreitete ihm den Vorschlag,

zumindest die kursiven Passagen, also diejenigen, aus denen die Literatin und Biographin Diane Middlebrook ganz stark und individuell spricht und IHREN UR-EIGENEN Ovid auftreten lässt, nicht – oder zumindest nicht so stark – einzukürzen? So ist gerade die 2. Edition der *Amores* literarisch höchst spannend (und auch „Ovids“ Überlegungen dazu), desgleichen die politischen Implikationen der *Metamorphosen*.

Konkrete „Wiederaufnahmevorschläge“ übermittelte ich am 1. Oktober 2012 – mit Erfolg. Am 13. Oktober 2012 hielt ich das fertig layoutierte Manuskript in Händen. Letzte Korrekturen (von mir und meinem damaligen Chef, dem langjährigen Dekan Franz Römer) wurden eingearbeitet. Am 30. Oktober 2012 war auch der Klappentext fertig. Präsentation und Lesung konnten termingerecht und unter großem Publikumsinteresse stattfinden.

³³ <https://www.agentursimon.com/autoren/profil/73-b/1222-barbara-von-bechtolsheim.html> (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

Diane Middlebrooks Ovid – österreichisch & amerikanisch

Aber was macht gerade dieses Ovid-Buch so anregend? Die Professorin in Stanford hatte einen weitreichenden Ruf als Biographin. Die Personen, die sie für ihre Lebensdarstellungen auswählte, waren durchgehend exzeptionell.³⁴ Carl Djerassi beschreibt das im Vorwort zu *Der junge Ovid* (und im Nachwort zu *Young Ovid*), indem er Kurzcharakteristiken von Diane Middlebrooks Büchern über Anne Sexton, Billy Tipton und Sylvia Plath (und Ted Hughes) gibt.³⁵

Ovid war aufgrund der Quellenlage und der langen zeitlichen Distanz die größte Herausforderung und übte Faszination auf Middlebrook aus: Zitate aus den *Metamorphosen* in goldener Schrift zierten die Wände der Wohnung in San Francisco,³⁶ und auch für Djerassi hatte Ovid einen besonderen, mit seinem Leben verbundenen Stellenwert: Als er 1938 mit seiner Mutter Wien in Richtung USA verließ, um der Verfolgung durch die Nationalsozialisten zu entkommen,³⁷ war eine Ausgabe der *Metamorphosen* im Gepäck des damals knapp 15jährigen Burschen. Den Weltaltermythos zitierte er noch mit über 90 Jahren mühelos in lateinischer Sprache.³⁸ In einer seiner spätesten Kurzgeschichten, *The Dacriologist*,³⁹ spielen antike Autoren (darunter prominent Ovid) in einer gut sortierten Bibliothek eine wichtige Rolle.⁴⁰ Sein letzter (posthum erschienener) Roman, *Verurteilt zu leben*, endet mit Ovid (und einer Anspielung auf Heraklit):

34 Middlebrook (1991). Middlebrook (1998). Middlebrook (2003).

35 Middlebrook (2012) 6–9. Middlebrook (2015) 92–94.

36 Djerassi (2013b), 103 (über das Domizil in San Francisco); 116 (über die Wohnung in London). Zu den Wandinschriften vgl. <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/telling-tales-out-of-school> (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

37 Vgl. Djerassi (2013b) 186–235 (= „Jude“): Djerassi erläutert den Facettenreichtum jüdischer Identität(sfindung) und führt Selbst- und Fremdbild gegeneinander. Stets hat er betont, dass die Anführungszeichen zum Lemma hinzuzusetzen seien, weil Eigen- und Fremddefinition nur selten deckungsgleich sind.

38 Schreiner (2020) 229. Djerassi (2013b) 137 reflektiert seine Schulzeit in Wien, zu der grundständiges Latein (ab der 1. Klasse Gymnasium, somit ab der 5. Schulstufe) gehörte.

39 Djerassi (2013a) 22–38.

40 Fein verwoben sind in der Geschichte Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften, die Bedeutung von ‚Wandtattoos‘ (die auch in Diane Middlebrooks und Carl Djerassis Interieur eine

Wie schon Ovid schrieb: „Alles fließt.“⁴¹

Diane Middlebrook wiederum schrieb keine ‚klassische‘ Ovid-Biographie, wie sie in der altphilologischen oder altertumswissenschaftlichen Forschung üblich ist,⁴² und ebensowenig eine Monographie, die den (ausgetretenen oder innovativen)⁴³ Pfaden der einschlägigen Fachwissenschaft folgt, aber auch keinen Ovid-Roman nach dem Vorbild David Maloufs,⁴⁴ Christoph Ransmayrs⁴⁵ oder David Wisharts,⁴⁶ sondern ein *Biopic*, ein aus der Filmwissenschaft bekanntes Genre, das aufgrund seiner fiktionalen Elemente Bezüge zur antiken Biographie⁴⁷ aufweist und Ovid – so darf man annehmen, zumal sich *Young Ovid* und *Der junge Ovid* auf gewollt spekulativem Terrain bewegen – in seiner alternativen, nonkonformistischen Haltung zugesagt hätte: Romanhafte Elemente (entwickelt aus Ovids Werken und dem Wissen über zeitgenössische Realität) wechseln mit sozial- und kulturgeschichtlichen Abschnitten ab, die (zusätzlich zum Anmerkungsapparat) mit dem Leben um die Zeitenwende nicht in allen Details vertrauten Leser*innen müheloses Eintauchen in die (auf vielen Ebenen andere, fremde) Vergangenheit ermöglichen. Wer es vorzieht, nur die literarischen Passagen zu lesen, erhält – passend zum Untertitel *Eine unvollendete Biographie* – ein Mosaik aus aussagekräftigen Schlaglichtern auf Ovids Entwicklung zu dem Mann, als den wir ihn kennen (oder zu kennen glauben). Der besondere Reiz

Rolle spielten) und Gelehrsamkeit und Erotik; Djerassi (2013a) 37: „As was his custom when he entered an apartment or someone else’s home for the first time, his eyes swept the walls. To him, walls were a form of tattoo. The nature and placement of the tattoo told you a great deal about the person. Bare walls, though not bare skin, turned him off. [...] Most of the living room walls were covered with bookshelves, with the books attracting him like pheromones. Even the virtual absence of paperbacks registered with him. [...] Some of the economics titles were almost as incomprehensible to him as the Greek ones. There were leather-bound volumes of Ovid, Virgil, and Catullus, and an entire shelf of French literature.“

41 Djerassi (2015) 424.

42 Giebel (1991).

43 Hösle (2020) und Leiverkus (2021) sind (jeweils mit Fokus auf den *Metamorphosen*) besonders erfrischende Beispiel für neue Zugänge zu altbekannten Texten.

44 Malouf (1978).

45 Ransmayr (1988).

46 Wishart (1996).

47 Römer (2005).

liegt in der Mischung aus (einigermaßen, aber auch weitgehend) gesicherten Passagen und solchen, die – frei nach Robert Musils *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* – dem Möglichkeitsprinzip verschrieben sind. Auch eine der beiden Versionen des Untertitels der amerikanischen Fassung (*A Life Recreated* vs. *An Unfinished Biography*) weist diese gewollten Brüche deutlich aus.

Ovid hat Diane Middlebrook über Jahrzehnte begleitet – in akademischer Lehre und Forschung. Ihre Auseinandersetzung mit der Psyche der im Fokus all ihrer Biographien stehenden Personen und die anhaltende Modernität von Ovids Werken, wozu auch dessen positive Aufnahme bei ihren Hörer*innen gehörte, haben den Entschluss in ihr reifen lassen, eine neue und v.a. neuartige Ovid-Vita zu schreiben. Faktischer Umfang und intendierter Tiefgang dieses Projekts zogen eine zeitlich ausgedehnte Konzeptions- und Schreibphase nach sich, die von ihrer schweren Krebserkrankung und den erforderlichen Therapien unterbrochen wurde.

Die Idee⁴⁸ von Djerassi, der nach seiner Emeritierung eine erfolgreiche Karriere als Autor literarischer, dialogischer⁴⁹ und dramatischer Texte begonnen hatte, das Gesamtkonzept auf die Jugend des augusteischen Dichters zu komprimieren (mit einem Ausblick auf den Höhepunkt seiner Karriere vor seinem tiefen Fall, den die Relegation ans Schwarze Meer für ihn bedeutet haben muss), war, wenn auch nicht lebensrettend, so doch lebensverlängernd. Das vorhandene Fragment ist somit bis zu einem gewissen Grad gewollt und erzwungen zugleich.

Middlebrooks Einfühlungsvermögen in Menschen, denen sie durch ihre Biographien eine Stimme gibt, hat es ihr als Nicht-Altphilologin, aber begnadeter Komparatistin erlaubt, ein authentisches Bild zu zeichnen, wobei die Offenheit, Bücher, denen eine solche Konzeption zugrunde liegt, im (schulischen und universitären) Unterricht zu verwenden, in den USA ausgeprägter sein mag als in Österreich oder Deutschland: So gingen die Meinungen auf einer Fachdidaktiktagung in München 2019⁵⁰ auseinander – dahingehend, dass eine Gruppe von Gymnasiallehrer*innen von diesem innovativen Zugang angetan war, eine andere Besorgnis äußerte, dass es mit Arbeitsaufwand verbunden sein würde, den

48 Middlebrook (2015) 96 schreibt Carl Djerassi: „I had a brainstorm: [...] why not rename her book *Young Ovid*, and rewrite the preamble [...]?“

49 Djerassi (2008a). Djerassi (2008b). Djerassi (2011).

50 <https://www.fachdidaktik.klassphil.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/verbuende/the-past-for-the-present/mutatas-dicere-formas-2019/index.html> (letzter Zugriff: 15.10.2024).

Schüler*innen den schmalen Grat zwischen Fakt und Fiktion zu erläutern, ein Caveat, das in Zeiten multimedialer Annäherungen an Geschichte beherrschbar erscheint, da sich viele junge Rezipient*innen über Computerspiele, Fernsehserien, Netflix, Kinofilme, phantastische Literatur und historische Romane der Vergangenheit annähern und oft erst so tiefgehendes Interesse, verbunden mit der Bereitschaft zur Auseinandersetzung mit Originalquellen, entwickeln.⁵¹

Überdies erleichtern die übersichtliche Gliederung und der überschaubare Umfang von *Der junge Ovid* und *Young Ovid* die Auseinandersetzung mit dem inhalts- und beziehungsreichen Text: Die deutschsprachige Version enthält eine *Einleitung*, *Ovids Metamorphose* (im Original: *Introduction: Ovid's Metamorphosis*), drei längere Kapitel (*Geburt*, *Ovid wird Römer* und *Ehe, Scheidung und endgültige Berufung*) und einen *Epilog*. *In der Blüte des Lebens* (ursprünglich: *Epilogue: Ovid in His Prime*). Im Impressum der amerikanischen Ausgabe findet sich zudem der weiterführende Vermerk:

Portions of the Chapter „Ovid Is Born“ first appeared in: *Feminist Studies Journal*, 38.2 (Summer 2012), 293–329.

Zwischenüberschriften untergliedern die Kapitel: *Ovid Is Born* enthält *The Baby in the Family*, *Ancestry* und *Father and Mother*. Das entspricht *Der Jüngste in der Familie*, *Herkunft*, *Vater und Mutter*; *Ovid Becomes a Roman* besteht aus *The Patron of the Ovidii*, *A Roman Education*, *The Roman Republic Becomes the Roman Empire*, *Ovid's Debut*, *The Grand Domus* und *The Toga Ceremony*, also *Der Mäzen*⁵² *der Familie Ovid*, *Die römische Bildung*, *Die römische Republik wird zum römischen Reich*, *Ovids Debüt*, *Der Palast* und *Die Toga-Zeremonie*. *Marriage, Divorce, Vocation* ist unterteilt in *Corinna*, *Beardless Youth*, *The Soldier of Love*, *Maybe So*, *Marriage, Divorce* und *Grand Tour and Vocation*, in der Übersetzung: *Corinna*, *Bartlose Jugend*, *Soldat der Liebe*, *Vielleicht war es so*, *Ehe*, *Scheidung*, *Bildungsreise und Berufung zum Dichter*.

⁵¹ Vgl. die Reihe *Video Games and the Humanities* (2020–), worin auch praktische Unterrichtserfahrungen beschrieben werden.

⁵² Messallas Funktion war die eines Mäzens und eines Patrons. Middlebrook wird ‚patron‘ vorgezogen haben, weil Maecenas parallel zu Messalla einen weiteren höchst erfolgreichen Literatenzirkel leitete und sie eine Vorliebe für (sozialgeschichtliche) Termini hatte; von Bechtolsheim hat für ‚Mäzen‘ votiert, weil man im deutschsprachigen Raum mit ‚Patron‘ oft den ‚Schutzpatron‘, nicht den Förderer assoziiert (im Unterschied zu ‚Patronage‘ oder ‚Mäzenatentum‘).

Original und Übersetzung verfügen über unterschiedlich umfangliche Anmerkungsapparate.⁵³ In *Der junge Ovid* sind die Stellenangaben in die Endnoten verschoben; die amerikanischen Anmerkungen sind zuweilen ausführlicher. In der österreichischen Ausgabe sind sie nach Kapiteln gegliedert, in der amerikanischen von 1–107 durchnummeriert.

Die gut sortierte Literaturliste⁵⁴ ist in *Young Ovid* an den englischsprachigen Markt angepasst wie die in *Der junge Ovid* an den deutschsprachigen (u. a. in Rücksprache mit mir). Zusätzlich sind (nur in der amerikanischen Ausgabe) zentrale Passagen (in beträchtlicher Länge)⁵⁵ aus Ovids Œuvre in englischer Übersetzung in einem Anhang (*Annotated Selections from Ovid's Poetry*) beigegeben: *Amores* 1,1; 1,3; 1,4 (in Auszügen); 1,5; 1,9; 1,14; 2,13; 2,16; 2,18; 3,1; 3,7; 3,15. *Metamorphoses* 1,1–4; 1,452–567; 2,1–328 (in Auszügen); 4,1–388 (in Auszügen); 4,55–166; 4,389–415; 6,1–145; 15,871–879. Zusätzliche Lektüreempfehlungen (über die abgedruckten Texte hinaus) finden sich 116–117. *Fasti* 1,1–62; 3,713–790; 3,809–848; 4,721–862; 6,249–460. *Tristia* 1,1; 1,3; 1,6; 1,10; 1,11; 2 (in Auszügen); 3,7; 3,13; 4,10; 5,10; 5,14. *Epistulae ex Ponto* 1,4; 2,3; 2,4; 4,4; 4,16. Zu den *Fasti* gibt es einen ergänzenden Hinweis, gefolgt von zwei zur Verbannungsdichtung:⁵⁶

Although Middlebrook's unfinished biography addresses little of the *Fasti*, the excerpts below resonate with her approach, particularly her interest in fertility and the feminine.⁵⁷

The following excerpts reflect bitter experience and contrast sharply with Middlebrook's portrayal of Ovid's triumphs.⁵⁸

Compare this poem to Middlebrook's depiction of Ovid's festive birthday in Rome, pp. 80–3.⁵⁹

53 Middlebrook (2015) 187–190.

54 Middlebrook (2015) 183–186.

55 Middlebrook (2015) 101–181.

56 Kraus (1942) eröffnete eine neue, zukunftsweisende Sicht auf Ovids Exilpoesie, fortgeführt von Froesch (1976) und Volk (2012).

57 Middlebrook (2015) 136. Hervorzuheben ist *June 9: Vestalia*.

58 Middlebrook (2015) 150.

59 Middlebrook (2015) 167. Der Vergleich soll mit *Trist.* 3,13 erfolgen (*A Birthday in Exile*).

Den *Annotated Selections* vorgeschaltet ist ein *Foreword*:

Ovid's first biographer was Ovid. His constant presence in his own texts makes it not only feasible but also rewarding to supplement Diane Middlebrook's unfinished biography with selections from his poetry. The Ovidian corpus is vast and offers an embarrassment of riches. The following selections follow closely on Middlebrook's treatment of Ovid's works. They are included either because she cites them, or because they sound her major themes, or because they round out her portrait of Ovid. [...] New titles and brief headnotes have been added in order to lend the selections greater coherency. Whenever Middlebrook has cited or discussed the text, the reader is referred to the relevant pages of her biography.⁶⁰

Neu gegenüber der österreichischen Ausgabe ist die *Literary Executor's Note* von Middlebrook's Tochter Leah:

Diane was a teacher before she was a biographer, and everything she wrote [...] was designed to draw the reader into the world of the writer, and especially the poet. At the time of her death, she was working on her most richly imagined project to date, a biography of the poet Ovid, and a desire grew among Diane's admirers, family, and friends to publish the fragments of this text in order to perpetuate her life's work of introducing the general reader to the psyche of the artist. Maurice Biriotti and Carl Djerassi explain in more detail the chapters that follow. My role here is simply to offer my deepest thanks to them, and to the great circles of friends who convinced me that this work should come into print. Carl Djerassi, as well as Charlie Winton, Rolph Blythe, and Jack Shoemaker of Counterpoint Press, were crucial to that decision, and the press made some well-judged editorial interventions – in particular, the inclusion of the relevant selections from Ovid, which should add to the experience of reading this book. We have chosen not to dot every i and cross every t. Had my mother lived, the few missteps that the keen-eyed classicist may encounter would no doubt have been pruned with the same care she applied to the laurel trees on her London patio: She cut them with nail scissors, leaf by leaf, and she applied the same meticulous attention to her manuscripts. The fluidity of her prose masked an exacting scholarly rigor. But *Young Ovid* represents great work, interrupted.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Middlebrook (2015) 99–100.

⁶¹ Middlebrook (2015) ix–x.

Maurice Biriottis *Foreword: Caught in Midtransformation* (xi–xv) und Carl Djerassis *Afterword* (91–97) entsprechen weitgehend den entsprechenden Paratexten in der österreichischen Ausgabe (abgesehen davon, dass ein Zitat aus Goethes *Wilhelm Meister* einmal nur auf deutsch und einmal zusätzlich in englischer Übersetzung erscheint, dass ein Mail von Leah Middlebrook in deutscher Übertragung in der amerikanischen Ausgabe nicht enthalten ist und die Danksagungen, insbesondere an Maurice Biriotti, ausführlicher sind): Das liegt auch an der gestürzten Reihenfolge: In *Der junge Ovid* stammt das Vorwort von Djerassi und das Nachwort von Biriotti, „eine Coda, die nur von ihm geschrieben werden konnte“.⁶²

Weniger als einen Monat nach der Publikation von *Young Ovid* ist Carl Djerassi verstorben. Es war eine seiner letzten Freuden, dass er das Herzensprojekt seiner Frau nun auch noch in der (fast) ursprünglichen Fassung vorliegen sah, hatte es doch etwas mehr als zwei Jahre zuvor in der „[e]ditorische[n] Notiz“ zur österreichischen Ausgabe noch geheißen:

Der bislang unpublizierte englische Originaltext von „Der junge Ovid“ enthält einen Anmerkungsapparat von 401 Fußnoten, Zeugnis von Breite und Tiefe der Forschung von Diane Middlebrook. Für die deutsche Fassung, die das Original strafft, sind die Fußnoten unter akribischer Mitarbeit der Übersetzerin Barbara von Bechtolsheim auf das Notwendige reduziert. Auch das Literaturverzeichnis wurde entsprechend adaptiert und mit Titeln aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum ergänzt.⁶³

Wie Leah Middlebrooks *Note* den Stil ihrer Mutter charakterisiert, ist Diane Middlebrooks eigene *Einleitung* Einführung in Ovids literarisches Arbeiten und durchzogen – oder, um in ihrer prägnanten Bildsprache zu bleiben – durchwoben von Ovid-Zitaten:

In den *Metamorphosen* ist Weben auch eine Metapher für Dichten und Geschichten-erzählen; webend konstituieren die weiblichen Figuren eine Identität als Künstlerinnen. [...] Zu Pallas pflegt der Erzähler offenkundig eine ganz ungewöhnliche Beziehung. [...] Warum provoziert sie später den Streit mit Arachne, der gegenüber sie im Vorteil ist, und warum verliert sie die Kontrolle, als sie den Wettstreit nicht gewinnt? Keine dieser Fragen beantwortet die Dichtung. Es bleibt der Eindruck einer

62 Middlebrook (2012) 15.

63 Middlebrook (2012) 152.

rätselhaften Frau, ähnlich rätselhaft, wie es für den Erzähler als Kind wohl die Mutter war: bewundert und gefürchtet. In Pallas, diese Vermutung sei gewagt, verkörpert Ovid die Beziehung zu seiner ersten Lehrerin, die ihn webend und erzählend zu seiner Kunst inspirierte.⁶⁴

Das *carmen perpetuum*, um das es hier geht und das konzeptionell auf Ovids frühe(st)e Kindheit zurückgeführt wird, ist in der amerikanischen Version noch präsenter, ein beredtes Beispiel für „[t]he fluidity of her prose“, heißt es dort doch unter Verwendung technischer Fachsprache:

I venture to guess that the goddess embodies Ovid's relationship to his first teacher, who, while working at her loom, set him on the path of the kind of storytelling so brilliantly on display in the *Metamorphoses*, the craft of thumbing the turning threads into one endless strand.⁶⁵

Quellenstudium – Ovid und darüber hinaus

Diane Middlebrook wertet in *Der junge Ovid* resp. in *Young Ovid* dessen eigene Texte aus, um sein Leben nachzuzeichnen, besser noch: wieder zu erschaffen. Das ist ihr *endless strand*. Weitere Werke aus unterschiedlichen Genres (von Seneca pater bis zu Properz) reichern die realkundlichen Abschnitte an.

Properz als Ovids älterer ‚Dichterkollege‘ tritt aber auch in einer romanhaften Passage auf. Ovid, der ‚Debütant‘, trifft ihn bei Messalla, als er zum ersten Mal bei ihm eingeladen ist:

Die anerkannten Meister in diesem Kreis, Properz und Tibull, waren bärtige junge Männer Mitte zwanzig und ganz und gar lebenserfahren. Tibull hatte zwar nicht als Soldat gekämpft, aber er war mit Messalla auf dem Schlachtfeld gewesen – Kommandeure nahmen gerne eine halboffizielle Kohorte von Freunden und Untergebenen auf ihre Feldzüge mit. Einige von Tibulls Gedichten zollten Messallas militärischer Tüchtigkeit höflich Anerkennung, aber seine typischen Themen waren das

64 Middlebrook (2012) 66–67.

65 Middlebrook (2015) 35.

Leben auf dem Land und die leidenschaftliche Liebe als Rückzug und Trost. Properz hingegen schrieb ungestüme, verrückte erotische Gedichte, in denen die Liebe als etwas Schreckliches erschien, als ein Anfall von Wahnsinn. In der Darstellung seiner Geliebten Cynthia lernte Ovid eine Frau kennen, wie sie ihm noch nie im Leben begegnet war: klug, gebildet, leidenschaftlich, von absoluter Schönheit, verspielt – und mit einem hochrangigen Römer liiert. Ovid war zwar noch nie verliebt und bisher auch an keinem Gefecht beteiligt gewesen, doch die Gespräche in Messallas Kreis vermittelten ihm ohnehin, dass Dichtung aus Dichtung und nicht aus dem Leben entsteht. Die poetische Form hatte Vorrang, ihre Erfordernisse bestimmten den Inhalt. Zunächst meinte Ovid, Tibull und Properz beschrieben, was ihnen im Leben widerfahren war. Allerdings hatten die Männer, die neben ihm auf den Liegen beim gemeinsamen Mahl ausgestreckt lagen, wenig Ähnlichkeit mit ihren Abbildern im Gedicht. Die literarische Gattung gebot, dass sie in der ersten Person schrieben, und so erfand jeder ein Ich und stattete es mit den Erfahrungen aus, die am besten zur Form passten; der Rest war Fiktion. Diese Erkenntnis fand Ovid ermutigend. An jenem Abend hatte er für alle eine Überraschung, ein raffiniertes Gedicht, in dem der Protagonist ein Knabe war. Es hatte einen dramatischen Anfang mit einer Variation auf die „Aeneis“ – wer schrieb heutzutage nicht eine Variation auf den Anfang der „Aeneis“?⁶⁶

Der Abschnitt enthält so manche Raffinesse: Properz und Tibull weichen als reale Personen recht deutlich von ihren Dichter-*personae* ab (die Middlebrook treffend charakterisiert). Ihr gelingt eine ebenso subtile wie unaufdringliche Gegeneinanderführung von Lebensrealität, poetischer Gestaltung, Genrekonvention und dem, was in der Elegie-Forschung heftig diskutiert wird: dem Anteil tatsächlicher Erfahrung, die Eingang in die Dichtung gefunden hat, im Gegensatz zu *inventio* oder Metaphorik, was im Extremfall bedeuten würde, dass die *puella* für das Gedicht steht und nicht für eine reale Frau. Dem kann Middlebrook wenig abgewinnen. Für sie liegt die Wahrheit – wie für das Gros der Philolog*innen – in der Mitte: Ohne eigene Erfahrung kann man keine Elegie schreiben, aber nicht alles, was man beschreibt, muss auf eigenem Erleben beruhen.⁶⁷

Was folgt, ist Ovids erste Talentprobe, der Anfang der *Amores*: Epische Hexameter waren nicht mehr ‚dichtbar‘, da ihm der Liebesgott höchstselbst einen

66 Middlebrook (2012) 88–89.

67 Vgl. Römer (2021) 13–48 (= *Die römische Elegie*) mit Literatur zu allen Forschungspositionen.

Versfuß gestohlen und ihm nur noch das elegische Distichon belassen hat: Diane Middlebrook nimmt Bezug auf einige der wahrscheinlich am häufigsten zitierten Ovid-Verse (*Am.* 1,1,1–5) und zeigt, welchen anderen Zugang Ovid wählt: nicht Tibulls ätherisch-bukolischen mit gelegentlicher Panegyrik, nicht Propertius mit Händen zu greifende ambivalente Leidenschaft, sondern seinen ganz eigenen verspielten, fast schon parodistischen.

Lohnend ist für die unmittelbare Fortsetzung der Passage der Vergleich der gegenüber dem englischen Original etwas gekürzten deutschen Fassung:⁶⁸

Das Gedicht machte eine kleine Verneigung vor Tibull, dessen Lieblingsthema der Krieg war, und eine vor Propertius, der sich häufig abfällig über den Knaben Amor ausließ. Wie alt das Ich des Gedichts ist, erfahren wir nicht, aber es zeigt Witz und verspottet Amor, der mit einem Pfeil antwortet.⁶⁹

The poem made I little bow to Tibullus, whose favorite topic was the war; and it made another little bow to Propertius, who frequently referred to Cupid dismissively as „that boy“. The age of „I“ in the poem is not specified, but he talks like a smart-ass kid; what we hear is his cheerful taunting of that other kid, Amor, whose reply is an arrow. The speaker is shafted.⁷⁰

Der amerikanische Amor – und die Haltung zu ihm – ist noch expliziter charakterisiert. Dafür entsteht bei Barbara von Bechtolsheim eine persönliche, die Jugend hervorhebende Note (in einem früheren Abschnitt des Kapitels, als Ovid erst mit Vater und Bruder zu Messalla reist, wo er rezitiert wird) durch die Wahl des Vornamens: „Publius würde sehen und abwarten – bis sein Moment kam“⁷¹ basiert auf „Ovid would wait and see – he would choose his moment.“⁷² Diane Middlebrook hat sich für das *nomen gentile* entschieden und einen noch aktiveren Protagonisten gezeichnet: Der amerikanische Ovid wählt den Moment; der österreichische Publius wartet auf ihn.

⁶⁸ Der Übersetzungsentwurf hatte dem gedruckten Original noch entsprochen.

⁶⁹ Middlebrook (2012) 89.

⁷⁰ Middlebrook (2015) 52.

⁷¹ Middlebrook (2012) 73.

⁷² Middlebrook (2015) 40.

Unabhängig davon, ob man sich (dem jungen) Ovid über Middlebrooks Original oder von Bechtolsheims Übersetzung nähert, den jungen Mann bei seinen ersten dichterischen Versuchen begleitet und den Respekt und die anfängliche Nervosität gegenüber den älteren Kollegen nachvollzieht: eine solche Sicht auf Ovid wird man in der gesamten Literatur (Fachpublikationen wie Belletristik) vergeblich suchen, da darin stets auf einen oder mehrere Aspekte (z. B. ein Werk, das gesamte Œuvre, die Verbannung – so auch bei Malouf und Ransmayr, der überdies mit Rückblenden arbeitet, während Wishart seinen Kriminalroman überhaupt erst nach Ovids Tod ansetzt –, mikrophilologische Beobachtungen, Vorbilder und Rezeption, Literaturtheorie oder -geschichte) fokussiert wird. Das Neue und Gewinnende an diesem Ovid-Buch ist, dass aus extensiver Lektüre antiker Quellen und Sekundär- und Kommentarliteratur die Menschen hinter den Texten zum Leben erweckt werden, dass ihre Charaktere fassbar, ihre Freuden und Nöte fühlbar werden. Diane Middlebrook gelingt es aufgrund ihres feinen Sensoriums, in exemplarischen Szenen ein stimmiges Gesamtbild zu erzeugen und durch diese Präsentationstechnik die zeitliche und kulturelle Distanz merklich schwinden zu lassen: Ihr Ovid ist greifbar, weil man ihn bei der Lektüre kennenzulernen glaubt. Damit holt sie ihn ins Heute und gebiert ihn gleichsam neu.

Gender, Sexualität und starke Frauen

Durchgehend, insbesondere am Beginn, in der realistischen Szene von Ovids Geburt, aber auch bei der Schilderung seines Aufwachsens unter Frauen, sind Gender und Sexualität präsent: Ovid wird zum Frauenverstehender, als der er von jeher anerkannt ist und sich dadurch vom patriarchalen Mainstream seiner Zeitgenossen abhebt, weil er in der prägenden Phase seiner (frühen) Kindheit unter Frauen aufwächst, von ihnen lernt (auch das Erzählen) und sich – beobachtend, nachahmend, spielerisch und damit ganz natürlich – in sie hineinversetzt.

Ovid ist bei Middlebrook von der ersten Zeile an präsent, selbst, als er noch ungeboren ist.⁷³ Die erste Person, die sie ‚auftreten‘ lässt, ist aber nicht Ovids Mutter, sondern die (namenlose) Hebamme. Sie ist es, die ihren ‚Helden‘ unver-

73 Ähnlich präsent ist Ransmayrs eigentlich abwesender Ovid in *Die letzte Welt*, da er in allem, was Cotta am Schwarzen Meer vorfindet, eigentümlich verändert anwesend ist.

seht auf die Welt holt. Andere Männer werden erst später in Erscheinung treten. Vorläufig – und das wird über nicht wenige Seiten so bleiben – ist das Baby und später das Kind Ovid das einzige männliche Wesen im Text:

Die Hebamme beobachtete die Frau in ihren Wehen diskret von einem Stuhl in der Zimmerecke aus, sich sammelnd für das, was kam. Die Mutter hatte schon viele Stunden des Unwohlseins und der Erschöpfung hinter sich, ehe sie nun in die Übergangsphase eintrat, in der sich der Gebärmutterhals ganz weitet. Unterdrückte Schreie stießen rhythmisch durch ihre zusammengebissenen Zähne, händeringend wand sie sich in furchtbaren Schmerzen. Die Hebamme war eine gut ausgebildete, griechische Freigelassene und hatte schon so manches Kind zur Welt gebracht. Sie wusste, dass das Gelingen einer Geburt auch von der psychologischen Vorbereitung der Mutter abhing; ihr sollte vermittelt werden, dass sie diesen Kampf überstehen würde, auch wenn der Hebamme die Möglichkeit bewusst war, dass sie ihn nicht überleben könnte. Entsprechend war das Geburtszimmer so hergerichtet, dass es eine Atmosphäre von Normalität ausstrahlte. Zwei Liegen standen da: das niedrige, flache Bett, auf dem die Gebärende lag, und die andere Liege mit Bergen von weichen Kissen, wo sie nach der Geburt ruhen würde. Nur der Holzkohlenrost spendete gedämpftes Licht; Wasser und Öl standen zur Reinigung des Neugeborenen vorgewärmt auf einem Sims bereit – auch dies ein Zeichen des Vertrauens, dass das Kind ebenfalls überleben würde. Die Geburtsliege war hart, es war zu später Stunde, und die Gebärende war mehr auf ihre Schmerzen fixiert, als dass sie ihre Umgebung überhaupt wahrnahm. Wie lange würde sie noch durchhalten, ehe sie geschwächt aufgeben müsste? Die Hebamme ölte ihre linke Hand nochmals ein und führte sie in den Geburtskanal – sie hatte sich die Fingernägel sehr kurz geschnitten, damit ihre Fingerspitzen empfindsamer wurden und die zarten Schleimhäute der Frau nicht verletzten.⁷⁴

Geburtshilfe ist Frauensache.⁷⁵ Deswegen wird Ovids Mutter neben der Hebamme auch von anderen Frauen unterstützt, die sie im Alltag begleiten und zu

74 Middlebrook (2012) 25.

75 Ihr Fachwissen bezieht die Autorin – Middlebrook (2015) 187 n. 14 und etwas anders nuanciert Middlebrook (2012) 144 n. 4 – aus antiker gynäkologischer Fachliteratur, insbesondere aus Soranos von Ephesos, der um 100 n. Chr. in Rom praktizierte, mehrere Generationen nach Ovids Geburt. Dies macht keinen wesentlichen Unterschied, da medizinisches Wissen über lange Zeiträume konstant blieb.

ihrer *familia* gehören. Barbara von Bechtolsheim stellt sie als „die engeren Vertrauten der Mutter im Haushalt“ vor.⁷⁶ Im Original sind es „the mother’s work companions in daily life.“⁷⁷ Der sozialgeschichtliche Hintergrund wird mit der Entscheidung für die Nennung des ‚Haushalts‘ (worin das tägliche Aufgabenspektrum⁷⁸ – ‚work‘ – inkludiert ist) gut fasslich.

Die Lebensrealität von Frauen zu beschreiben war Diane Middlebrook generell ein Anliegen, wie auch eine Passage über Mutter-Kind-Bindung zeigt:

To a modern mind, the midwife would not have put the washed and swaddled baby at his mother’s breast that day. Since breastfeeding interferes with the production of hormones necessary to a woman’s fertility, it is most likely that Ovid’s mother did not nurse the children herself – she would not have become pregnant with this child, Publius, had she breastfed the older baby longer than three months, whereas Roman babies were usually not weaned for two or three years.⁷⁹

Im Entwurf für die Drucklegung für *Der junge Ovid* hatten diese Spezifika noch Erwähnung gefunden; geblieben ist lediglich:

Höchstwahrscheinlich stillte die Mutter das Kind nicht selbst. Da Stillen die Produktion der Fertilitätshormone hemmt, wäre sie sonst nicht so bald nach dem ersten mit dem zweiten Kind schwanger geworden.⁸⁰

Im Kontext des Erzähldukts ist dies ausreichend, aber die Middlebrook so wichtige Dimension ist doch etwas verkürzt. Dies ist eine der Stellen, an denen aus Gründen leichter Lesbarkeit (auf Wunsch des Verlags) gestrafft wurde. Ein direkter Vergleich lässt die Leser*in die Kürzung bedauern; liest man nur die Übersetzung, stellt sich kein Verlustgefühl ein, zumal unmittelbar davor die Schilderung noch mit praktischen Implikationen für die Gesundheit der Frau kombiniert ist:

76 Middlebrook (2012) 26.

77 Middlebrook (2015) 2.

78 Zur Verbindung von Hausarbeit und emotionaler Tiefe vgl. Schreiner (2017).

79 Middlebrook (2015) 6.

80 Middlebrook (2012) 32.

Die Hebamme hob das neue Wesen von den Schenkeln der Mutter, in der Kühle, die über seinen Körper strich, schnappte es nach Luft und stieß einen erfreulichen Schrei aus. Sie legte es auf ein Kissen in ihrem Schoß, während sie der Mutter die Brüste massierte; so löste sie die Kontraktionen der Gebärmutter aus, damit die Nachgeburt kommen konnte und schwere, womöglich lebensgefährliche Blutungen verhindert wurden.⁸¹

Jedoch steigert ein Detail im amerikanischen Original die Gefährlichkeit des Schwellenmoments im Leben jeder Gebärenden – der, ist der richtige Zeitpunkt übersehen, aufgrund seines schnellen Eintretens oft nicht mehr vermeidbare nachgeburtliche Tod:

The midwife lifted him away from his mother's legs, and the cool air passing over his body caused him to gasp, then expel a gratifying howl. She laid the wailing infant on a pillow in her lap while she stroked the mother's breasts to induce contractions of the womb, to deliver the afterbirth, and stanch the heavy bleeding that could kill the postpartum mother in minutes.⁸²

Einen spürbaren stilistischen Kontrast ergibt, was unmittelbar nach Ovids Geburt passiert – unter gut gewählter Einpassung eines explizit genannten (und eines unterschwellig mitgedachten) Ovid-Zitats, gefolgt von einer mit Überlegung konzipierten Episode:

Und hoch über dem Haus leuchtete Lucifer, der Morgenstern, am Morgenhimmel – ein himmlischer Empfang für diese neugeborene Stimme, die nun kraftvoll in der Welt war, für immer und ewig. Diese Schilderung hörte Ovid immer gern, auch Jahre später, wenn er an der Seite seiner Mutter stand, während sie beim Spinnen und Weben saß. Die Geschichte war so blutrünstig wie eine Schlacht, und man hätte sie ihm eigentlich nicht erzählen sollen. Die Entbindung war ein Frauengeheimnis; nie wohnten die Männer des Haushalts ihr bei, und sie war kein Gesprächsthema. Er wollte die Ausnahme sein, er musste genau wissen, was geschehen war, und die Mutter, erheitert durch seine Beharrlichkeit, tat ihm jedesmal den Gefallen. Dabei arbeitete sie weiter, hielt das Wollknäuel in der einen Hand, zog mit der anderen Faden um Faden heraus, drehte sie umeinander und wickelte die langen Stränge um

81 Middlebrook (2012) 28.

82 Middlebrook (2015) 3. So noch im deutschsprachigen Entwurf.

die Spindel, genau so wie sie Geschichten spann, beliebig lang. Seit ihrer eigenen Kindheit konnte sie ganze Abschnitte aus den Epen von Homer auswendig, auch Mythen und Legenden über Rom, wie sie die Kinder hören sollten, die später einmal zum Regieren berufen waren. Wenn sie dem Knaben vom Tag seiner Geburt erzählte, zeigte sie auf seinen Bauchnabel, dass die Geschichte, die ihm so gut gefiel, die Wahrheit war und nicht etwa ein Märchen. Ein menschlicher Körper war in einem anderen menschlichen Körper herangewachsen, war aus diesem als ein Ganzes und Vollkommenes ausgetreten – geblieben war davon dieser kleine Knoten, als bleibender Beweis für eine erstaunliche Verwandlung.⁸³

Den Morgenstern, Lucifer, den Lichtbringer, erwähnt Ovid in einem Text aus der Verbannung, der gemeinhin als ‚Selbstbiographie‘ bezeichnet wird, anlässlich der besonderen Tatsache, dass sein Bruder und er am selben Tag geboren sind. Diane Middlebrook verweist auf *Trist.* 4,10,11. Nicht genannt, aber impliziert ist auch *Trist.* 1,3,74, der Pentameter, in dem nach Ovids letzter Nacht in Rom der Morgenstern aufgeht und sich der endgültige Abschied nicht länger hinauszögern lässt; so ist schon in Ovids erstem Lebensmoment sein späteres Schicksal angedeutet; die Kette der Transformationen hat zum frühestmöglichen Zeitpunkt begonnen.

Anatomisches – das Abbinden der Nabelschnur – ist gegenüber dem amerikanischen Original erneut verkürzt, war aber im Entwurf noch enthalten; aus ‚myth‘ (stärker antik gedacht) ist überdies ‚Märchen‘ (stärker der deutschen Romantik verpflichtet) geworden:

When she told the little boy about the day he was born, she would point at his belly button to prove that the story he liked so much was absolutely *true*, not a myth. A human body had grown inside another human body, then burst forth whole and perfect, to be tied off in a knot: There it was, the permanent evidence of an amazing transformation.⁸⁴

Generell fällt auf, dass in der Übersetzung so mancher Fachterminus leser*innenfreundlich erklärt ist, z. B. wird aus „[i]n that gesture he asserted his role as the new *paterfamilias*“⁸⁵ im Deutschen „[m]it dieser Geste bestätigte er seine

83 Middlebrook (2012) 28–29.

84 Middlebrook (2015) 4.

85 Middlebrook (2015) 13.

Rolle als neuer ‚pater familias‘, als Familienoberhaupt.“⁸⁶ Oder ein Begriff wird ersetzt oder ein wenig verkürzt: So ist aus „Greek *grammaticus*“⁸⁷ ein „Privatlehrer“⁸⁸ geworden; dem „Augenzeugen“⁸⁹ steht ein „expert eyewitness“⁹⁰ (Seneca pater als ‚Fachgutachter‘ von Ovids Talent) gegenüber.⁹¹

Immer aber ist die Schilderung des alltäglichen Lebens, die Darstellung von Ovids Sorgen, Nöten und Freuden, von Festen, Zeremonien und Riten durch solides Fachwissen über die Antike abgesichert. Das erhöht den Realismus, weil Positives nicht übersteigert, Unangenehmes nicht verschwiegen und Genderfragen und damit zuweilen, aber keineswegs immer einhergehender Klassismus behandelt werden.

Gerade diese Vielfalt und Buntheit zeichnet das Ovid-Buch aus: Middlebrook und ihre Übersetzerin geben Einblick in unterschiedliche Lebenslagen. Nicht nur an einer Episode wird die Figur aus der Literaturgeschichte zu einem Individuum außerhalb seiner Texte. Die Autorin skizziert ihn mit geschickten Strichen in seinem Umfeld und dieses selbst – nicht zuletzt deshalb, weil sie Personen in den Fokus rückt, die sonst nur am Rand oder gar nicht vorkommen: Frauen, Kinder, Unfreie und Menschen auf dem Land. Diese Musterkapitel werden zu *patterns* für weitere Szenen, von denen man sich als aufmerksame*r Leser*in von Seite zu Seite besser vorstellen kann, wie es gewesen ist (oder sein hätte können).

86 Middlebrook (2012) 40.

87 Middlebrook (2015) 38.

88 Middlebrook (2012) 71.

89 Middlebrook (2012) 79.

90 Middlebrook (2015) 45.

91 Auch im *Epilog* kann man das beobachten. Die Aufzählung in Middlebrook (2012) 133: „Die Atmosphäre hat noch jedesmal die Art von Konversation inspiriert, wie er sie sich wünscht: Politische Debatten und literarische Fachsimpeleien gehen hin und her, aber auch der neueste Klatsch wird ausgetauscht“ ist gegenüber Middlebrook (2015) 88: „The room’s decor never fails to stimulate exactly the kinds of conversation Ovid hopes for: political fulminations, technical disputes and disquisitions, literary gossip, even scholarly footnotes“ geringfügig verkürzt. Im Entwurf wurde diese Vielfalt noch transportiert.

Hierarchien

Wirklichkeitsnahe Schilderung des (Alltags)lebens macht überdies soziale Hierarchien, aber auch deren Verschwimmen in Schwellensituationen sichtbar: Ovids Familie gehört der Oberschicht an, v. a. die Männer leben nach deren Regeln. Bei den Frauen sind die Grenzen fließender, wie man am Beiziehen der Hebamme gesehen hat. Was zählt, ist ihre (lebensrettende) Spezialisierung, nicht ihre Herkunft. Durch unangreifbare fachliche Autorität hat sie sich Achtung erworben und nachhaltig gesichert.

Diane Middlebrook versucht bereits durch sorgsame Wortwahl in den Kapiteltiteln diese genderspezifische Gewichtung zu untermauern (z. B. *Ovid wird Römer*, was nichts anderes bedeutet als ‚Ovid wird zum Mann‘, ist die Schilderung doch mit der Anbahnung seiner ersten Ehe verknüpft, auf die bald die Trennung folgt – unterbrochen durch die eng an *Amores* 1,5 angelehnte erotisch aufgeladene Siesta mit Corinna). Weiters stellt sie ihn zu einem sehr frühen Zeitpunkt als „a provincial boy from a good family“⁹² vor; in der österreichischen Ausgabe wurde eine Reduktion auf „Spross einer guten Familie“⁹³ vorgenommen, weil ‚provinziell‘ im Deutschen nicht positiv konnotiert ist.

Persönlich und emotional ist die Schilderung der sich erst nach und nach entwickelnden Beziehung von Ovid und seinem Bruder zu ihrem Vater – anlässlich des Ablebens des Großvaters infolge eines Reitunfalls in den Bergen:

Sie wurden von Schritten geweckt, die sich ihrem Zimmer näherten. Eine Hand schob den Vorhang zur Seite, und zu ihrem Erstaunen stand ihr Vater da. Noch nie, nicht ein einziges Mal seit ihrer Geburt hatte er den hinteren Trakt des Hauses betreten, wo die Frauen, Kinder und Sklaven ihre Zimmer hatten. Im Alter von sechs und fünf waren die Knaben zu jung, um ihn überhaupt zu interessieren; außer an Festtagen verbrachte er keine Zeit mit ihnen. [...] Jetzt kniete sich der Vater an ihr Lager und wandte sich ihnen freundlich zu. Er teilte ihnen mit, dass ihr Großvater tot war – ein großartiger Mann, bekannt für seine Tapferkeit in der Schlacht und für seinen Gerechtigkeitsinn, einer, der seiner Stadt stets gedient hatte. Jahrelang sei er auch das Familienoberhaupt gewesen, erklärte der Vater. Obgleich die Knaben noch zu jung waren, um an den strengen Ritualen teilzunehmen, mit denen die Familie die Hausgötter verehrte, waren sie doch alt genug, die Trauer der Fa-

92 Middlebrook (2015) xviii.

93 Middlebrook (2012) 18.

milie zu teilen. [...] Am Fußende des Sarges stand ihre Mutter, ruhig und mit gefalteten Händen. Ihr Leiden und ihre Trauer hatten sich schon durch das Wehklagen mitgeteilt, jetzt sahen die Knaben, welche sichtbaren Spuren es hinterlassen hatte. Ihre Wangen waren eigenartig zerfurcht von langen blutigen Striemen, als hätten Hiebe von Tierkrallen sie verletzt, und ihr langes dunkles Haar war zerdrückt und wirr. Ihr Gewand war zerrissen und mit Asche vom Herd befleckt. Die Knaben waren zu klein, um über den Rand des Sargs zu schauen; der Vater hob einen nach dem anderen hoch, so dass sie ein letztes Mal das Gesicht des Großvaters sehen konnten. Am folgenden Tag, so sagte man ihnen, würde ihr Vater die Prozession anführen, die den Leichnam zu dem Scheiterhaufen auf einem Bestattungsfeld außerhalb der Stadt begleitete. Viele, sehr viele Trauergäste würden an dieser Prozession teilnehmen – alle Würdenträger von Sulmo und der weite Bekanntenkreis ihres Großvaters sowie alle Verwandten, die nah genug wohnten. Am Ende dieses langen Tages würden die Knochen des Großvaters in eine Urne gelegt und im Familienmausoleum beigesetzt; dann würden sie die Totenmaske, die man dem Leichnam vor der Verbrennung abnahm, ins Wohnhaus der Familie bringen und in einem Schaukasten neben dem Familienaltar aufbewahren. Das Trauerritual der Familie war eine private Angelegenheit und wurde im eigenen Haus abgehalten.⁹⁴

Was folgt, sind detaillierte Schilderungen des rituellen Transfers der verantwortungsvollen Funktion des *pater familias*. Erst nach dem Tod des Großvaters kommt Ovids Vater diese Aufgabe zu; im Erwachsenenalter und selbst schon verantwortlich für zwei Kinder ist er nach römischem Denken erst jetzt selbstständig – herausgetreten aus der *patria potestas*, dem weitreichenden väterlichen Einfluss, einer Sphäre, in der Ovid (zum Zeitpunkt der erzählten Handlung noch ein kleiner Bub) seinerseits noch lange verbleiben wird – umso erstaunlicher, wie sehr es ihm gelingen wird, den für ihn vorgesehenen Lebensweg nach seinen Vorstellungen umzugestalten: Wie, schildert Middlebrook in den romanhaften Passagen ihres Buches. Dazwischen liegen unterschiedlich lange Pausen. Wie Spotlights lässt sie einzelne Episoden aufblitzen. Die späteste davon liegt Jahrzehnte nach Ovids Jugend und beschreibt – betitelt als *Epilog* – seinen 46. Geburtstag.

94 Middlebrook (2012), 38–39.

Epilog – Szenen eines Künstlerlebens

Dieser ‚Nachspann‘ wurde, wie aus dem deutlich längeren ursprünglichen Manuskript ersichtlich und durch meine E-Mail-Korrespondenz mit Andres Müry bekräftigt, neu zusammengestellt, indem zwei romanhafte Passagen ineinander ‚gesponnen‘ und die (gerade hier besonders ausführlichen) realkundlichen Teile beträchtlich gekürzt wurden: Das Ergebnis ist ein neues, konzises Ganzes. Hierin folgt die amerikanische Ausgabe der zuerst in Österreich vorgenommenen Anordnung. Ein Rückbau auf die ursprüngliche Version wurde nicht vorgenommen – mit Ausnahme einiger (kürzerer) Zusätze, darunter die noch zu besprechende, ausführlicher gestaltete Arachne-Episode.

Generell ist der deutsche Text aber über weite Strecken deckungsgleich mit der amerikanischen Fassung. Zuweilen sind (kleinere) Umstellungen erkennbar.⁹⁵ Daraus lässt sich ableiten, dass auf Diane Middlebrooks ursprüngliche Formulierungen (erschließbar über den deutschen Entwurf), aber die in der Übersetzung vorgegebene (und gedruckte) Positionierung zurückgegriffen wurde.⁹⁶

Zunächst sind Ovids Frau und Tochter, noch ein kleines Mädchen, wichtige Akteur*innen⁹⁷ im Epilog, der im weiteren Verlauf von Ovids Reflexionen über sein Dichterleben geprägt ist und schließlich von Apollo und Daphne, aber auch von Minerva und Arachne. Beide Episoden hat die Autorin mit Feingefühl für die Bedeutung, die diese Erzählungen aus den *Metamorphosen* für Ovids dichterische Entwicklung wie auch für sein Leben hatten, ausgewählt. Minerva stand

95 Steht im Entwurf Middlebrooks Aussage über Ovids neue Erzählperspektive noch nach dem Zitat über die Erschaffung des Menschen (*Met.* 1,76–79. 84–86), ist es in den gedruckten Ausgaben davor positioniert und führt auf Ovids eigene Worte hin: Middlebrook (2015) xx: „The most radical shift in Ovid’s new work is this mature point of view from which it is narrated.“ = Middlebrook (2012) 21: „Diese reife Erzählperspektive ist Ovids radikalste Änderung.“

96 So fehlt am Beginn von *Der Jüngste in der Familie = The Baby in the Family* eine Passage aus dem Entwurf, in der darauf hingewiesen wird, dass man Ovid als Künstler nur vollumfänglich verstehen könne, wenn man seinen phantasievollen Umgang in seinen Gedichten mit frühkindlichem Erleben, u. a. seiner Beziehung zu seinem Bruder, in Verbindung setzt. Der Abschnitt setzt direkt mit *Trist.* 4,10,5–13 ein. Auf den Vorspann wurde verzichtet: vgl. Middlebrook (2012) 34. Middlebrook (2015) 8.

97 Die Erwähnung der Ehefrau und des kleinen Mädchens zeigt abermals Middlebrooks entwickeltes Interesse am Frauenleben, zumal sie Adressat*innen von Ovids Verbannungsdichtung sein werden. Aus der Gegenüberstellung von glücklichem Familienleben und späterer Einsamkeit durch erzwungene Trennung ergibt sich ein emotionaler Spannungsbogen, der sich literarisch wie biographisch ausloten lässt.

schon am Beginn über den Webstuhl und die Webkunst mit seiner Mutter in Verbindung. Jetzt kehrt sie auf einem Fresko wieder. In der amerikanischen Fassung ist Arachnes Schicksal breiterer Raum gegeben (so, wie es auch im deutschsprachigen Entwurf der Fall war, aus dem ein etwas kleineres Stück auf meine Anregung hin wieder in die deutsche Fassung aufgenommen wurde):

Er geht, wie er es gerne tut, von Raum zu Raum. Wie im Garten, so hat er auch die Ausstattung im Inneren selbst beaufsichtigt, und besonders stolz ist er auf sein Speisezimmer mit den Fresken an den Wänden, die Darstellungen aus seiner geliebten Mythologie zeigen. An der größten Wand bleibt er stehen. Sie zeigt den künstlerischen Wettstreit zwischen der Göttin Minerva und dem trotzigem Mädchen Arachne. Im Mittelteil sitzen die beiden im Halbprofil einander gegenüber und arbeiten konzentriert an ihren Webstühlen. Unten sind die bereits fertigen Teile der Teppiche sichtbar. Arachnes schreckliches Ende, ihre Verwandlung in eine Spinne, hat Ovid bei dem Freskenmaler nicht in Auftrag gegeben. Die Kunst sollte das letzte Wort haben. Die Geschichte endet mit den beiden Tapisserien der so verschiedenartigen Künstlerinnen, die je eine Wand einnehmen. [...] Nur wenn man genau hinschaut, entdeckt man in den netzförmigen Ornamenten eine kleine Spinne.⁹⁸

Ovid takes pleasure in circumnavigating the private areas of his house. He has overseen the decoration himself and is especially proud of his dining room. Entering the *triclinium* through the wide portal that separates the diners from the garden, he pauses to enjoy the vivid frescoes. These illustrate the metamorphosis of the girl Arachne into a spider. The largest wall is segmented into three panels – a large central panel flanked by two narrower ones – dedicated to the goddess Minerva. The central panel shows the contest to which Minerva has challenged Arachne. The female figures are seen in angled profile, and their working posture brings them into equivalency; no longer does the angry goddess tower over the defiant girl. The lower half of each loom shows a slice of the tapestry that each has just begun to weave. In the tale, Arachne tries to escape by hanging herself, but the goddess intervenes: She shrinks Arachne into the form of a spider. But Ovid did not commission a painting of that episode. In his dining room, the story ends with each of the two glorious „tapestries“ occupying a wall of its own. [...]. Nonetheless a spider motif can be detected in the weblike ornamental tracteries on panels surmounting

98 Middlebrook (2012) 132–133.

the frescoes in the upper zone of the walls, and in an obscure corner, a small non-descript painted spider seems to hang suspended.⁹⁹

Ovids *Metamorphosen*-Text ist im Fall von Arachne zur Textur, zum Dekor, zu einem Bild, einem Detail in einem Fresko und somit zur Wandverzierung geworden – wie in Diane Middlebrooks und Carl Djerassis Wohnung, eine subtile Anspielung, ein Sich-Einschreiben in den eigenen Text, in dem es um andere Texte geht. Gérard Genette¹⁰⁰ hätte an diesen Textschichten und -ebenen, dieser fugenlosen Verbindung von literarischer Praxis und Literaturtheorie seine Freude gehabt. Daphne wiederum gibt es zum Zeitpunkt der erzählten Zeit erst im Kopf des Dichters, als Konzept für die bevorstehende Lesung. Noch bevor sie beginnt, endet das Buch – in einem positiven, der Zukunft zugewandten Grundton:

Als sich alle wieder versammeln, sind auch neue, eigens für das Kommende geladene Gäste dabei. „Daphne“ hat heute, am 46. Geburtstag des Dichters, Premiere. Es könnte ein Meilenstein in seinem Leben werden, Ovid spürt es. Er hat erreicht, wozu er geboren war.¹⁰¹

Womit er nicht gerechnet hat (oder es zumindest weit von sich geschoben hat), ist, dass ihm das zum Verhängnis werden würde – dass auch seine Gegner zwischen den Zeilen zu lesen verstehen (oder Berater haben würden, die ihnen Erläuterungen einflüstern); geübte, wissende Leser*innen können diese drohende Gefahr aus einem Passus erahnen, der knapp davor steht:

Er will „Daphne“ noch einmal Zeile für Zeile durcharbeiten, damit er die Geschichte seinen Gästen abends vortragen kann. Das soll die Überraschung seines Geburtstags sein. Er ist sicher, dass es eine hinreißende Geschichte über die Liebe ist, aber seine Freunde würden auch die Botschaft zwischen den Zeilen verstehen: Wenn sich alles wandelt, ist auch die höchste Macht nicht davon ausgenommen.¹⁰² Während er da und dort eine Korrektur anbringt und der Morgen vergeht, trägt ein Skla-

99 Middlebrook (2015) 87–88.

100 Genette (1982). Genette (1987). Genette (1989). Genette (1993).

101 Middlebrook (2012) 135.

102 Diese (folgenreiche) Herrschaftskritik implizierende Passage wurde auf meine Anregung hin wieder in die deutsche Fassung aufgenommen; im Übersetzungsentwurf war der

ve seinen Tisch mehrmals an einen neuen Platz, je nachdem wie das Sonnenlicht in den Innenhof fällt. [...] Die Arbeit geht Ovid leicht von der Hand. Es kommt alles darauf an, dem inneren Metrum zu folgen, das in seinem Körper wie ein Metronom tickt.¹⁰³

Doppelbödigkeiten und subversive Andeutungen missfielen Octavianus Augustus. Diane Middlebrook formuliert es nicht aus. Sie überlässt diesen Rückschluss ihren Leser*innen, die wissen, dass Ovid bald in Ungnade fallen und Rom für immer würde verlassen müssen.

Im amerikanischen Original ist die Geschichte, wie in den gängigen Ausgaben, als „Apollo and Daphne“ bezeichnet¹⁰⁴ und die Fallhöhe noch größer:

„Apollo and Daphne“ will make its public debut, a milestone in Ovid’s life and, he hopes, in the life of his writing. At age forty-six, he has reached the height of his powers. And now more than ever, he is performing the work he is born to do.¹⁰⁵

Octavianus Augustus wird seinerseits „the height of his powers“ nützen, um Ovids machtvolle poetische Worte nur mehr aus der Entfernung hören zu lassen...

Passus noch ausführlicher und direkter, während Middlebrook (2015) 86–87 auf Middlebrook (2012) basiert: „It is a fascinating love story, but his friends are going to understand the hidden message: Even the highest powers are not exempt from transformation.“

103 Middlebrook (2012) 131–132. Middlebrook (2015) 87 enthält (wie auch der deutsche Entwurf) zusätzlich einen instruktiven Passus über antike Gedächtnisleistung: „Ovid’s concentration does not waver. He writes steadily, without needing to consult his notes; like most educated Romans, he has a trained memory and carries much in his head. But in any case, it is wise to stay with the momentum of the meter he has set like a metronome in his body.“

104 Z.B. Middlebrook (2015) 86.

105 Middlebrook (2015) 90.

Was (noch zu sagen) bleibt

In *Der junge Ovid* und in *Young Ovid* ist es den Herausgeber*innen (und der Übersetzerin) gelungen, trotz (moderater) Kürzungen ein stimmiges Gesamtbild zu erzeugen – in jeder der beiden Fassungen auf je eigene Weise, aber durchgehend im Sinn der verstorbenen Autorin und ihrer Familie.

Erst der direkte Vergleich zeigt Unterschiede auf, die wohl beim Gros von Übertragungen (allein schon aufgrund der abweichenden sprachlichen Struktur) auftreten, etwa wenn „[d]ie Biographie ist die geeignete Gattung, solchen Geheimnissen eines künstlerischen Werks nachzugehen“¹⁰⁶ die Entsprechung zu „[t]he genre of biography offers a template for investigating just such mysteries about a work of art“¹⁰⁷ ist (und ‚template‘, in diesem Fall eine Mischung aus ‚Muster‘ und ‚Spielwiese‘, keine Entsprechung mehr hat). – Nur selten fehlt ein Absatz:

Ovid would not have wished to publicize the fact that the married woman in these poems was married to *him*. „Since tradition demanded an elusive mistress, rather than a legally available wife,“ Peter Green remarks, „imagine the literary snickers if the truth got out!“¹⁰⁸

In der Übersetzung¹⁰⁹ endet der Abschnitt mit *Amores* 1,4,16–22, eine Entscheidung, die der Verlag mit der Übersetzerin getroffen hat; im Entwurf war der Paragraph noch enthalten. – Zumeist ist die deutsche Fassung aber lediglich geringfügig anders nuanciert:

Für einen Biographen mag Ovids Formulierung „für alle Jahrhunderte werde ... im Ruhme ich leben“ wie eine Ohrfeige über zwanzig Jahrhunderte hinweg klingen. Abgesehen von der selbststilisierenden Geste kann man den Ausdruck als leere Konvention abtun: Auch Ovids gefeiertste Zeitgenossen scheuten vor solchen Formulierungen in ihren Werken nicht zurück.¹¹⁰

106 Middlebrook (2012) 23.

107 Middlebrook (2015) xxii.

108 Middlebrook (2015) 71.

109 Middlebrook (2012) 112.

110 Middlebrook (2012) 17–18.

To a biographer, Ovid's declaration „I shall live“ can feel like a glove slapping a cheek across twenty centuries. Quite aside from its embarrassingly self-promotional aspect, the phrase can be dismissed as empty convention: Ovid's most celebrated contemporaries incorporated lines like this in work of their own they most admired.¹¹¹

Hier hat die Genese dessen, was in Druck gegangen ist, interessiert: Barbara von Bechtolsheim ist untrennbar verbunden mit Diane Middlebrook (und Carl Djerassi). Sie ist ihre deutsche Stimme – und hat das Potenzial, der ursprünglichen *voice*, die in den USA ungebrochen gerne gehört wird, im deutschen Sprachraum dauerhaftes Gehör zu verleihen und somit (in Ovids Verständnis des *carmen perpetuum*, des ‚sich ewig fortschreibenden Gedichts‘) über die Kontinente hinweg für eine *vita perpetua*, eine ‚fortlaufende Biographie‘, und eine (literarische) *vita aeterna*, eine ‚bleibende, andauernde Existenz‘, somit für eine *posteritas*, ein ‚gesichertes Nachleben‘, Sorge zu tragen.

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111 Middlebrook (2015) xvii.

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Going Home Again to Troy and Ithaca

Abstract As the author of three novels inspired by the Homeric epics, I reflect on the challenge of writing such books. Reception novels can make familiar stories new and engaging by presenting characters in the immediacy of decisive moments and looking at familiar situations from different perspectives. I also examine the fictive as opposed to the historical location of Troy, how Troy and Ithaca became my imaginative home, and my process for writing such books. It concludes with an excerpt that illustrates the points made. The novels discussed are: *Breeze* (2021), *We First Met in Ithaca or Was It Eden?* (2023), and *Let the Women Have Their Say* (2024). Another book, *Trojan Tales* (2024), consists of excerpts from these three.

Keywords Homeric epic, Homeric reception, Trojan War, recursion, perspective

BRIDGES VS. RECEPTION

When I first ventured into the narrative world of *The Iliad*, I assumed that I needed a bridge to introduce readers to that other world, so they could empathize with the characters and understand their aspirations and motivations. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be transported from here-and-now to there-and-then, like in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, to be limited by the physical and social structures of that time but with knowledge and memories from the present.

The device I used in my novel *Breeze* was “soul transference.” This is not reincarnation – rebirth after death. Rather, the consciousness of an individual moves from one body into another in a different place and time.

The novel consists of three parts. In part one, a college-age woman goes into a coma, unexpectedly and without known cause. Her boyfriend scrambles to get her medical care and to cope with her absence. In part two, this woman, Breeze, finds herself on the shores of Troy, in the body of Achilles' Briseis. She has to quickly figure out what is going on and learn to speak and act so as not to reveal the strangeness of what has happened to her, for fear others would think she was mad or possessed. As she adjusts to her new circumstances, the reader learns as well, gradually coming to understand the challenges and risks of that world, like Claire Fraser in *Outlander* adjusting to 18th century Scotland, and Sam Beckett in *Quantum Leap*. There is no language barrier. Breeze as Briseis can understand and be understood as if she were hearing and speaking English. She figures out that she is not in historical Troy, but rather the fictive version of it. Since she knows what must happen next in the Homeric story, she also knows where she has the freedom to improvise. What actually happens need not be the same as the accepted story, so long as that story is still believed to be true. In part three, she finds herself at Delphi in 350 AD, the time of Julian the Apostate. Once again she needs to adjust, but this time she learns to control the soul transfer mechanism, so she can swap bodies at will with other people in the same time and place.

An additional challenge was for me to write from the perspective of a woman. Much of the pleasure of writing and reading comes from viewing the world from inside the skin of characters very different from ourselves.

When writing my next Homeric-themed novel, *We Met in Ithaca or Was It Eden?*, I still felt the need for a bridge, but I used a different mechanism. Two strangers meet and fall in love. Both are obsessed with Ancient Greece, and they flirt by making up stories which are variants of Homeric tales. Without understanding why, they begin to experience those invented stories, first as witnesses,

then as participants. They begin to lose control over the stories as they recount them. They wonder if they have met before in previous lives, as Odysseus and Penelope, or as Eumaeus and Ktimene (Odysseus' sister).

Writing my third Trojan novel, *Let the Women Have Their Say*, I realized that, for many readers, the popularity of recent reception novels based on Homer's works means that a bridge is no longer necessary. Nearly a dozen novels with such a setting have become best sellers over the last decade. Many fans of those books are familiar with the stories despite never having read *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. Today, stories are available in many different forms – not just in traditional printed books, but also in ebooks, comic books, graphic novels, movies, TV series, and videogames. A popular story spawns sequels and becomes a franchise. Fans immerse themselves in the same fictive world in multiple ways. They vicariously enjoy taking on the roles of characters from Star Wars, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Avengers, and Jane Austen in newly imagined adventures. The recent popularity of Trojan War novels is part of that phenomenon.

My ideal readers already know what is going to happen, at least in broad outline. They have preconceptions about the personalities and motivations of the main characters. That enables me to surprise and delight them with new variants while remaining true to the traditional tales.

Playing in the Narrative Space of Greek Legend and Myth

Historical and myth- or legend-based novels invite readers to vicariously experience live through not just the stories told, but, by extension, the era in which they occur. They present events in the making, when multiple possibilities loom large, not filtered through the hindsight of history, with its focus on actual outcomes. Moreover, an event as experienced from inside differs from that same event seen from afar. The actors believe that many outcomes are possible and that they are somewhat responsible for what happens. Living in the immediate moment is fraught with risk and drama, with a sense of one's agency and accountability.

The event as lived depends on human choice and ignorance, competence and incompetence. It is subjective, dependent on your unique perspective in the moment. You need to understand, decide, and act on the fly. The event seen from afar is determined, predictable, and ordinary. It is over and done with.

Both views are valid. Free will and determinism are both true at once.

Narrative ranges from the subjectivity of *Tristram Shandy* to the objective chronicling of facts. Subjective novels invite the reader to explore the reality of others, at moments that are rich in possibilities. Characters who “come alive” in that way give readers opportunities to experience and understand the events of the story as if they were actors and eyewitnesses. Novels of reception can play subjectively within the objective framework of previously written stories and/or history. Innovation and creativity can take place in what the original left unsaid. I strive to give the reader a subjective experience through the consciousness of the characters. The elements of the traditional story which are inviolable (without outraging the audience) serve as “fate.”

Reception novels can also take advantage of multiple perspectives. The same events seen in different ways, perhaps from the viewpoint of a minor character in the original, can generate a very different story, while remaining faithful to the original framework. Because the audience is already familiar with the framework, the author is freed from the burden of lengthy exposition and can focus on developing the characters and making the events flow naturally from one to the next.

Where Was Troy?

As I imagined the story of the Trojan War for *Let the Women Have Their Say* from the perspectives of the participants, I soon realized that the generally accepted location of Troy needed to be corrected for my retelling to make sense. This was not a question of archaeology and history, but rather narrative integrity. There may have been an historical city named Troy at the site now known as Hisarlik. But the fictional story of *The Iliad* has a setting very different from that. The location matters because of its connection with the perspectives, motivations, and strategies of the parties and the individual characters. Picking a location that does not correspond well with the dynamics of the original story can muddy our understanding and appreciation of the text and lead to the creation of reception fiction that does not ring true.

As I explain in the Preface to that novel, since the days of the flamboyant amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann 150 years ago, experts have located Homer’s Troy at Hisarlik in the northwest corner of what is now Turkey, in the Troad region, near the beginning of the Dardanelles (Hellespont), the waterway leading from the Aegean to the Black Sea. Based on that location, historians and

novelists have presumed that the war was fought for control of that strategic sea passage.

But in *The Iliad*, Troy has no port – just a beach – and has no fleet, no ships at all, not even fishing boats. When Paris wants to sail to Sparta seeking Helen, ships need to be built for the occasion, and not by a shipwright, but by a carpenter (*tektonos*, smith, maker, builder, Book V, 59–63). Troy's has nothing to do with the sea. Its trade and its allies are land-based.

In addition, in *The Iliad*, the city of Troy, also called Ilion, was founded in the recent past by Ilus, son of Tros and grandfather of Priam, who was the king during the Trojan War. In contrast, the archaeological site at Hisarlik had already been occupied for hundreds of years, one city built on the ruins of another. The level identified as Homer's Troy was sandwiched in the middle (layer 6A).

Those anomalies lead me to believe that the city of Troy portrayed in *The Iliad* was on the south rather than the west coast of the Troad, in a location without strategic significance, where it could thrive as the hub of land-based trade and alliances. I imagine it 20–30 miles from Hisarlik, on the Edremit Gulf, across from the island of Lesbos and near Mount Ida.

Perhaps the ruins at Hisarlik belong to another city, such as Dardania, an ally of Troy, whose inhabitants were members of the same Trojan tribe. Perhaps Dardania, too, was destroyed during the Trojan War.

With that adjustment of perspective, I was able to reimagine the Trojan War and the hopes, fears, and motivations of the people involved.

Switching Perspective and Giving Minor Characters Stories of Their Own

In *Breeze* the traditional story of the Trojan War functions as fate. It cannot be changed, no matter what anyone might do. But people are free to act in the gaps of the story. So long as the general public inside the story believes that events unfold as in the traditional framework, anything can happen.

For example, to save Iphigenia, Achilles surreptitiously deflowers her the night before she is scheduled for sacrifice. In principle, if she isn't a virgin she won't be an acceptable victim. But that makes no difference to Agamemnon and Calchas. The ceremony goes ahead as planned.

Also, Achilles' death is staged with another body in his armor. Everyone believes he died, but in fact, at the end of the novel, he rides off to the land of the

Amazons with Briseis/Breeze, who becomes an Amazon warrior. He will be her house-husband.

My favorites among the many stories told in *We First Met in Ithaca or Was It Eden?* deal with Polyphemus, Calypso, Eumaeus, and Ktimene.

Polyphemus, the Cyclops blinded by Odysseus, hooks up with Enyo, with one of the Gracae, the three sisters who share a single eye. She steals the eye from her sisters and shares it with the Polyphemus. They live happily ever after.

Calypso loves Odysseus, but they can't truly connect because one is mortal, the other divine. She pleads with Zeus to make him immortal, but, instead, Zeus makes her mortal. Odysseus doesn't believe her story. Since she no longer has divine powers, she can't keep stopping him from leaving. She pines for him and dies.

Eumaeus and Ktimene (the sister of Odysseus) were childhood friends, until her parents married her to someone from the nearby island of Same. In *The Odyssey*, XV. 361–79, Eumaeus claims they were raised together and mentions the enormity of her bride price. In my version, Odysseus needs that wealth so he could afford to buy the hand of Penelope, and Ktimene's husband is Eurylochus, who accompanies Odysseus to Troy, leaving Ktimene behind. When she believes that her husband died on the return trip, she flees from her in-laws, fearing they will marry her off to someone else. Arriving in Ithaca in disguise, afraid to reveal herself to her parents who would send her back to Same, she becomes the friend and assistant of Eumaeus, now the royal swineherd. Their delicate, unexpressed love for one another grows for years, until Odysseus returns, sees they are a perfect match, and has them marry, without knowing who she is.

“As a wedding gift, Odysseus gives them ownership of their farm, and they continue to live there, despite an invitation to move to the castle. But they visit the castle often because Eumaeus loves an audience, and now he can tell tales about the adventures of Odysseus and his reunion with Penelope, including a first-hand account of the battle with the suitors. Traveling bards go out of their way to hear his version, which he elaborates with each telling. They use his scenes and descriptions in the versions they sing. In gratitude to him, in their performances, they address him and only him directly, like an old friend – ‘You, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd.’ A year later Ktimene and Eumaeus have a son. They name him *Homer*. When he grows up he becomes a bard and tells that tale better than anyone else.” (p. 183)

In *Let the Women Have Their Say*, I reimagine major characters of the Trojan War story, such as Helen, Polyxena, Cassandra, Andromache, Paris, and Achilles,

telling how and why the events unfold as they do, with them growing and learning and one episode flowing naturally into the next.

For example, the goddess Thetis hid her son Achilles on the island of Scyros and had him dress as a woman and live with women to prevent him from going to war and dying on the battlefield, as foretold. At Troy, he enjoys dressing as a woman and at sometimes performs as a drag queen for the entertainment of the troops.

The Trojans arrange for Achilles to meet with Polyxena, in hopes that to win her he will make a separate peace and withdraw from the war. He wants to see her as she is, without pretense and ceremony. So he disguises himself as a woman, who is seeking a job as her handmaid. She has been tipped off to expect that, but doesn't know that this *woman* is he.

Also, Iphigenia is only three years old when she is to be betrothed to Achilles. (Clytemnestra and Helen are twins, and Helen is too young to have an adult daughter at the time of her elopement). Agamemnon loves Iphigenia. He doesn't intend to sacrifice her. The ceremony is staged to impress the troops, to show them his total commitment to the cause. He would go through the motions, only to be stopped at the last moment, like Abraham with Isaac. Iffie knows that a deer will be sacrificed. She asks to hold the knife and is told that it was so sharp that it won't hurt the deer and that dying is just changing one body for another, like changing clothes. She playfully slits her own throat.

Rereading Classic Texts as a Form of Recursion

Recursion involves the repeated application of a process, where the result of each iteration is used as input for the next. Seriously reading a great work of literature changes you, giving you complex and rich new paths of association, and you change as well from your life experiences and everything else you have read and learned. Each time you return to the work, you experience it differently because your knowledge of it is different, and also because you are a different person.

As an amateur, not a scholar, with only rudimentary acquaintance with ancient Greek, I have depended on translations. I first read *The Iliad* in Pope's translation, with heroic couplets, when I was in the fifth grade. Later I read it in the prose translations of Butler, Lattimore, Fitzgerald, and Fagles. Not just the recursive effects, but also the major differences among the translations made each reading a new experience.

For example, Lattimore religiously keeps the lines of his translation parallel with the line numbers of the original, but in so doing he often distorts the meaning, settling for awkward and sometimes inaccurate phraseology. His use of non-traditional spellings of personal names is also jarring. Fagles is very readable, but he sometimes uses creative turns of phrase that are vivid but stray from the original, and his lines numbers don't match, which is problematic for finding referenced passages.

Recursion was also a structural element in *We First Met in Ithaca or Was it Eden?* As the two narrators tell stories to one another, they start to experience those stories as if they were participants in them. The stories they tell change them and change their relationship with one another. Perhaps they have lived before and met before and fallen in love before. And the book as a whole ends with a fresh beginning for all mankind, with this couple having become a Adam and Eve in a new Eden – history repeating itself, but recursively rather than circularly, with new awareness that could lead to new outcomes.

The Odyssey can be viewed as a metaphor for recursion. Odysseus returns home as a different person and, once there, goes through life-changing events, with the expectation that he will leave again, change again, and return again.

Also, writing my first reception novel made me aware of the challenges and the possible tactics, which changed my approach to the second, which in turn changed my approach to the third. And the writing of this paper is making me more conscious of my process, which will, no doubt, change it yet again.

How Troy and Ithaca Became My Home

In *We First Met in Ithaca*, the narrators are Oz (short from Oswald), a classics professor, and Elle whose personal imaginative landscape was shaped by the Homeric epics since early childhood.

“Oz asked, “How do you know so much about *The Odyssey*? I studied it and taught it for decades, but you talk about it as if you inhabited that world.”

“That story was my childhood obsession,” she explained. “My parents named me *Penelope*, so I asked them repeatedly, and also read widely, eager to know who Penelope was and where and when she lived. Ithaca became my make-believe home. Sometimes I was Penelope, sometimes Odysseus, sometimes Calypso or another character, seeing the story from different angles.”

“It’s as if you and I met in Ithaca,” Oz concluded.
“Yes. We both have that world in our minds.” (p. 48)

Like her, Greek mythology and legend resonated in my imagination as a child. I discovered the Trojan War in the fifth grade in the pages of Olivia Coolidge’s book of that title, which extends beyond *The Iliad* to tell the related stories in chronological sequence. That same year I saw the movie *Helen of Troy* and read the related comic book. The characters soon populated my personal imaginative world. Like my classmates, I used to play with plastic cowboy and Indian figures, reimagining clashes in the Wild West. Now, I started reenacting the Trojan War with bottle caps, each cap representing a warrior. With the cork side up, they were alive. Flipped over they were dead. Beer caps with aluminum on top of the cork were Trojans. Soda bottle caps with just the cork were Greeks. Ginger Ale with shiny white on top of cork were captains of the Greeks. Caps with the cork removed were major characters. I glued a small strip of paper with the name of each of those to the bare metal. Sometimes I controlled the action, deciding which to flip and when. Sometimes I shook the rug underneath them and removed the *dead* from the battlefield. Troy was my imaginative home. I was an only child. This was a personal game that I played alone.

In the fifth and sixth grades I put together Trojan War costumes for Halloween with the help of my father, who made the sword, shield and helmet. I was Achilles. My friends had no idea who Achilles was, aside from what I told them.

Back then, my parents belonged to the Book of the Month Club and the Heritage Book Club, and curiosity prompted me to check out their selections. *The Gold of Troy* by Robert Payne recounted the adventures of Heinrich Schliemann, the brilliant amateur who, with *Iliad* in hand, found the site of ancient Troy. When *The Odyssey a Modern Sequel* by Kazantzakis arrived, I couldn’t make sense of it, but I was intrigued by it, which prompted me to want to read Homer. Fortuitously, *The Iliad*, translated by Alexander Pope, was soon a Heritage selection. Despite the rhyming couplets, I read it with pleasure and was soon writing a sequel, also rhymed – doggerel that’s painful and embarrassing to read today.

For an independent project in the seventh grade, I wrote an essay about how world history would have been changed if the Trojans had won the war. (Aeneas would never have fled to Italy, and Rome wouldn’t have been founded by his descendants).

My senior year at Yale I wrote a play called *Amythos or Without a Myth*, in which mythical characters are forced to live a story not of their choosing, or to

be suspended alone in nowhere, conscious but unable to do anything. Their story was their fate.

In graduate school (Yale, Comparative Literature), I wrote a paper exploring a recurrent theme in Greek mythology. In the legends of Mycenae, Thebes, and Sparta, there is an alternating pattern of succession. If the king inherits from his father, whoever marries the king's eldest daughter succeeds, immediately, not having to wait for the king to die. Then in the next generation, a king who secured the throne by marriage is succeeded on his death by his oldest son. This alternating pattern leads to dramatic situations in which a young woman plays a key role as symbol of the right to rule.

For instance, Menelaus becomes king as soon as he marries Helen, the eldest daughter of the king of Sparta. Then his right to rule is thrown into question when she goes off with Paris.

Iphigenia, the eldest daughter of Agamemnon, is expected to marry Achilles, but if she were to do so, by this pattern of succession, the right to rule in Mycenae would pass to him. Sacrificing her or having becoming a priestess with a vow of virginity, eliminates that possibility and thereby solidifies Agamemnon's right to rule.

Oedipus has a double right to rule Thebes, both as the son of the father he kills and as the husband of his mother. That throws the succession pattern into disarray. Who should rule in the next generation? When the sons of Oedipus and Jocasta die fighting one another. Jocasta's brother, Creon, fills the gap, without the sanction of tradition. Whoever marries Antigone, Oedipus' eldest daughter would normally rule, and Creon's son Haemon wants to marry her. But Creon doesn't want her to marry anyone. He exiles his son which leads to his son's death. Antigone stays unmarried, and Creon keeps the crown.

After grad school, I got married, had four children, and worked as an employee communications editor and then as an Internet evangelist for Digital Equipment, the minicomputer company. After that, I was an independent Internet marketing consultant and a publisher of public domain books on CDs, DVDs, and through online ebook stores. For forty years of my life, time was tight and my writing was on the back burner.

My wife died ten years ago. My kids are off on their own. At 78, I now have no responsibilities other than reading and writing and engaging in creative dialogue with my partner, Nancy Felson, a renowned Homeric scholar.

I finished *Breeze* two years ago. Then I wrote and rewrote *We First Met in Ithaca* over the course of a year, and *Let the Women Have Their Say* in six months. I was dealing with familiar characters and situations. I was returning to

my imaginative home and seeing it with new eyes, enjoying the many different ways the familiar elements could fit together.

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are now part of who I am and how I think. Characters and scenes come alive in my sleep. I often wake up in the middle of the night and write notes for chapters as if I were listening to characters speaking to one another and I was taking dictation. I am often surprised and delighted when I'm suddenly able to see scenes from the perspectives of my characters and hear dialogue among them.

In *Let the Women Have Their Say*, much of the story is revealed through dialogue. What matters is not just what happens, but what the characters think about it and how that affects their hopes and fears. Readers witness as characters make discoveries about themselves and others, as the drama unfolds.

Often what characters know and don't know in a particular scene influences their perception of what is going on and hence affects their motivation. I learned this recursive technique in reading *The Odyssey*. Rather than recount Odysseus' adventures in chronological order, Homer has Odysseus tell the stories of the fall of Troy and the voyage home to a royal audience in Phaeacia. He encourages the reader to consider this speech in a dramatic context, an element moving the present narrative forward. And at the same time this account is a revelation of how well Odysseus can spin stories – both true and false.

The events that Odysseus is talking about changed him. He was a different person before they happened than after. And the act of retelling them from the perspective of the new person he has become, changes him yet again.

Homer reveals Odysseus' past as part of the dramatic present. And in the subsequent events – the return to Ithaca and the slaughter of the suitors – we witness yet another transformation of Odysseus. In this way, Homer compactly displays many recursive versions of Odysseus – the many-sided, many-faced hero.

A devious man, who excels at disguise and at inventing false backstories for himself, finally tells the truth. Or is it the truth? Truth is, at best, relative. But having a problematic relationship with truth is part of Odysseus' identity, so even when he lies, he partially reveals his character to the literary audience who knows more about him than the audience inside the story, and has learned not to take him at his word. And what the audience knows affects their experience of what they hear or read. So each time we return to this multi-layered work, it is different to us. Both the book and its hero are recursive.

To show this process at work, I'm closing this paper with an excerpt consisting of chapters in which Helen and Paris, despite their differences, fall in love in

unexpected ways and run off together, but not to Troy. This is in keeping with the variant that inspired Euripides' *Helen*, but for different reasons. In my version, they finally get to Troy in the ninth year of the war, shortly before the opening scene of *The Iliad*, reconciling the variant with the main storyline. These chapters are plucked from their context in the novel and joined together here as a continuous story.

HELEN

Leda

In Sparta, the speaker's staff passes to someone in the back of the megaron, who shouts so the king can hear. "This has gone on too long, my lord. Five years and no child. You must put this woman aside and marry another who can give us an heir."

Queen Leda coughs, then coughs again, then coughs hysterically.

King Tyndareus welcomes the distraction. He turns his full attention to her and calls, "Bring the physician. Immediately!"

Her eyes meet his. She nods to him, then collapses on the banquet table, knocking over goblets. Blood-red wine stains her tunic and cloak. She coughs more urgently and makes her body convulse as if in excruciating pain.

The king, restraining a smile of appreciation at her performance, quickly adds, "Have him bring emetics and antidotes. Someone may have poisoned the queen."

When the physician arrives, she continues to convulse. She looks scared.

Realizing she may not be faking, the king freezes, and silence spreads through the megaron. The only noise is the queen's coughing and her twitching on the table.

"Restrain her. Hold her still," the physician orders. With one hand he holds her mouth open, and with the other he pours a concoction down her throat.

The queen gags. She can't breathe. She loses consciousness. No, she changes consciousness.

She sees herself from on high, and not in the megaron. She's on the bank of a pond near the palace. The sunset reflecting off lily pads sprinkles her arms and legs with green. She feels at one with the pond, the grass, with all of the nature.

She has never seen such color. If she were an artist, she would feel compelled to mimic it with paint on cloth or on walls, again and again.

A swan dives and lands without a splash, as if the water expects it and embraces it. Then it swims to her, unafraid, as if she were a goddess beckoning it.

She welcomes the swan, like the water welcomed it. It enters her, man-like, forceful and unstoppable, like she had hoped and imagined her husband would. She convulses in pleasure, relaxes, then finds herself once again on the banquet table.

The physician pulls her mouth, looks down her throat, reaches in, and pulls out a feather.

With a look of shock, he displays it to the king, then turns so the crowd can see it as well.

"What is it?" asks the king.

"The feather of a swan, I believe, my lord."

"What, in the name of Zeus...?"

Half-conscious, Leda clears her throat, then says softly, "Yes, Zeus, in the guise of a swan."

Inspired by that cue, the king improvises. "Zeus, yes, Zeus. He has taken the form of birds before. He was an eagle when he plucked Ganymede from the palace at Troy and took him to Olympus to be cupbearer of the gods. Zeus, yes, Zeus in the guise of a swan."

She answers, "I tried to fight him off, but what could I do against Zeus himself?"

"Hallelujah!" he exclaims, delighted that she took his cue. "Queen Leda has been blessed by the King of the Gods. We needed an heir and now we'll have one – offspring of both me and Zeus. If it's a girl, she'll become the most beautiful woman in the world, and the greatest and wealthiest rulers in Greece will contend for her hand and for the crown of Sparta. All hail to Zeus, co-father of your queen to be."

He leans down to kiss Leda on her cheek and whispers, "Brilliant! You're a genius."

She keeps up the act, leaning on his shoulder as they navigate the corridors from the megaron to their bedchamber. Dare she confess to him what really happened? Does she know?

He's ready now as she has rarely seen him before. He enters her and fills her quickly.

If a god didn't make her pregnant, this will.

She wonders, can a single child have two fathers, one human and one divine? How often do the acts of gods and humans echo one another, both causing the same outcome?

Nine months later, she has twin daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra. Helen is, by a few minutes, the king's eldest daughter. That means that, by Spartan rules of succession, whoever marries her will become king, even though her father is still alive.

Then, a year after that, Leda has twin sons, Pollux and Castor.

She wonders, could Tyndareus suddenly be that potent? Or did the second pregnancy come from the same coupling as the first? If a god can take the form of a swan and impregnate a woman, perhaps she got pregnant twice from a single event.

In any case, childbirth is risky. Women often die of it. And, as she learned from her midwife, having twins doubles the risk.

Enough is enough. Every night, she puts sleeping potion in Tyndareus' wine, and in the morning she praises him for his virility and acts surprised that he doesn't remember the pleasure they had together. That's her last pregnancy.

Double Wedding

"Is Menelaus the best choice?" asks Leda.

"I'm sure of it," Tyndareus replies, "Red Beard has a way about him, no-nonsense, strict. She needs someone who can control her, get her to forget her fantasies."

"Are you sure? You aren't always right, you know. Getting people to believe

she's a daughter of Zeus led to that ugly business with Theseus and his friend. That abduction and rape never would have happened if they hadn't thought she's the most beautiful woman in the world."

"You must admit she's lovely. Takes after you, my love."

"But *the most beautiful*? What does that even mean?"

"It means whatever people want it to mean. And people calling her that is certainly to our advantage."

"But Zeus? Was that necessary?"

"That was your inspiration, my love. Brilliant."

"All I did was swallow a swan feather as a distraction. I explained that to you. It must have stuck to my robe when I went for a walk. When that man in the back starting saying nasty things, I put it in my mouth to make me cough."

"Such a performance. Couldn't have worked out better."

"But Zeus? And gilding the feather, putting it on display time and again?"

"People love that story. It got her dozens of wealthy and powerful suitors. With the gifts and the bride price, we'll have an amazing retirement. We'll be able to travel anywhere and do anything, without the hassles and responsibilities of kingship. All thanks to you."

"And Helen."

"Yes. She's pretty enough and smart enough to play the role of *the most beautiful*. But she has a wild streak and a penchant for fantasy. I suspect the abduction affected her mind. Unlike any other woman, she insisted that she, not I, choose the man she'd marry. She believed in *true love*, whatever that is.

"Until she was ready for marriage, I indulged her fantasy and held receptions in the megaron, to put her on display. Then, when suitors swarmed, I locked her up and didn't let them see her or talk to her. Telling them I was afraid of another abduction reinforced the Zeus swan story and made them even keener to win her."

"But Red Beard? Why did you choose him? Why not his brother Agamemnon?"

"I considered Agamemnon. But he's severe, emotionless. Helen would never take to him, but she might learn to care for Red Beard."

"Yes. He's certainly better than his distant, boring brother. But yet you're giving Cly to him."

"It made sense to have the brothers draw lots, and let the gods or fate decide the winner. That way jealousy won't come between them. And, of course, I rigged it."

"You care that much more for Helen?"

“Cly can take care of herself. She’s lied to us so many times and so well. I’m sure she started when she was a toddler stealing sweets. She won’t let a boring husband get in her way. She’ll do what she wants, when she wants, with whom-ever she wants, and he’ll be none the wiser.”

“What an awful thing to say about your daughter.”

“I’m proud of her for that. Our preferential treatment of her twin didn’t make her envious and mean-spirited. We had to focus on one twin as a daughter of Zeus. Only one could be *the most beautiful*. Helen has a winning look. Even as an infant, when both of them cried, we picked Helen up first. Cly didn’t resent that. Since no one noticed her, she could do whatever she wanted. She’s a perfect match for haughty Agamemnon. He’ll have no idea what she’s up to.”

“You are so devious, my love.”

He kisses Leda and replies, “From you, I take that as a high compliment.”

She continues, “But the brothers’ bids weren’t that much higher than those of others. And there were handsomer, better mannered, more clever and interesting men among the suitors.”

“Who would you have chosen, if you were the bride-to-be and it was up to you?”

“Odysseus. He’s young, but clever and witty. The stories he made up to entertain us! He had me half believing all those adventures.”

“Yes, he’s a spinner of tales, a master of fantasy. But that’s the last thing Helen needs. Best she be with a man’s man, no nonsense, someone who will break her and control her. Besides, Odysseus doesn’t want Helen. He’s obsessed with my niece, Penelope. He came here to ask my help in getting her. And now, I’ll certainly oblige him. He’s the one who suggested the suitors swear to support Helen’s husband if she’s ever abducted again; otherwise, they’d have been at one another’s throats. He deserves a reward for that. I’ll send word to Icarius, asking him to give Penelope to Odysseus and for a bargain price. My brother can afford that. He won’t be retiring. In Acarnania, you rule until you die. Such a barbaric tradition.”

Arrival in Sparta

Helen misses the arrival of two young princes from Troy. She’s in the garden, hiding from her three-year-old daughter, Hermione. It isn’t a game, though Helen pretends it is. She doesn’t want to see the child, wishes she hadn’t had this child and doesn’t want any more.

During the long labor, her mother, at a loss for what to say but obliged to stay at her daughter's side, mentioned that the risks of childbirth double when carrying twins, and that the likelihood of having twins goes up if they run in the family. Helen is a twin, and she has a set of twin brothers and her father forced her to marry the son of a twin. She has no death wish. She finds ways to avoid pregnancy.

When people say that Hermione is delightful, bright and beautiful, that she takes after her mother, Helen smiles politely. But she never willingly spends time with her daughter. At birth, she didn't let the baby touch her breasts, quickly handing her to a wet nurse. Now, a toddler, the child follows her mother everywhere. When Helen hides, Hermione thinks she's playing hide-and-seek and tracks her down, relentlessly, finding her in the most unlikely places. Everyone thinks Helen is a wonderful mother for playing with her daughter so much.

Helen has heard that the Trojan visitors are brothers, traveling the world in search of love-brides. She orders a handmaid to escort them to the garden and to call out when they arrive. She'll be hiding in the hedge-maze to avoid Hermione. Since Hermione, like a hunting dog, navigates by smell, not sight, Helen rubs her arms and legs with rose petals, to mask her scent,

Only one prince shows up. He avoids looking at her and seems impatient to leave. She has always been the center of attention. She doesn't know what to make of this Trojan.

"Where's your brother?" she asks.

"Please excuse him. He doesn't mean to be rude. He's a rustic and doesn't understand what's expected of him. It's no fault of his own. A dream of our mother's was misinterpreted as a prophecy, and he was abandoned to die as an infant. He was saved and raised by a shepherd, and up until a few months ago, he had no idea that he's a son of the King of Troy. His manners are rough. He speaks little Greek. He doesn't know how to conduct himself in polite company. But he's good-hearted and unselfish."

"I hear the two of you are looking for brides. But no one from Troy has ever visited here, and Sparta is far from the coast, and we have no marriageable royal women. So what really brings you here?"

"I'm embarrassed to say."

She takes his chin in her hand and turns his head so their eyes meet. He looks shocked. She smiles and orders, "Say it!"

When he tries to break away, she holds tighter, touches nose-to-nose.

"You'll never believe it," he insists.

"That's for me to decide. Tell me!"

“Paris says that when he was a shepherd, three goddesses asked him to judge who is the most beautiful among them.”

“Goddesses? Which goddesses?”

“Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite.”

“And why him? Why was he qualified to make such a judgment?”

“He doesn’t know. But it was more a matter of bribes than of judgment. Hera offered him power, Athena wisdom, and Aphrodite the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Which did he choose?”

“The woman.”

Helen laughs. “Well if Aphrodite gave him such a woman, why is he traveling the world, looking for a bride?”

“She told him that you, Helen, queen of Sparta, are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Helen blushes and smiles, raises her hands high and laughs out loud.

“Yes. You,” he continues. “And he believed that dream of his as if it were divine truth. He was convinced that that was his fate.”

“But didn’t he know I’m married, married to a king? How could he imagine that I would be his?”

“Absurd as it sounds, that was his obsession.”

She laughs again. “How flattering.” She walks away a few steps, picks a rose, then turns back to ask, “Was? You said *was*?”

“Until we got to Salamis.”

“What happened in Salamis?”

“Before we got there, he had his doubts about the goddess, but still wanted to meet you, in case the promise was real and you were the one. But he’s immature. His emotions can change at the bat of an eyelash.”

“Whose eyelash?”

“A young woman he saw on the dock as our ship was leaving Salamis. Their eyes met. That was all it took. We had already sent word ahead to Sparta, so we had to continue. But he wants to return to Salamis as soon as we’re finished here.”

“How odd,” she mutters, and closes her eyes. “You’re telling me that Paris thought that all he had to do was show up at my palace, and I would fall in love with him? He doesn’t even know Greek, but he made a hazardous sea crossing to meet me. And he does all this because he thinks a goddess promised me to him? But she didn’t say anything to me. And he had no plan for what to do about my husband. He presumed that I would give up my life as a queen, aban-

don my daughter, and elope with a stranger? And on his way here he made eye contact with another woman, whose name he doesn't know, and now he thinks he's in love with her?"

"I shouldn't have told you that."

"This is hilarious. I'll tell our bard. He may turn it into song."

She starts to walk away, then stops, turns back, and says, "Send Paris to me here. I'd like to talk to him."

Tamer of Horses

Paris gets lost in the hedge-maze. Helenus gave him clear directions. He doesn't want to shout like a country bumpkin or a fool. When he sees her, he'll stand tall, with a haughty look; polite but distant; respectful, like a diplomat; not awkward and over-anxious, like a suitor.

He remembers his mother's words before he left Troy. "No one is making you do this. If you saw Aphrodite, she didn't give you an order. She offered you an opportunity. You can take it or leave it. Is beauty all there is to Helen? Or do you feel a deeper attraction? If it's beauty alone, what's that worth? What price beauty?"

He's cured of his obsession. Hecuba will be glad to hear that. But, of course, he's curious. He'd rather reject this woman, than be rejected by her.

After an embarrassingly long time, he spots her, sitting on a bench plucking petals from a rose bush and crushing them with her feet. She looks annoyed, impatient. She doesn't notice him, and he doesn't call attention to himself.

He thinks, this couldn't be the Helen Aphrodite promised. She looks ordinary; pleasing, but not special. For this, I came so far? For this, I left behind the Fair Maid of Salamis, with her sparkling eyes and her magical connection with me? Rumor doesn't a beauty make.

She spots him, then says something he doesn't understand. He's not as good at languages as he had hoped. He settles awkwardly on a bench facing hers and answers haltingly, in Greek, "Please speak slowly. I begin to learn Greek."

"I'm speaking your language, not mine."

"What?"

"Of course I speak Luwian. What would you expect of a queen?"

"And what did you ask?"

"Did Aphrodite tell you I would be yours?"

“So I thought,” he admits, avoiding eye contact. “She said *Helen*, but didn’t say *Helen of Sparta*. Just *Helen*. When I heard of your reputation, I presumed you must be the one. I made a mistake. I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t long for another man’s wife.”

“Do you long for me?”

“No. Not now. But I did. One day I was a shepherd, and the next I was the son of the king. I thought I’d keep being lucky, like a gambler who wins once and thinks he’ll keep winning. I apologize to you for my arrogance, expecting you to fall in love with me and run off with me, a total stranger.”

“And now you no longer believe in your goddess and her promise?”

“That was a dream. My sister Cassandra believes she was raped by Apollo and that he gave her the gift of knowing the future. Madness may run in my family. Now I suspect there was no goddess, no beauty contest. Maybe there are no gods at all.”

“Am I such a disappointment?”

He looks at her directly and hesitates. Most men would take that question as a cue and compliment her. Paris stares awkwardly. He’s unimpressed by her and can’t think of anything to say.

Finally, she breaks the silence, “Maybe there are gods, and there is a goddess of love, and maybe you saw her. Maybe she promised you *Helen*; but meant someone else with that name. Maybe that’s the name of the girl you saw on the dock at Salamis.”

“My brother told you?”

“Yes. You should go back and find her. Maybe the promise of a goddess is a half-way thing. You’re given a chance, but you have to grab it. You have to take risks to prove you’re worthy of the gift. There you were – a shepherd turned prince, travelling the world in search of your true love. But when you found her, you did nothing to win her. You should have insisted the captain turn the ship around. Or you should have jumped into the sea and swum to her. That’s what I would have done.”

“Can you swim?”

“No. But that wouldn’t stop me. Nothing would stop me if I thought I was in love. Where’s your gumption? Where’s your sense of romance? Where’s your daring?”

“If I had my horse here, I’d show you daring.”

“You race chariots?”

“No. I ride horses.”

“Horses aren’t for riding. There’s no way to control a horse. You might stay

mounted for a while, but at the first stumble or the first fright, the horse would throw you.”

“It’s not easy, but it can be done. It takes skill to sit astride the bare back of a galloping horse, to balance, to become one with the horse, moving with it as it moves.”

“And you can do that?”

“Agelaus, the shepherd who raised me, is a Scythian. He has deep knowledge of horses. He can ride bareback, with his hands free so he can hold and shoot a bow at full gallop.”

“Impossible.”

Paris laughs. “I, too, can do that.”

“Show me,” she insists.

“My horse, Boreas – swift as the north wind – is home at Troy.”

“I’ve heard that Trojans are *tamers of horses*, but I’ve never heard that they could do tricks like that. In Sparta, horses pull wagons and chariots and ploughs. If you can ride a horse astride, sitting upright, not just tied to the horse’s back, show me. And if you need to train a horse first, then do that. Please.”

“That would take time.”

“How much time would it take for a *tamer of horses* to do that?”

“To just ride, not to do tricks like shooting arrows or leaning over the side of a galloping horse to touch my hands to the ground?”

“How long?”

“A week, maybe two.”

“Then do it. I dare you.”

“My brother and I aren’t planning to stay here that long.”

“Menelaus will be leaving soon for Crete. He has business there that can’t wait. He plans to hold a banquet in your honor on his return. It would be a breach of courtesy for you to leave before that. Talk to his charioteer and pick a horse that’s quick to learn. I want to see you ride a horse. Better still, I want you to teach me to ride as well.”

Paris laughs.

She continues, “So it’s a joke? You were teasing me? People can’t ride horses like that, just as there’s no such thing as a centaur.”

He laughs still louder.

“Are you telling me that centaurs are real?” she asks. “Have you seen one? Have you ridden one?”

“No. That’s not what’s funny.”

“Then what is?”

“The image of you on horseback.”

“You don’t think I’m capable of that? You think women can’t do what men can?”

“No. It’s a matter that isn’t to be discussed in polite company, or so I’ve been told these last few months.”

“And what’s that?”

“Women aren’t meant to sit astride horses, with their nether parts pressing against the horse’s back.”

“You mean it isn’t proper, isn’t ladylike for a woman to be seen doing that? Propriety be damned. I’m a queen. I do what I want. Besides, no one need know. I dare you to teach me.”

“Your passion for knowledge and your daring are admirable. But the issue is a physical matter, the consequences of the friction, the rubbing of your tender parts and the rhythmic motion of the horse.”

“You mean I could be injured, that there would be pain? I would put padding between myself and the horse. Surely if Scythian men ride horses, Scythian women must too, or this whole tale of yours is a myth.”

“It’s not a myth. Men can ride, and women can as well; but not ladies.”

“Because we’re dainty and afraid of discomfort or pain?”

“Pain isn’t the issue. It’s pleasure.”

“Pleasure?”

“Indeed. That’s the joke. Among my people, the people of the mountain where I was raised, randy young men try to get women to ride horseback, because of the effect the rubbing has on them.”

“Effect?”

“Putting them in the mood.”

“The mood?”

He laughs again. “Warming them up, getting them ready so we can have our way with them.”

“You seduce women by getting them to ride horseback?”

“Of course.”

“And you’ve done that? You’ve bedded women that way? And not just slaves you could order? Respectable innocent women? What kind of man are you? How many women have you had on your Mount Ida?”

“One. Oenone’s her name. We had much fun together before I was found and became a prince. That started with me teaching her to ride Boreas.”

“So you’re a master of rowdy stories, and you lie with great aplomb.”

“I would never lie to you, my lady.” He bows to her with an exaggerated sweep of his hand.

Helen hesitates. She isn't sure she heard that right. Did he say "lie to" or "lie with" or did he say the one and mean the other? "Then do it," she says, with more enthusiasm than she deems appropriate. "Pick one of our chariot horses. Train it to be ridden. Then teach me to ride!"

"As you wish." Paris smiles provocatively.

Hermione suddenly appears, races to her mother, and wraps her arms around her mother's legs. "Got you! But that was too easy. You talked, Mommy. I could hear you from far off.

"And who are you, sir? Can you really ride on a horse's back? Teach me, too. I like riding dogs, big dogs. But horses must be even better – the speed, the wind.

"Zeus turned himself into a bull and a swan, never a horse. If I were Zeus, I'd make myself into a horse. But I'm me. I just want to ride a horse, the fastest in the world.

"Zeus is Mommy's daddy, her real daddy. Everybody says so. But she never asks him to do things for me.

"Mommy, please tell this man to teach me to ride a horse."

"Only if you're good."

"But I am good. Everybody says so."

"You have to be even better for such a treat. Paris here needs to train a horse and teach me to ride. Then he can teach you. But Daddy might not want us to do that. So keep this a secret. That's a new game for you – knowing things without telling anybody. Start now. Repeat after me: *people can't ride horses.*"

The Right Touch

Paris asks a stableboy for help in picking a chariot horse that's smart and obedient. He harnesses it to a chariot, brushes its back, speaks to it softly, and feeds it apples and sweets. Then he improvises. He has never trained a domesticated horse, only wild ones.

He ties sacks of grain, about his own weight, to the horse's back and leads it to the race track, where he has it go around several times, gradually increasing

speed, so it can adjust its stride to the extra weight. Then he detaches the horse from the chariot, but keeps the harness and yoke in place. It's familiar with those and associates them with humans and obedience.

The next morning, Paris removes the weights and, from a fishing net, fashions a rope contraption which he wraps around the horse's midsection and attaches to the harness. This gives him footing for mounting and dismounting and will enable him to lean over the side for gymnastic tricks. Finally, he rides the horse, advancing from walk to trot to canter to gallop, signaling the pace with legs and hands and words, and rewarding the horse with treats for getting it right. This horse learns far faster than he expected.

Then he rides the horse to the palace garden, where he sees Helen resting, alone.

She's shocked. "How did you train it so fast?"

"Magic, my lady," he replies.

"Wait here," she orders. A few minutes later she returns with her hips wrapped in thick layers of cloth padding. "Teach me. Teach me now," she insists.

First he has her talk to the horse and brush its back. Then he loads it with sacks of grain and mounts it himself, so it gets used to carrying a double load. Finally, he removes the weights, helps Helen to mount, and mounts behind her.

She talks softly to the horse, holds tightly to the harness and net, and with her free hand pats it gently on the neck. When both she and the horse seem comfortable, Paris urges the horse forward at a slow walk, then gradually speeds it up. After a few circuits of the garden, Helen asks to stop. Paris helps her down. She removes her padding. He helps her up again and mounts again.

With her groin pressed against the horse's neck, and Paris pressed against her backside, she feels sensations she never experienced before. As the horse increases its pace, the pressure becomes rhythmic and pleasurable.

"Faster," she whispers.

"As you wish."

He wraps his arms around her waist as he urges the horse with his heels.

When they dismount, back at the garden, she admits, "I'm panting, but not from exertion. I feel like a different self."

Paris explains, "It's the pressure, the rubbing between the legs, the rhythmic contact down there, like when you touch yourself. The friction."

"What do you mean? Why would I touch myself?"

"Surely you know. Your mother must have told you. Or you should have learned on your own. You're no virgin. You've had a child. You've been married for four years. Surely your husband showed you."

“We’ve never talked of such matters. Why should we? Sex is for men, not women. It’s something a woman endures, forced on her by men. That’s the way it was when I was raped as a child. And it wasn’t much different with my husband.”

“Wasn’t?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Tell me,” he urges her, rubbing her back with one hand and her feet with the other.

Enjoying the contact, she tries to explain. “Of course, I had no choice of mate; that was my father’s business. Then I was my husband’s property to do with as he pleased, which he did all too often. I was soon with child. My labor was difficult and dangerous. The baby was in the wrong position. Mother brought in one midwife after another until the last was able, with pushing and massaging, to turn the baby around. I felt trapped. I wasn’t ready to be a mother. This wasn’t the life I had dreamed of as a child. I didn’t want to be a mother. I passed the baby to a wet nurse. I saw her only when I couldn’t avoid her. Now she’s a toddler and she’s after me all the time.

“During the ordeal of childbirth, Mother tried to distract me with tales of her own labors. She had had two sets of twins – me and Cly, then Castor and Pollux. Having twins is rare and dangerous. For her to have had two sets and to have survived was extraordinary. That alone could have led to speculation that the father was no mere mortal.

“Mother said she regretted that she didn’t plead with Father to find a different match for me. Since I am a twin and Mother had two sets of twins and Menelaus is the son of a twin, the odds were great that I would have twins. Then the labor would be far more painful, and I would probably die. She warned me not to have more children with Menelaus.

“I asked her how I could avoid that. I’m subject to the will of my husband. And there’s no sure way to prevent pregnancy. If the priests are right, even a goddess can’t do that, even the goddess of love.

“She told me to put sleeping potion in Menelaus’ wine when he comes to bed, and, in the morning, praise him for his virility and act surprised that he doesn’t remember. That’s what she did with Father, after her second set of twins. I have another method that’s more reliable.”

“And what is that?”

“I richly reward his concubines when they lure him to their beds instead of mine. And when he’s in the mood for me, rather than them, in the dark, I have my handmaid take my place and satisfy him. When he’s finished his business, I climb back into bed and my handmaid goes away.”

Paris chuckles. “And you’ve been doing that for years? And he’s never suspected?”

“He’s so used to doing it with her that if he did it with me, he’d think I was an impostor.”

That night, Menelaus chooses to bed one of his concubines, so Helen and her handmaid have the room to themselves, and Helen indulges her curiosity. She experiments, stroking herself with fingers, with cloth, and with objects. That feels good. But the more she touches, the more she needs to – harder and faster. She feels tense with expectation, needing something more to trigger a release, and not able to bring it on.

She asks her handmaid to join her under the covers. “Do you touch yourself in your private places, for the pleasure of it?” she dares to ask.

“Of course. Doesn’t everyone? It’s not something you talk about. You just do it. It’s no one else’s business, but it’s natural; it’s necessary.”

“Touch me that way.”

“What?”

“That’s an order.”

Soon she’s shaking and quivering, with a loss of control and a release of tension. It feels good, very good. Then she helps her handmaid arrive at that same peak of pleasure.

She learns two lessons that night: sex can be pleasurable for a woman, and a woman doesn’t need to depend on a man for that – she can do it for herself or with another woman, if she likes.

A Time to Remember

The next morning Paris and Helen go riding again. Then lying side-by-side in a meadow, Helen tells him about her experiments with herself and with her handmaid, and she asks him if he, too, can give himself pleasure.

“Yes,” he replies with aplomb, delighted that she’s willing to talk to him of such matters.

“You mean sex is that simple?” she asks. “You don’t need a woman? You don’t need to enter a woman, and risk giving her a child?”

“Yes. But it’s far better when it’s not your own hand doing it. The element of surprise. And I imagine it would be still better if you cared for the person you did it with.”

“You’ve never experienced that?”

“Nor have you, from what you’ve said.”

“But my sister, Cly, has.”

“The one who married Menelaus’ brother? Did she win the marriage lottery and wed a man she loves?”

“She found her true love and sleeps with him every night. But he isn’t her husband.”

“Then who is he?”

“Her handmaid.”

“A woman?”

“Her husband thinks so. They met on her wedding day, which was my wedding day, too. He was disguised as a handmaid and was planning to kill both Agamemnon and Menelaus. His name is Aegisthus. He’s the rightful king of Mycenae. He wanted revenge for the deaths of his father and brothers. Instead, she convinced him to go to Mycenae with her, disguised as her handmaid. He shares her sleeping chamber. She follows our mother’s advice and uses a potion to avoid her husband’s attentions. She and her lover make love whenever they want, and the children she bears are his.”

“Whether that’s true or not, it’s an amazing story,” says Paris. “You have spirit and imagination.”

“What?”

“You dare do what you want to do and say what you think.”

“It’s extraordinary that you say that of me. Men always compliment my looks. No one says anything about my mind, about how I think or speak. I’m just an object to look at – a living statue, but a statue nonetheless – to be admired for my face and body. Would you like me to recite my poetry? To sing my songs?”

“You compose poetry and songs?”

“Not yet,” she laughs. “But you make me think I can and should. I’ve had such ideas waking in the middle of the night. But it’s hard to remember anything long and complex. I can’t imagine how bards memorize long poems for performance – not just how they create them, but how they can tell the same story many times. Often I can’t even remember what I want to buy at the market.”

“My sister Cassandra – the one with the gift of seeing the future – her problem is the opposite. She can’t forget. The vision she once had from Apollo won’t go away.”

“Well, maybe that’s what bards have, or the best of them. Gods or muses give them visions that they can’t forget. But remembering words shouldn’t depend on divine intervention. I’ve seen Phoenician merchants make marks on wood or

wax to keep track of inventory, transactions, even thoughts. And other people can understand those marks, like hearing unspoken thoughts, or hearing today what was said yesterday. They call the making of such marks *writing* and the understanding of them *reading*.”

“Well, why don’t you learn writing from them?” suggests Paris. “Surely you could pay Phoenicians to teach you.”

“I know the sounds those marks stand for, but not the Phoenician words. It would take years for me to learn Phoenician. But maybe I could use those marks to make Greek words.”

“Show me.”

She picks up a stick and makes scratches on the ground, two lines of marks.

She explains, “The first line stands for sounds of Greek and the second for sounds of Luwian. And they both mean the same thing.”

“And what is that?”

“I love you.” She hesitates for a moment, then adds. “And I do. I love that mind of yours and what it does to mine.”

He pauses, self-conscious, not knowing what she expects of him. He’s flattered and doesn’t want to undo her opinion of him. Should he say he loves her too, even though he doesn’t? He couldn’t – not so fast. But the young woman in Salamis caught his attention immediately. How could he have been so young and naive just a few days ago? What should a man say to a woman when she says she loves him? Saying nothing at all would be an insult, but echoing her words would sound false. He knows he’s taking too long to reply.

Helen sees his confusion. She’s pleased that he doesn’t feel compelled to say he loves her, without meaning it.

She says, “This is a life-changing moment.”

Once again, he’s speechless.

She adds, “We should run off together.”

He flinches, as if she slapped him in the face.

She smiles at his reaction, that he doesn’t know how to mask his thoughts and feelings.

Finally, he asks, “To Troy?”

“No,” she replies. “To Phoenicia.”

Not So Happy Returns

“That?” exclaims Menelaus. “You tell me that that is Helen? You can’t believe that I’m that gullible. You went to great lengths to prove to me that she’s dead. You swore she died ten years ago. And now she shows up? What an insult to my intelligence. What a whiplash to my emotions.

“I’m grieving about her death, knowing that I’ll never see her again, that we’ll never be able to share, regret, and undo our wrongs to one another. And now you tell me she’s alive? And worse than that, you point at that creature standing in the corner and claim that she’s Helen? She’s more male than female. She looks nothing like Helen, has none of her storied beauty, her glow, her aura. Maybe she’s a peasant. Maybe you chose her at random, as a sacrifice to end the war. To have picked her as your Helen pretender is an insult to my intelligence.”

Priam admits, “I’ve never seen Helen before, and this woman certainly doesn’t match the image of her I had from her legend. But my son Paris says that’s she. Talk to this woman yourself, and look at her more closely. Surely, you should know Helen if anyone does. Remember it’s been ten years since last you saw her. With all she’s been through, it’s possible she’s changed. Also, your image of her may have grown in her absence. Imagination magnifies memories. You and so many others have risked so much for her that you think she’s godlike and find it hard to recognize her in this frail and flawed human.”

“She was like a goddess. The real Helen was the daughter of Zeus himself. She would never show herself in public like this, with close-cropped hair and a jagged scar on her cheek. You should have decked her in queen’s clothes, used cosmetics, given her false hair since she has so little of her own. Why do you bring this woman before me like this?”

“I sent word to you immediately. I wanted you to see her as I did. Unadorned. Authentic.”

“Authentic? Nonsense. If you want to fool me, do me the courtesy of making a better try at it. As she is, she’s an insult to me and an insult to the memory of my wife.”

“I understand your skepticism. I too doubted their story when I first heard it. In those ten years they’ve been missing, they sailed to the ends of the Earth and saw all there is to see. They were beyond the Pillars of Heracles, at the outer Ocean itself when they first heard that we are locked in war and that they are the cause of it. They want to atone for the harm they’ve done. They know their lives are forfeit for their crime. They don’t expect forgiveness. They are surrendering themselves to you for punishment. They ask only that you end this war

and go home, that innocent people be allowed to go on with their lives, in peace. Talk to them. Please. Hear their story and judge for yourself. I wouldn't bring them to you if I myself were not convinced of the truth of what they say."

Paris explains, "Our ship was made with green wood, an amateur's mistake. Cracks opened up and expanded. We hopped from one island to the next, filling the cracks with pine tar. We went to Sidon. We didn't dare go to Troy. Father would have sent us back to you under guard, with all we had taken and compensation besides. That's the kind of man he is. Of course we fled. We had no alternative.

"In Sidon, we released our crew and captain and paid them handsomely. None of them returned to Troy. Instead, they settled there and found work and built new lives, rather than risk the long voyage home and punishment for helping us.

"Helen and I bought a seaworthy ship made with wood that was properly aged. We also bought fine cloth that we could trade in other ports. We became merchants. Rather than spend our stolen wealth, we would increase it by trade. There might be no limit to how long and how far we could travel. But it wasn't as easy as we thought. Pirates were everywhere. That's how Helen got the scar you see."

"Enough, Paris, if you are Paris. Tell me no yarns of your travels. I want to hear from your lady. Tell me, woman; say something to convince me that you're Helen. Or, better still, like a goddess, cast off this human form and show yourself once again in the body I knew and loved – the stuff of legend."

"But I can't do that, Red Beard. I am as you see me – a mere mortal."

"Red Beard? You call me Red Beard? Paris must have told you that. He probably rehearsed you for this performance. Speak. And don't tell me well-known facts. Say things that only Helen and I would know."

"You didn't know me very well. You never tried to know me. Nor did I know you."

"I was your husband. We shared a bed. What could be more intimate than that?"

"After the birth of Hermione, you never had me."

"What nonsense is that?"

"When you wanted me instead of one of your concubines, in the dark my handmaid took my place. It was her you groped and entered, not me. You got used to her ways. You enjoyed her mightily, or so you told me in the morning, after she had gone. You were so proud of yourself. But I was never yours, never willingly.

“If you still want me back, knowing that, knowing that I loathe you, then I’m yours. But your crudeness, your insensitivity and my escape from that false union should be a private matter, not cause for war. Torture me, kill me if you wish. But end the war. Our private tragedy is no reason for the misery and death of others.”

“No!” Paris speaks up. “I challenge you, Menelaus, to meet me one-on-one, in single combat. If I win, if I compel you to submit, you leave with all the Greeks and renounce your claim to Helen. If you win, kill me and take Helen; but the war ends then too.”

“A fight to the death for Helen and for an end to the war? A fight of me against you? You, of all people, will be the champion of Troy? Have you ever held a sword, much less used one in combat? Fight me and I’ll cut you slowly and painfully, lopping off this and that piece of you. Surrender without a fight, and I’ll give you a quick and painless death.”

“And Helen?”

“I’ll do with her as I please.”

“Being dead, I’ll have no way to contest that. What of Troy? What becomes of Troy?”

“Troy is ours. But we’ll spare your people. Leave the city to us, intact – no burning, no destruction. And in return, we’ll let your people go into exile, wherever they wish, with safe passage, taking with them all they can carry.”

“Better that than endless war. So combat it is. But beware. You don’t know what you’re up against.”

“You mean the goddess of love? I’ve heard that tale of yours. You’re expecting Aphrodite herself to fight at your side and save you. Believe that if you wish. And I’ll believe in the sharp edge of my sword. I’ll meet you at dawn tomorrow by your Scaean Gate. To the death!”

Falling in Love Again

Helen doesn’t dare watch from the ramparts with the mob of spectators. The mood is celebratory. This is a way out of the war.

All presume that Paris will lose and die – just punishment for his crimes. And if they see her now, they might tear her to pieces for her share of the guilt.

They’re probably talking about what to take with them and how to pack it and how to carry it – by wagon, on donkey back, on their backs, on their heads,

stuffed in their clothing, and where to go for their exile. Many will choose Lycia, which, unlike nearby towns and cities, is still untouched by Greek raids.

How could I have fallen for such a fool? wonders Helen in their chamber. How can he believe Aphrodite will save him. He's mad, totally mad, like his sister Cassandra.

She grabs a wineskin, holds it high above her head, and squeezes, sending a red stream straight into her mouth. Soon she's coughing and spitting it out. Her body has limits. Oblivion isn't easy to reach.

There's no sword in their chamber. The best she can find is the iron knife that Paris uses to shave his beard. He sharpened it on a stone for hours, as a way to cope with the dread of impending death – a sign that he doesn't believe in Aphrodite. It's sharp enough for Helen to slit her wrists with the lightest of strokes.

She lies down on the bed with the knife in hand.

She will count to a hundred and then do it – first the left wrist and then the right.

But before she counts to fifty, she falls asleep in a drunken stupor.

Then Paris is beside her, holding her, kissing her, sobbing.

In her dream – it must be a dream – he mistakes the wine stains for blood. He thinks she bled to death. He prays to Aphrodite to bring her back. If not, he'll kill himself and meet her in Hades.

Through delirious, half-closed eyes, she sees sunlight reflecting off the blade as he takes it from her hand. She opens her eyes wide. He shouts with glee.

Their lips touch and then their tongues. He licks the scar on her cheek and calls her, "My pirate queen."

She isn't dreaming.

"You won?" she asks. "The goddess did that for you?"

She hugs him tight, in relief and joy.

"Not exactly," he says.

"It was win or lose," she replies. "Clearly, you didn't lose. So you must have won."

"Not exactly. There was a mist, then a fog, a thick fog."

"Is Menelaus still alive?"

"I think so. I didn't see. One moment we were facing one another – shield in one hand, spear in the other, ten feet apart. Then a fog descended from Mount Ida, covering the plain, covering the city, covering us. I ran."

"You ran?"

"What else could I do? I couldn't see him. I couldn't see my own feet. I ran to-

ward where the gate should be, then to the palace and here. I don't know how I found my way. The goddess must have guided me."

"Take me," she replies. "Take me now. Enter me."

"But you've always been afraid. The risks of childbirth."

"Damn the risk, Paris. I love you. I want your seed. I want to bear your child."

He starts to protest. She covers his mouth with one hand, and, with the other, she guides him where he has never been before.

Helen and Menelaus

Helen retreats to the chamber she shares with Deiphobus and crawls into bed with him, and makes love with him – not from passion, but with empathy, knowing that at long last the end of the war is near, and the two of them will be dead by morning.

She wakes – how was she able to sleep? – to shouts and screams, the clatter of weapons, the crackling of fire, the collapse of buildings. Smoke streams through the window.

Deiphobus, in full armor, stands at the ready, guarding the door.

Helen sits on a stool by the bed, numb, emotionless, certain she's about to die. She won't struggle. That would only prolong the agony.

The door crashes in, knocking Deiphobus to the ground.

He scrambles to his feet and once again assumes the ready position. Then he quickly, smoothly switches sword and shield so the sword is in his left hand.

He had shown Helen that trick. He's proud of it. On the battlefield, it served him well, catching his opponents off-guard.

Menelaus faces him without helmet, without shield, both hands on the hilt of his sword.

With a piercing war cry, Deiphobus strides forward.

Menelaus, with a single stroke, severs his head.

Helen shuts her eyes.

She expects to see a rush of images like what Cassandra saw in her vision, but instead of the future, her past – childhood, rape, marriage, childbirth, Paris.

Instead, her mind goes blank.

Darkness. Silence.

The wait is interminable.

Is she dead already?

Then she hears a thump.

In her panic, has time slowed down for her. Or has it taken that long for Deiphobus' head to hit the ground?

Another delay, then she hears the crash of a body toppling over.

Warm liquid hits her arm.

She keeps her eyes shut. She doesn't want to see the blood. She doesn't want to watch as Menelaus swings his sword at her.

She hears heavy breathing. She smells sweat.

Why doesn't Menelaus get it over with?

Is he savoring his revenge?

She wakes again, with a shiver. Was she dreaming? Did none of this happen? Or is it about to happen? Or will it happen over and over again, forever? Is that her punishment in Hades?

A short while before, she and Deiphobus had gripped each other in despair and tried to blank out the sounds of death, rape, and destruction in the streets below. Before that, during their brief marriage, Deiphobus and she had been polite strangers. She made no effort to know him. He couldn't replace Paris. That was unfair of her. She should have given him a chance. People change. He could have. She could have. Now neither of them could.

When Menelaus kills her, she will forgive him and wish him well. She deserves her punishment. She will be at peace with herself and with him.

She opens her eyes.

He's standing next to the bed, sword held with both hands.

How long has he been there?

Their eyes meet. She expects anger and hatred.

Instead she sees tears and regret.

There's a touch of gray in his red beard. There's a weariness about him. He looks pensive, rather than angry. War has changed him, and age as well.

If they first met now, what would she as she is now think of him as he is now?

That's impossible to imagine. They wouldn't be who they are now, if they hadn't gone through their failed marriage, her elopement with Paris, and the ten years of war their breakup triggered.

She says, "I wonder what it would have been like if you and I had gotten to know one another. Could we have been friends? Might we have become lovers? We'd never seen one another when Father decided we would marry. Then you took me roughly as if I were a new-bought slave. I had no choice. I was yours to use as you pleased, a thing, not a person. I doubt you got much pleasure from it. I know I didn't.

"Then, after the birth of Hermione, I became aware of the risk, not just of childbirth but of the birth of twins. I had my handmaid take my place in bed with you, and you didn't even notice. I left you, truly left you, long before Paris.

"We were strangers then. And we're even more strangers ten years later. What

would you think of me if first you saw me now, not a child bride, not a legendary beauty, but a mature woman with a jagged scar on her cheek?

“Go ahead. Do what you have to do. I’m ready for it. Kill me. Pretend that you’re still enraged over what I did so long ago. Or would you prefer to wait until you have an audience so you can prove your manhood in front of them? Or perhaps you’d like to slit my throat in a temple at an altar, as a sacrifice to the gods, thanking them for your glorious victory.”

“No,” he says softly, taking her hand in his and kissing the cheek with the scar.

The next day, they set sail on a single ship. The rest of the Spartans head straight home.

They journey southward – world-weary strangers, who on a whim decided to run off together, shedding all responsibility, not caring where they go or what becomes of them.

When he makes the first clumsy gestures toward physical intimacy, she doesn’t object. Gradually, they teach one another what they want of one another, and respond in kind.

In Sidon, they trade their war ship for a merchant ship, hire a Phoenician crew, and barter for merchandise that they can sell for a profit elsewhere, as Helen and Paris had done years before. They sail to Cyprus, Egypt, Libya, Carthage. Sometimes they talk of having another child or even twins, but that never happens.

When they reach the Pillars of Heracles, they’re tempted to sail north to the island rich in tin, or south along the coast of Africa, or west across the Ocean, perhaps to the Islands of the Blest. But instead, they return to Sparta, where their daughter Hermione is old enough to have children of her own.

Helen in Arcadia

When Menelaus dies, Helen retires to Arcadia. There she composes a lengthy poem about her life and the war it caused. She writes it down, using Phoenician characters to represent Greek sounds. Only she knows how to read it.

Traveling bards visit her in Arcadia, learn the story by heart, and repeat it often, all over Greece. They add battle scenes and bloodshed – always crowd pleasers.

She remembers fondly the visit of Telemachus in search of his father and the look on Menelaus’ face when she recounted that she walked three times around the hollow horse and knocked on its flanks and called out the names of the soldiers inside, mimicking the voices of their wives. That was the first time she added that detail.

Menelaus neither confirmed nor denied what she said, but she was sure he wanted to believe it. Her eyes flirted with his, inviting belief, but at the same time laughing at his gullibility.

In her written version, Menelaus tells that anecdote, implying that he's retelling what she told him, challenging the credulity of their guests.

She loves layering her narrative – one perspective on top of another, and none of them privileged and special, all possible at once.

She misses Menelaus. She misses Paris too, but she misses Menelaus more because he was the perfect audience, and a singer of tales needs an audience.

Remembering that scene with Telemachus reminds her of when Paris was his age. Back then, she didn't really know Menelaus and didn't know herself. If what happened after that hadn't happened, they would never have bonded as they finally did, and her life would have been much poorer.

Truth is dull and flat, she thinks, but story is alive, ever growing, ever changing, becoming ever more memorable. Anomalies and inconsistencies throw history into doubt, but they make the story all the stronger. We want to believe all the more when we know that we can never be certain. Our confidence is an act of faith, an act of love.

Menelaus liked it when I told stories that couldn't be corroborated, when I told the same stories with variants, and no one knew which was *true* if any were.

He loved the way I could flirt with truth and flirt with him in doing so. In particular, he liked my telling of the story of the hollow horse.

He believed he remembered the rhythmic knocking. It had to have been deliberate. Someone knew but didn't reveal that the horse was hollow, that there were warriors inside. The revelation could have led to the death of everyone in the horse and the Trojans might have saved their city.

Was that me knocking? He could never know that as a fact, but he believed it, even though he remembered not the sound of the knocking, but my telling of the tale.

His lingering doubt made his belief all the stronger, like belief in a god, like belief in all gods, like belief that life has meaning and that there is love and that my love for him was as strong as his for me.

When bards visit and ask Helen to tell them her tale, she never shows them her written version. She doesn't try to teach any of them how to read it. Rather she forces them to rely on their memories, knowing that variations due to lapses of

memory and creative twists added by retellers will make the story all the more memorable, through the narrative power of doubt.

Once a year, Helen visits Andromache and Helenus in Epirus. By chance, Cassandra's prophecy for them has turned out to be true. And perhaps many years hence there will be a namesake of Paris, a great Alexander who will conquer the world. So much that is impossible has happened already, why not that as well?

But she doesn't envy them their role in history. She will live in story, which lasts much longer than history and is far more fun to tell.

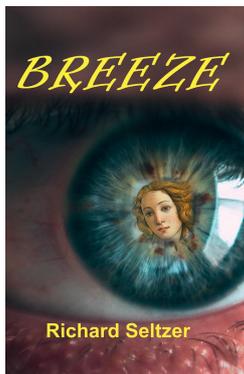


Figure 1 Cover of *Breeze*

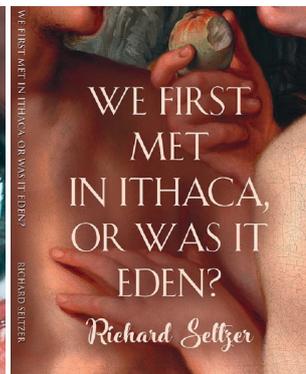


Figure 2 Cover of *We First Met in Ithaca, or Was It Eden?*

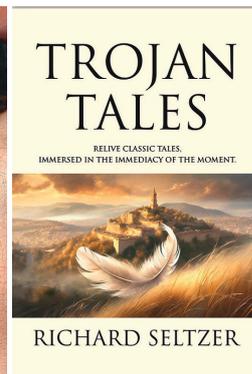


Figure 3 Cover of *Trojan Tales*

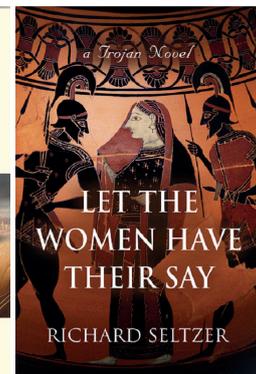


Figure 4 Cover of *Let the Women Have Their Say*

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KATHARINA WESSELMANN

(Universität Potsdam)

Rezension von Suzanne Collins:

Die Tribute von Panem auf Lateinisch.

De sortibus Pani tributis

Ausgewählt, übersetzt und eingeleitet von Markus Janka und Michael Stierstorfer. Reclam (Stuttgart 2021), 224 S.

ISBN: 978-3-15-019646-5, 9,00 €.

The Hunger Games, deutsch: *Die Tribute von Panem*, ist heutzutage vor allem als Filmreihe bekannt, die auf den gleichnamigen Romanen der Kinder- und Jugendbuchautorin Suzanne Collins basiert. Die Filme haben seit 2012 über drei Milliarden Dollar eingespielt, zuletzt mit dem im November 2023 erschienenen Prequel *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. Und wie das Wort *Prequel* eine Art Frankenstein-Form ist – dem Suffix *-el* wurde schamlos das Präfix *pre-* angeklebt und die lateinische Wortwurzel *sequ-* dabei verstümmelt, ohne dass ihr semantischer Gehalt irgend beachtet ist –, so be-

steht auch der Plot der *Hunger Games* aus Myriaden kaum zueinander passender Versatzstücke der griechischen Mythologie und römischen Geschichte: Die Story erscheint als modernisierte Version des Theseus-Mythos, indem alljährlich Jugendliche zum Sterben in eine labyrinthartige Struktur geschickt werden; die Protagonist*innen tragen die Namen historischer Figuren, etwa der römischen Politiker Caesar, Cato und Coriolanus; die Hauptstadt der dystopischen Welt heißt Kapitol. Entsprechend begeben sich Markus Janka und Michael Stierstorfer in der Einleitung zu ihrer lateinischen Version der *Tri-*

bute auf eine Motivsuche, deren Ergebnisse einleuchten, die aber gleichzeitig auch die Willkür der Rezeptionsmischung offenlegt: Dass etwa die dekadenten Kapitölbewohner*innen Namen der römischen Oberschicht tragen (im Gegensatz zu den ärmeren ‚Guten‘, die mit ihren Pflanzennamen Naturverbundenheit aufweisen) ergibt zwar Sinn, aber man darf nicht zu lange darüber nachdenken, wie die historischen Catones zu dieser Analogie gestanden hätten. Ähnliches gilt für die Namensgebung des bösen Präsidenten Coriolanus, der die Plebs hasst wie sein historischer Namensvetter, der in seiner Adaption des livianischen Gleichnisses vom Magen und den Gliedern aber zugleich auch ein Wiedergänger des Menenius Agrippa ist. Mit diesen und zahlreichen anderen Anleihen unternimmt Suzanne Collins eine überwiegend assoziative Reise durch den Selbstbedienungsladen der griechisch-römischen Kultur, die spielerisch ist und sich kaum darum schert, ob die Analogie gerade besser oder schlechter passt.

Eine explizite Einordnung dieser Art von Antikenrezeption vermisst man in der Einleitung; sie könnte eine potenzielle lateinlehrerliche Entrüstung (wie sie der Rezensentin über die anarchische Wortschöpfung *Prequel* schon mehrfach begegnet ist) über die Regellosigkeit von Collins' Verarbeitungen verhindern. Den Motivmix der *Tribute* als Positivum zu fassen, nämlich als Neubesetzung von Topoi, die auch losgelöst von ihren antiken Traditionen funktionieren, ist die

wahre Bereicherung, die Lateinlernernde mit Rezeptionsprodukten wie Collins' Romanen und den daraus entstandenen Filmen erfahren. Wenn in eine diffuse moderne Wahrnehmung der antiken römischen Gesellschaft als ‚dekadent‘ sogar der strenge Stoiker Cato einbezogen wird, erklärt das vieles über die Wirkungsweisen erzählerischer Überlieferung und auch über den modernen Blick auf die Antike. Zu begreifen, dass Traditionen nicht linear und logisch sind, dass die Aufnahme von Motiven oft abseits von historischer Informiertheit erfolgt, ist vielleicht die wichtigste Erkenntnis, die Lernende bei eigenen Recherchen über die antiken Hintergründe der *Tribute* erreichen können.

Ist das Zielpublikum des Bändchens überhaupt an der Schule zu verorten? Zweifellos dürften auch sonst Liebhaber*innen der lateinischen Sprache Jankas und Stierstorfers Übersetzung zu schätzen wissen, aber die Ausgabe scheint doch in vieler Hinsicht prädestiniert für den Lateinunterricht. Preislich ist der Band absolut zumutbar, und schon die Struktur erweist sich als pragmatischer Geniestreich: Alle drei Bände der *Tribute* sind inhaltlich abgedeckt, indem die übersetzten Textstellen mit deutschen Einleitungen versehen sind, die Übersprungenes paraphrasieren und geschickt in die aktuelle Handlung einführen. Die Passagen sind handlich portioniert, das Latein klar und einfach und perfekt geeignet als Übergangsektüre für die Mittelstufe; nicht im Reclam-

Grundwortschatz enthaltene Vokabeln sind in einem Verzeichnis beigegeben, was bei Begriffen wie *clausura denticulata* (Reißverschluss) und *cuniculus montanus* (Mine) auch durchaus vonnöten ist. Im Namensverzeichnis erschließt sich auf einen Blick der Spaß, den die Autoren beim Übersetzen ganz offensichtlich hatten: Rory, etymologischer aus einem gälischen Wort für die Farbe Rot, wird zu *Ahenobarbus*, Madge Undersee zu Magdalena Submarina, Peeta Mellark zu Petrus Mollarcus und so fort.

Auch an der Übersetzung zeigt sich die Kreativität der Autoren im Umgang mit Sprache, so in der Genese des Spitznamens unserer Protagonistin, die im englischen Original wie folgt erklärt wird:

„Hey, Catnip,“ says Gale. My real name is Katniss, but when I first told him, I had barely whispered it. So he thought I'd said Catnip. Then when this crazy lynx started following me around the woods looking for handouts, it became his official nickname for me. I finally had to kill the lynx because he scared off game. I almost regretted it because he wasn't bad company. But I got a decent price for his pelt.

In der lateinischen Übersetzung liest sich die Passage folgendermaßen:

„Salve, Catula“, Gallus ait. Verum nomen mihi Catanissa est, sed cum ei primum nomen meum dicerem, id

ei solum insusurravi. Itaque Catulam audivit. Et cum postea ista catula fera demens me per silvam donum sperans consequi inciperet, Gallus mihi hoc nomen ioculare dedit. Quam catulam feram postremo interficere debui, quia feras bestias fugavit. Hoc me prope paenituit; nam non mala comes erat. At eius pellem magno pretio vendidi.

Vor dem Problem, dass die Klangähnlichkeit von Katniss und ‚catnip‘ sich auf die deutsche ‚Katzenminze‘ nicht erstreckt, standen schon die Übersetzer*innen der deutschen Erstausgabe. Sie entschieden sich für ‚Kätzchen‘, was als befriedigende Lösung erscheint, denn ein Luchs könnte auch einem Artgenossen durch den Wald folgen, so wie er im englischen Original durch den Lockstoff angezogen scheint. Raffiniert wirkt hier jedoch die Latinisierung des Namens Gale zu Gallus, indem nun beide Jugendlichen zu Tieren werden. Das Thema vom Fressen und gefressen werden, von der Vertierung des Menschen, der unter furchtbaren Bedingungen existieren muss, ist hier bereits angelegt: Das wilde Kätzchen muss sterben, auch wenn es keine *mala comes* ist, da es andere zu erjagende Tiere vertreibt. Das passt zum Fortgang der Geschichte: Die große Catula wird ihre Altersgenoss*innen in der Arena töten müssen, um selber zu überleben.

Überhaupt dürfte die dramatische Handlung des Jugendromans Lateinschüler*innen mehr begeistern als

manch andere Übergangsektüre: Zentrum des dystopischen Romans sind die grausamen Spiele des fiktiven Staates Panem, der die Staatsraison des Unterdrückens durch Ablenkung bereits im Namen trägt, im Sinne des lateinischen Diktums *panem et circenses*, ‚Brot und Spiele‘, die das Volk ruhigstellen und von einer politischen Beteiligung abhalten sollen (Iuv. sat. 10,81). Die erst sechzehnjährige Katniss Everdeen muss gemeinsam mit ihrem Altersgenossen Peeta Mellark ums Überleben kämpfen, während die Menschen das Spektakel im Fernsehen verfolgen; die beiden Jugendlichen werden überdies Ingezwungen, eine Liebesbeziehung zu simulieren, um positive Presse für das System zu generieren und den aufkeimenden Widerstand zu ersticken. Es nützt nicht viel: Katniss muss im zweiten Band erneut kämpfen und die Zerstörung ihres Heimatdistrikts und Peetas Entführung durch die Regierung erleben. Im dritten Band schließlich eskaliert der Widerstand zur offenen Rebellion. Katniss wird zum Symbol des Aufstands, der sich in einem Krieg gegen das ‚Kapitol‘ entlädt. Auch wenn die Geschichte im Großen und Ganzen positiv endet, sind die Traumatisierungen der Hauptfiguren nicht zu leugnen, die gerade daraus entstehen, dass immer wieder die Grenzen zwischen Gut und Böse verschwimmen. Bei all diesen düsteren Themen, die in der heutigen Welt realer scheinen dürften als noch vor fünfzehn Jahren, als der erste Roman der Reihe erschien, bleibt

die Handlung doch so deutlich in einer fiktionalen Welt situiert, dass die Schüler*innen die Differenziertheit der Darstellung von politischer Manipulation, moralischen Dilemmata und menschlichem Leid von möglichen eigenen Erfahrungen trennen können sollten.

Markus Janka und Michael Stierstorfer haben mit ihrem Band eine neue Tür für den Lateinunterricht geöffnet, die in dieselbe Richtung weist wie andere lateinische Versionen populärer Jugendromane, etwa die Harry Potter-Übersetzungen von Peter Needham (zu denen Michael Stierstorfer auch gearbeitet hat). Die lateinischen *Tribute von Panem* haben den Vorteil einer Konzentration auf wenige zentrale Passagen, so dass die Portionierbarkeit für den Unterricht in optimaler Weise gegeben ist. Es bleibt zu hoffen, dass die Gelegenheit von zahlreichen Lehrenden genutzt wird, sei es für eine Stunde oder eine ganze Unterrichtseinheit. Veralten wird der Stoff schon aufgrund seiner antiken Topik nicht, und dank dem kommerziell nach wie vor erfolgreichen Franchise-Universum, das sich aus der Romantrilogie inzwischen entwickelt hat, wird vermutlich auch in Zukunft noch neues Material entstehen.

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