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Katarzyna Szmigiero

Akademia Piotrkowska, Poland

szmigierko@hotmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-00021648 3217

Reflexivity and New Metanarratives. Contemporary English-language Retellings of Classical Mythology

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Abstract: The turn of the millennium has brought a revival of interest in the ancient Greek and Roman texts. Obviously, the legacy of antiquity is a permanent feature of Western literature and visual arts; yet, its contemporary manifestation has taken a novel form, that of a retelling. It is a new trend in which a well-known text belonging to the canon is given an unorthodox interpretation, which exposes the ethnic, class, and gender prejudices present in the original. Mythological retellings are often written in an accessible manner containing features of genre fiction, which makes the revised version palatable to ordinary readers. A characteristic feature of mythic fantasy is the shift of focus from heroic exploits to private life as well as putting previously marginal characters into limelight. The retellings are a consequence of new, reflexive research angles that have appeared in the field of the classics.

Key words: classics, feminism, mythology, retelling

Introduction

The prefix 're-' implies doing something again in order to improve the current situation. The action indicates dissatisfaction with the *status quo* – things were better in the past or they are no longer adequate to present conditions. The need to adapt may refer not only to a material object but also an idea or interpretation of past events. Revisionism is a popular tool within the academia as established narratives reflected upper class, male, and Eurocentric ideologies. They are being supplemented, or even replaced, by looking at history and cultural traditions from the point of view of the previously marginalized people. The ability to reflect upon the past with a critical eye demands from the scholars a double status, they must simultaneously be insiders and outsiders in the field. Their academic credentials must be impeccable, yet their background should make them suspicious towards the mainstream research. The destabilizing interpretation can only come from a person who is capable of “disciplinary reflexivity,” noticing the unfairness of the established modes of thinking and

seeing it as a result of the narrow gaze of the previous generation of scholars (Dean, 2017, p. 2). With the inclusion of individuals of lower class background, women, non-Westerners as well as people of colour into the academia, some fields of study have undergone a dramatic shift in attitudes and a rising level of reflexivity towards the production of knowledge and power dynamics within the discipline. Such is the case with the so-called classics – the study of ancient Greek and Roman history, philosophy, literature and language, mythology and art. The aim of this article is, however, not to look at the novel trends in classical scholarship but rather their popular applications – the rapidly growing genre of mythological retellings within the context of reflexivity understood as a constant circular relationship between the ancient heritage and its reception. How literary output is interpreted and evaluated is influenced by our current cultural values; simultaneously, the interpretation itself can reinforce or challenge these values. It is the “back-and – forth process whereby an account of reality depends on preexisting knowledge of that account. This sense of the concept acknowledges that the knower and the knowledge cannot be fully separated” (Morawski, 2014, p. 1653).

Traditional Approach to the Classics

Sarah B. Pomeroy observes that for a long time the classical research has been dominated by ‘masculinist’ topics, especially “political and military history” as well as “intellectual history” (2015, p. ix). Moreover, biological essentialism would be used to explain the gender divide of the ancient societies, so women’s subjugation to the domestic sphere was seen as natural. Frequently male academics did not dwell on the subject at all nor did they notice that various ancient societies perceived gender differently. Furthermore, researchers often remained blind to the blatant misogyny of many ancient texts – either due to convenience, not to write about a controversial subject, or, more likely, paying lip service to assumptions about women’s ‘natural’ inferiority.

Even now, some female classicist or historians face accusations of being too feminist for their own good. Carolyne Larrington’s *The Feminist*

Companion to Mythology (1992) was republished as *Women's Companion to Mythology* (1997) as the publisher, without consulting the editor, probably decided the word 'feminist' may discourage some audiences.¹ Likewise, Natalie Haynes admits hostility of the academia towards feminist classicists is one of the reasons she never considered a university post.²

Much of classical scholarship also focuses on seemingly gender – and class-neutral 'high-philology' issues such as translation of ancient texts, their composition and transmission, questions of influence and authorship. The scholars engaged in it believed in the illusion of absolute objectivity and universality of their inquiry, forgetting that

when we approach a literary text – and the analysis and interpretation of texts is at the core of any literary-critical project, even the "purely" theoretical one – we inescapably approach it from the point of view of readers embedded in particular historical and cultural frameworks, as well as scholars endowed with certain information (Šebek, 2022, p. 210).

They lacked reflective awareness that to what they paid attention in their study reflected their background and values but excluded a multitude of other viewpoints, equally justified. In other words, the discipline failed to acknowledge "the limits of knowledge specifically associated with the analyst's membership and position in the intellectual field" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39), presenting its findings as unbiased and unrelated to the identity of the scholars. Shelley P. Haley notes, for instance, how racial and gender prejudice of the academics has often impacted their apparently objective research. Comparing the established translation of Roman poems into English with the Latin original, Haley observes how neutral adjectives used in antiquity become racist slurs (Haley, 1993, pp. 30–31). In the most recent translation of the *Iliad* (2023), in the fragment where Helen reproaches herself

¹ Personal communication with the author.

² Haynes, Wednesday lecture at Leventis Gallery, 3.05.2023, Nicosia, Cyprus.

for the carnage of war, Emily Wilson decided to render the enigmatic phrase employed by Homer as “dog-faced” (Wilson, 2023). Other translators, all men, chose to interpret it in terms of sexual immorality without any justification but their own values and assumptions. Helen thus calls herself a “wantom,” “a slut” or a “whore” (Wilson, 2023). It is obvious that the reader is getting a conservative male viewpoint here – the translators assume a woman should not leave her husband and child for a lover and if she does, she is a whore. The term may mean wretched or miserable.

Even a casual glance at contemporary textbooks on ancient literature proves that harmful stereotypes are still entrenched in the field. For instance in Blackwell’s introduction to Homer from 2004, a student may read:

: Hector, Andromache, and Astyanax are a family, contrasted with
 : the fruitless union of Paris and Helen, built on lust, leading nowhere
 : except to death. Their self-indulgence, their slavery to selfish pleasure,
 : will bring the death of the city, a collection of homes and of the families
 : that reside therein (Powell, 2004, p. 79).

Thus, childlessness (whether chosen or involuntary) is perceived as morally suspicious while the economic motivation of the siege is ignored. A personal opinion of the male author of the study is presented as a universal truth expressed by Homer. Michael Silk’s guide to the *Iliad* (2004) does not mention gender or sexual violence even once. Powell’s and Silk’s books are good examples of scholarly works which, apart from information and sound analyses, smuggle biased opinions. Since Greek and Roman mythology and elementary knowledge of classical literature are taught at schools, many androcentric assumptions about class and gender are still transmitted without much reflection.

Page duBois has argued that classics have been held hostage by conservatists, who use ancient history or mythology to support their “reactionary ideas,” such as militarism, imperialism, and misogyny (2001, p. 4). The discipline, for a long time, failed “in attracting women or people of color” (Rabinowitz, 1993, p. 4). It influenced which aspects of the field were highlighted,

which suppressed. Rabinowitz notices that female classicist were acknowledged as long as they did research within the classical mainstream, employing standard methodological tools and working on ideologically neutral subjects (1993, p. 6). If they had already established their credentials, in a gender-neutral areas, they were allowed, occasionally, to deal with gender issues.

Yet, the classical tales themselves contain many rebellious characters or examples of transgression. Also, some classical writers, most notably Euripides, are ambiguous in their attitude to ethnicity and gender. These texts have the potential for a much more radical metanarrative yet such approaches used to be silenced or dismissed.

Metanarrative of Classical Legacy

The accepted manner of approaching works belonging to the literary canon is sometimes referred to as metanarrative – an established way of reacting to a text and its message, a time-honoured interpretation rooted in Western culture. The term is derived from Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). The French critic claimed that:

the 'great narratives' that underpin Western civilization – religion, Marxism, the idea of progress through the application of rational principles, the belief that a completely free market will ultimately benefit us all – have at least theoretically been discredited. All those 'metanarratives' are guilty of having declared themselves universally valid and they have all contributed to the West's oppression, if not actual enslavement, of a good deal of the world. What we need, Lyotard tells us, is 'little narratives' – small-scale, modest systems of belief that are strong enough to guide us, but are always aware of their provisional nature and their local rather than universal validity (Bertens, 2001, pp. 142–143).

Yet, the traditional conviction that Homer's epics express timeless values of honour, codes of proper behaviour, ideals of masculinity, etc. – now

seems preposterous. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were deeply grounded “in social assumptions which were masculinist, misogynistic, socially elitist, imperialistic, and often militaristic and violent” (Stephens & McCallum, 2013, p. 9). Ignoring these aspects of the texts or dismissing their criticism as ahistorical only corroborates them.

Robert Fowler, in the Introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Homer*, says that “for centuries these poems have stirred the emotions, enlightened the minds and ennobled the spirits of their readers who, however much their interpretations differ, all recognise their fellow human beings, hear and comprehend a sublime voice, and feel the redemptive power of civilization” (2006, p. 3). Indeed, raping, plundering cities, and murdering infants and pregnant women are highly ennobling for the spirit – Vladimir Putin’s forces in Ukraine will surely identify with Homer’s heroes. Likewise, Gilbert Highet opens his monumental work, *The Classical Tradition. Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (1949/1985), as follows:

Our modern world is in many ways a continuation of the world of Greece and Rome. [...] But in most of our intellectual and spiritual activities we are the grandsons of the Romans, and the great-grandsons of the Greeks. Other influences joined to make us what we are; but the Greco-Roman strain was one of the strongest and richest. Without it, our civilization would not merely be different. It would be much thinner, more fragmentary, less thoughtful, more materialistic—in fact, whatever wealth it might have accumulated, whatever wars it might have fought, whatever inventions it might have made, it would be less worthy to be called a civilization, because its spiritual achievements would be less great (1985, p. 1).

Yet, we have also inherited gender and class inequality, leniency towards sexual violence, and confusion between love and desire. As Pomeroy reminds her readers “the past illuminates contemporary problems in relationships between men and women” (2015, p. xii). “The way the Greeks conceptualized [women and non-Greeks] has echoed down the ages” (Rabinowitz, 2008, p. 86), often with disastrous consequences. Thus, a critical look at the classical

heritage is necessary. Stephens and McCallum see the clichés about the “timelessness and universal significances” of myths as well as their forming a “part of ‘our’ heritage” as “deeply problematic” (2013, p. 63).

Realizing how dominant metanarratives affect the reaction to the classics is connected with the notion of reflexivity as it implies continuous questioning of previous assumptions (that is, established models of interpretation) as new generations of scholars and artists are exposed to classical legacy. Their background and sensitivity undermines the established metanarratives in a constant “boomerang effect,” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s apt term (2004, p. 4). Yet, the boomerang is slightly different with each throw and return. As the way the society changes, our response to the classics is adequately modified.

Feminist Criticism and the Classics

The most conspicuously offensive aspects of Greek mythology are the manner in which women are presented and the attitudes to sexual violence. First of all, female characters are predominantly marginal: they might assist the hero to be abandoned by him when they are no longer needed or are a trophy received for heroic exploits. Second, they are also limited to their sexual functions as objects of erotic desire and mothers of future heroes. Finally, women are often depicted as monstrous. Innumerable terrifying creatures of Greek mythology are female: Hydra, Scylla, Gorgons, Harpies, Sirens, or the Furies. The first woman ever, Pandora, is an artificial creature made by the gods to bring misery into the world. Apart from the frequent depiction of female monsters, there are a few ‘monstrous’ women in Greek mythology – that is individuals or whole societies that defy the social norms and transgress gender roles. In the Greek imagination, women opposing their traditional functions were a fearful abomination. The best example is the society of Amazons, fierce female warriors living outside male control, who take lovers for pleasure yet do not want to be wives, who hunt and fight like men and make their own laws (Haynes, 2020, pp. 113–114). For the Greeks, the Amazons were an example of a hypothetical society, “a negative illustration of what might happen if warrior

women were in control” (Lefkowitz, 1986, p. 19), “a perversion of all that is proper and correct, a threat to the family” (Powell, 2002, p. 165). If individual women are concerned, the most terrifying are the depictions of Medea or Clytemnestra. They “express different notions about their primary role in life,” act upon their dissatisfaction and bring destruction not only to themselves but their entire families (Lefkowitz, 1986, p. 52). A woman should not criticize her husband for any infidelity, assume his hegemony as the head of the household or follow her passions.

Another important aspect of classical mythology that attracts the attention of feminist critics is the treatment of sexual violence. Mark Morford and Robert J. Lenardon admit that ancient texts do not differentiate between abduction, rape, and love (2003, p. 20). They give numerous examples in which the word ‘rape’ signifies ordinary courtship in which both partners willingly participate as well as those in which violence or trickery is employed. It can be argued that this distinction, fundamental for modern readers, reflects the customs prevailing in antiquity. Brides often met their husbands on their wedding day, were taken to their grooms’ homes and subjected to an intercourse with a stranger (Doherty, 2003, p. 25). A carefree childhood reached its irrevocable end and the obligations of an adult woman had to be embraced, though initially a girl might have been reluctant. Many scholars argue that the abduction/rape myths should be interpreted figuratively as female rite of passage stories (Doherty 2003, pp. 24–25).

Accusations of Ahistoricism

Those opposing feminist ways of looking at the classics often accuse the new generation of scholars of ahistoricism. They claim imposing contemporary values and sensitivities to a remote culture which cherished different norms of behaviour is inappropriate and leads to biased judgments. Yet, it must be remembered that Homer’s works as well as the poems belonging to the so-called Epic Cycle described events that supposedly took place in the Bronze Age, yet were composed and transmitted orally several centuries later, to be

finally written down not by their original authors. Furthermore, the myths about the Trojan war were undertaken by playwrights of the classical period and later Roman writers. They were also an immensely popular subject in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Needless to say, the first book ever to be printed in English was *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (1464), a French romance translated and published by William Caxton (Hughes, 2006, p. 7). Each period added its own interpretations, explanations, events and characters, not to mention the understanding of the moral aspect of the tale. As Josef Šebek explains, analyzing the role of reflexivity in literary studies, “In Bourdieu’s theory an object can only be understood on the basis of its relationship to the human agent who produced it (typically its author), or to the successive agents who surround it with further discourse (critics, but also publishers, etc.)” (2022, p. 215). In case of classical heritage, we deal with multiple layers of authors, critics and interpreters. The way the story and its protagonists is depicted reflects the values and preoccupations of the period in which myths were re-adapted, not the original 1200–1300 B. C. E. Sometimes these moral assessments contradict one another. The shifting attitudes to gender roles are of primary importance here.

The way we look at female mythological characters mirrors our ideas about female sexuality, gender roles, fidelity and motherhood as well as human agency. Contemporary authors do not attempt anything more scandalous or sacrilegious in their retellings, as each period took their liberties with the ancient tale, adding its own flavour. They simply hijack Homer and his successors once again – but since they themselves retold older stories, they cannot complain.

Retellings

The growing dissatisfaction of modern readers, writers and educators with the dominant metanarrative of the classics has recently resulted in a rapidly growing number of retellings, which are generally understood as novel ways of telling a known story, making familiar unfamiliar through shifting points

of view, giving voice to marginal characters, focusing on different events or suggesting different motivation for characters' actions. Last but not least, "the potential moral impact on audiences" must be mentioned (Stephens & McCallum, 2013, p. ix). The aim of the retelling is to subvert the traditional metanarrative and offer new interpretative frameworks. Thus, their great majority is revisionist in character. They are often written in an accessible manner and contain features of genre fiction, especially fantasy and romance, thus making the revised version palatable to a reader without classical education. It is the "attitudes and ideologies pertaining at the cultural moment in which the retelling is produced" that give each new version its unique dimension (Stephens & McCallum, 2013, p. ix).

Though the term retelling is far from precise, as any new version of a familiar story can be labelled and marketed as a retelling, it should be seen as different from adaptations. Adaptation suggests a change of medium or genre while the modification of the metanarrative is of secondary importance. Thus, Wolfgang Petersen's film *Troy* (2004) is definitely an adaptation. Yet, despite many major changes in the plot and the elimination of supernatural agency, it is still rather reactionary in spirit. For instance, it omits several notable female protagonists, gives an insipid portrayal of Helen, and focuses on political and military themes. It also idealizes the relationship between Achilles and Briseis. Some adaptations of the Persephone myth, like *GoofyGodCartoons* or *Lore Olympus* comic, are both adaptations and updates, moving the action to modern times. The musical *Hadestown* (2006) is also an example of an update adaptation.

The enormous popularity of *Troy* rekindled the interest in new versions of classical mythology. In 2005, a Scottish book publisher, Canongate, initiated a series of myth-inspired books, commonly referred to as Canongate Myth Series.³ Most of the novels are based on Greek mythology, but there are also a few Bible retellings as well as stories inspired by other world mythologies.

³ <https://canongate.co.uk/collections/the-myths/> The idea behind the project was later imitated by the Hogarth Shakespeare series (2016) or The Austen Project by HarperCollins (2011). Though called retellings these books were all commissioned as contemporary updates based on similar motifs, not retellings in the narrow sense.

Nevertheless, the term retelling might be misleading here – the texts inspired by Greek myths are modern stories based on similar motifs, loosely inspired by the classics. Had Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) been not published under the Myth Series label, few readers would be aware of its similarity to the Iphis myth. Only Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005) meets the criteria of a retelling understood as presenting a cherished story from a different point of view, offering a novel interpretation as it challenges the metanarrative of Penelope as patient, loyal, loving, yet a little boring. The retellings I will focus on in this article are all set in the Bronze Age and follow, more or less closely, the versions of myths known from Homer, Greek and Roman drama or Ovid's poetry. They drastically depart, however, from the established interpretation of these stories, challenging the traditional metanarrative. Thus, I use the term retelling in a narrow sense of the word, as a text closely based on earlier sources yet infused with modern sensitivity. The authors of the retellings consciously engage themselves with challenging the traditional approach to the classics, introducing contemporary concerns and their own experiences as women. They do not pretend to be neutral transmitters of objective knowledge but reflexive interpreters and re-evaluators of the cherished tales.

Retellings of mythology had appeared earlier – for instance the German author Christina Wolf published *Cassandra* in 1983 and *Medea* in 1996. Italian writers have also taken up mythological themes, often giving them unorthodox treatment like Luigi Malerba in *Itaca per sempre* (1997, translated into English in 2019). There were also a few romances dealing with the love life of Helen of Troy, such as John Erskine's *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1925). Yet, the launch of the Canongate project renewed the interest in new versions of mythology. There is a constantly growing demand and supply for them. Many retellings are marketed as trilogies: the *Golden Apple Trilogy* by Emily Hauser, the *Grecian Women* series by Hannah Lynn, *Homer's Wives* by Naouma Kourti, *Homeric Chronicles* by Janell Rhiannon and the yet unfinished *Songs of Penelope* by Clare North can serve as examples. Stephen Fry's non-fiction retellings of mythology, *Mythos* (2017), *Heroes* (2018) and *Troy* (2020), also come as a trio, yet the books are more like a chatty introduction to various myths, not a coherent narrative. The author's celebrity status contributed to

the books' popularity among ordinary readers unfamiliar with the classics. Some authors, like Madeline Miller or Jennifer Saint do not write cycles but specialize in the genre.

Some of the retellings are penned by classicist, such as Emily Hauser, Natalie Haynes, Madeline Miller, and Claire Heywood.⁴ Hauser combines a career as an academic with creative writing, while Haynes writes, apart from fiction, also books popularizing the ancient world. Their views and sensibilities, visible in the retellings, depart from the conventional approach to classical heritage. Ironically, feminist classicists act as a Trojan horse, dismantling the conservative discipline from within. A few retellings were written by authors with established reputations (Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, Pat Baker) yet many authors are little known and publish independently. Some of these books are masterpieces, many are 'disposable' pulp fiction for lovers of historical romances and fantasy.

The most popular retellings deal with the Trojan war and its aftermath. Yet, there are also notable versions of the canonical accounts of the story of Medusa, Medea, Atalanta, and the Amazons. Retellings of myths are a unique mixture of fantasy, period romance, and alternate history fiction. Sometimes they are referred to as mythic fiction or mythological fantasy, yet popular literature tends to be fluid – and ephemeral – if generic conventions are concerned (Murphy, 2017, pp. 1–11). These novels are not particularly original and seem to be commercially driven. Even their covers follow a certain pattern to signal to the readers that they belong to the same category of fiction: there is usually a stylized picture resembling a classical sculpture or a relief, showing a woman or a group of women, sometimes a vase, columns, olive or vine leaves with a Greek border pattern.

⁴ Male classicists also write popular accounts of ancient history or mythology. It is worth mentioning here Valerio Massimo Manfredi, an Italian writer whose *The Last Legion* became a popular film in 2007. Mark Knowles, the author of the *Blades of Bronze* trilogy (*Argo* published in 2021, *Jason and Hades* in 2023), studied Classics and worked as a teacher. Their focus, however, is more on action/adventure/heroic fantasy, not revisionist retelling.

What all these novels have in common is that they retell a known tale from the perspective of marginal female characters (or male, in the case of Miller's *A Song of Achilles*) presenting their plight in a manner consistent with contemporary feminist sensitivity. They focus on family ties, especially the experience of sisterhood and motherhood, relationships with men, who are often abusive, and an attempt to find a safe haven within a deeply misogynist society. Though the literary value of some of these text may be questionable, they meet the emotional needs of their readers in accessible prose. After all, most readers are not academics, not to mention classicists, and their expectations towards what constitutes a good reading matter differ from those of professional scholars or critics. Retellings aptly voice contemporary anxieties regarding gender roles and cultural conditioning of women towards passivity and men towards aggression linking them to myths.

Needless to say, the authors of the most recent retellings are women with strong feminist sympathies. The ancient versions of myths were written down predominantly by men. In fact, only a handful of ancient poetry written by women has survived till our times (Doherty, 2003, p. 21). The major recipients of literary texts, actors performing on stage as well as the members of the audience, were male. These texts are a product of "an androcentric community" (Stephens & McCallum, 2013, p. 64). Many aspects of female experience must have eluded the male writers. Thus, the contemporary trend of rewriting the myths attempts to fill that gap.

To illustrate how the modern authors from English speaking countries reflect upon the classical mythology, I will take a closer look at a few notable retellings as they enter into dialogue with Homeric texts exposing their masculinist military ethos, objectification of women and attitudes to sexual violence.

The first issue that must be addressed is style. Homer's epics as well as the majority of Greek tragedies (with the exception of Euripides) were written in deliberately archaic, inaccessible language and most translators attempt to duplicate the lofty diction. Yet, Pat Barker in *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *Women of Troy* (2021) de-inflates the loftiness of the *Iliad* using "demotic register" (Stephens & McCullum, 2013, p. 11) – every-day, mundane,

occasionally obscene vocabulary and shot sentences. The word 'fuck' is more often employed than the fixed epithets of 'rose-fingered', 'swift-footed' or 'mighty'. English in most translations of Homer is a language that was never spoken, and "was written only for the purpose of translating Homer and retelling Bible stories" (Petr Dickinson, quoted in Stephens and McCullum, 2013, p. 30). As Sophie Gilbert noted, on the surface Barker's tone clashes with the noble, lofty expressions found in Homer (Gilbert, 2018). Simultaneously, however, the two epics "were not composed in a single Greek dialect, but in an artificial hodge-podge of dialects transcending any specific local culture" (Blondell et al., 1999, p. 6). His diction glamorizes war and glosses over its brutality: sweat, fester, blood, excrement, rotting bodies... Though, in Gilbert's words, Barker's "anachronisms that can be jarring" they "also force readers to compare the misogyny of ancient Greece with the misogyny of the present" (Gilbert, 2018). The words Briseis hears, being inspected as a captive, is "Hey, will you look at the knockers on that" (Barker, 2019, p. 20). She feels reduced to being flesh – like innumerable contemporary women having their bosom inspected by males in the street, pub, beach, swimming pool or male students in a school corridor. When Achilles calls his Myrmidons "lads" (Barker, 2019, p. 22) he behaves like a football hooligan talking to his mates on a Friday night. Yet, as Barker recalls in the motto to the first novel, taken from Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), the story of the *Iliad* is like a barrroom brawl, with two most beefy men fighting over a girl. "We do not find in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* low or indecent language" (Griffin, 2006, p. 158) but it is hard to imagine common soldiers or their commanders using dactylic hexameter during feasts or intercoursed with slaves. It is Homer's diction that defies the realities of war, not Barker's. Other novelist, such as Miller or Atwood, use less colloquial language, but definitely reject the bombastic tone associated with the classics. Fry's language is also filled with contemporary colloquial expressions often creating a humorous breach of decorum between low style and subject matter traditionally viewed as sublime.

Another important modification is connected with the notion of the hero. Traditionally, mythological warriors are seen as embodiment of bravery, fitness, military skill, loyalty to their country and leader, etc. They fight

for eternal glory and honour but also the spoils of war. Women, with their mundane domestic tasks are too passive to be seen as heroic. But who is a hero, asks Calliope in Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019):

Is Oenone less of a hero than Menelaus? He loses his wife so he stirs up an army to bring her back to him, costing countless lives and creating countless widows, orphans and slaves. Oenone loses her husband and she raises their son. Which of those is the more heroic act? (Haynes, 2019, p. 177)

The quiet ability to endure and care about others is juxtaposed with murderous rage. Haynes also observes the impact of men's eagerness to fight on the life of their wives. According to Homer, Helen is embarrassed by Paris' cowardice after he runs away during his duel with Menelaus. He survives but his lack of courage is seen as unmasculine. In many retellings women question the use of their husbands' valour. Leodamia, the widow of the first Greek casualty in Troy, ponders: "Who could love a coward, she had once heard a woman say. Laodamia knew the answer. Someone for whom the alternative is loving a corpse" (Haynes, 2019, p. 117). Miller also challenges the notion of the hero presenting the modest Patroclus as honourable and protective.

Last but not least, contemporary retellings question the omnipresent objectification of women and connect the ancient misogyny with contemporary feminist concerns such as attitudes to unwanted sexual advances, rape and pregnancy. For example, myths do not say whether Zeus raped Leda or seduced her as a swan. Her feelings about the act itself, her attitude to her semi-divine child and the reaction of her husband are never mentioned. It is assumed being chosen by Zeus is always a rare privilege and the mortal woman must feel proud. Yet, in Amanda Elyot' *Memoirs of Helen of Troy* (2005) Leda's husband shuns her, blaming her for the rape, so Leda eventually commits suicide. In Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta* (2022), little Helen carves her mother's affection but Leda is unable to love the child whose presence constantly reminds her of the sexual trauma to which she was subjected. On the other hand, Fry's account trivializes the experience. Leda is relaxing with her eyes closed after her husband has made love to her. When

she feels being touched again, she assumes her husband is “very frisky,” which is rather out of character as apparently he is not known for being an ardent lover (Fry, 2020, p. 68). Yet the body on top of her feels unfamiliar – “Tyndareus was hirsute, but no more hairy than the average Greek male. He certainly wasn’t furry. But no, this wasn’t *fur* that she could feel all over her flesh, it was something else. It was... Surely not?... Could it be *feathers*?” (Fry, 2020, p. 68, emphasis in the original). He does not devote even one line to Leda’s reaction – shock? disgust? pleasure? Fry does not approach the scene realistically as a real act of an animal forcing itself onto a woman. For him it is yet another quirkiness for which those crazy Greeks were known, not an act of violence.

The most powerful example of neglecting female experience in ancient texts is the famous scene in which Priam, heartbroken after the death of Hector and by the bestial manner in which Achilles mutilates his son’s corpse, sneaks into the Greek camp to beg for the return of Hector’s body. The old king says:

∴ “That I am wretcheder, and bear that weight of miseries
 ∴ That never man did, my curs’d lips enforc’d to kiss that hand
 ∴ That slew my children” (*The Iliad*, book 24, lines 449–451).

For him, his act of submission is unique in the history of humanity. Yet, as Briseis observes “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” (Barker, 2019, p. 267). For Priam, women do not count as human even though he probably realizes slavery will soon be the fate of his wives, daughters and daughters in law.

Homer does not mention the fate of Briseis in the *Iliad* since when the poem finishes Achilles is still alive. Barker assumes she is pregnant with his child – most Trojan ‘brides of the spear’ ended up impregnated by their captors. She discusses the issue of pregnancy which erases the woman’s identity making her a container for the child she is to bear. As soon as it becomes obvious Briseis is expecting Achilles’s child, she observes that “people’s attitudes to [her] shifted.” The Myrmidons “who apparently could see inside [her] womb” are certain it must be Achilles’s son she is carrying.

At times [she] had the feeling that what [she] carried inside [her] was not a baby at all, but Achilles himself, miniaturized, reduced to the size of a homunculus, but still identifiably Achilles; and fully armed (Barker, 2021, p. 19).

The pregnancy changes her status, from a disposable whore who can be swapped between men to an object of veneration – strangers touch her stomach “not in a sexual, predatory way, but as a mark of [their] loyalty to the bloodline of Achilles” (Barker, 2021, p. 57). Previously she was groped for sexual thrills, now she is “the casket that contained the crown jewels” (Barker, 2021, p. 57). Though Briseis benefits from it, she is aware it is the unborn child that matters to everyone, not her. Her observations echo the contemporary discourse of anti-abortionists, who often value the fetus over the rights of the mother, even if the child is the result of rape. Barker reflectively imposes contemporary sensitivity on the ancient myth, yet her approach is psychologically plausible. Briseis calls the fetus a “a parasitic infestation” that has taken over her body and identity (Barker, 2021, p. 57). Her pregnancy also makes her painfully aware she as a person hardly matters, she is just a container for a life that even before birth is so much superior to her own. If it had not been for her womb, she would have been given away as a prize during Achilles’s funeral games. Instead, she was married to a Myrmidon of Achilles’ choice (Barker 2021, p. 171).

The discrepancies between the traditional accounts of the Trojan war and the contemporary retellings incorporate previously absent female perspective into the narratives. The authors focus on marginalized characters as well as non-military exploits, showing how war affects women’s lives, subjecting them to slavery, rape and unwanted pregnancy. Simultaneously, however, the experience of fictitious characters from mythology uncannily echoes realities of contemporary life, entering into a dialogue with the past. According to Rabinowitz, “some will continue to look to antiquity for the origins of the glory of Western civilization, while others [like authors of the retellings] will look to antiquity as a formative moment of misogyny” (1993, p. 7).

Conclusions

Women writers, “outsiders and latecomers” (Stephens & McCallum, 2013, p. ix) in the myth re-production, have offered a novel angle from which they look at the classical heritage, giving myths a degree of “contemporaneity” (Purkiss, 1992, p. 441). Using mythological contexts to discuss contemporary issues also reminds the readers of the oppressive continuity of gender expectations. The classical ideals of femininity (submissiveness, unquestioning loyalty to a male guardian, devotion to motherhood and domesticity) as well as depictions of behaviour seen as transgressive does not depart from contemporary norms.

The recent popularity of mythological retellings raises several questions about the place of the so-called ‘canonical’ literary texts. On the one hand, new generations of readers need to be familiarised with them. After all, they are a part of “social heritage, transmitting many of a culture’s central values and assumptions and a body of a shared allusions and experiences” (Stephens & McCallum, 2013, p. 3). Simultaneously, however, the very values seem not only to be dated but also blatantly cruel, arbitrary and morally wrong. They are deeply offensive to women, whose sheer humanity is questioned. They glorify physical violence and blind obedience to superiors, who are defined in terms of birth and wealth, not ability. They endorse theft and plunder. Furthermore, since they have been revered for millennia, they have undoubtedly contributed to acceptance of some behaviors. Why raping captives and murdering civilians is an heroic act if committed by Agamemnon, but a war crime if the victims are Bosnians or Tutsi? How to fight sexual harassment if reading lists at schools and galleries are literally filled with eroticized rape scenes? “Our ideas about sexuality are not natural or inevitable; they are the legacy of a particular historical development, always in the process of change” as duBois argues (2001, pp. 75–76). The same applies to the reluctance of seeing women take prominent roles in the public sphere and men becoming more involved in domestic affairs (Rabinowitz, 2008, p. 87). The way we reflect upon such themes now interpreting and appropriating mythological themes – whether eroticizing them, sanitizing them or exposing their cruelty – influences everyday life.

Thus, we not only need new metanarratives with which to interpret the old texts but also new versions of the classic stories that supplement the biased narratives of the past. In 2013, Stephens and McCullum speculated that a shift in interpretative frameworks might change our perception of literary classics.

When the new metanarratives are acutely incompatible with the older metanarratives that have shaped a given story, the outcome can be a moment of cultural crisis. For example, the modern women's movement, and feminist social and critical analysis in particular, has produced a bundle of metanarratives so incompatible with the metanarratives which have informed many traditional stories in the past that if feminist metanarratives become socially dominant – and hence implied and invisible – many traditional stories will be rendered unreadable and beyond recuperation (2013, p. 9).

Their forecast has been proving correct. The number of popular retellings of mythology as well as new approaches to the classics from the academia are a proof one cannot ignore. They try to replace the traditional masculinist values with more humanistic, inclusive ones. Though the retellings are authored by women with feminist sympathies, it would be a simplification to suggest they focus only on women's point of view. Most narratives show the negative impact of the militaristic message of the Bronze Age also on men.

Though retellings reverse the moral order of the ancient tale, the very fact that contemporary writers chose the classical topic stresses the importance of the original. Retelling is both an act of rebellion but also a homage. It helps to “construct, preserve, and perpetuate particular forms of cultural knowledge, [thus], in their assumptions and reassertions of canonicity retold stories are deeply implicated in this process” (Stephens & McCallum, 2013, p. 21). Retellings do not try to push the classics out of the canon but, acknowledging their indisputable position in the Western heritage, yet propose a less obsequious attitude to the values expressed in mythological tales, especially their role in upholding “national, gender, and class hegemonies” (Stephens & McCallum, 2013, p. 22). In order to do that a reflective look at the classics is needed, one that does not fear accusations of ahistoricism or inaccuracy, as these are often the tools that help to gloss over misogyny and injustice.

Interpreting myths as allegories or accepting their views on violence as simply reflecting the values of their times blind the readers to the injustices inherent in them and, consequently, to their legacy in modern times. The need to reflect on established metanarratives offers new interpretations of mythology but also proves the constant fascination with myths and their incredible malleability.

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