



## Editorial: “Myth and Women: Virtuous and Perverse”

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For reasons which various sciences have explained for many decades, women have been historically considered a paradigm of virtue or perversion. In literature, art allergic to transparency, these feminine stereotypes have often been conveyed through mythical stories. Firstly, let us look at the suitability of myth to transmit these clichés; then we will present the broad field of study that features this topic.

Myth corresponds to the figures of major structures, which assign transformations to the content in a text. Allegory is therefore a literary device of great importance in the generation, dissemination and interpretation of myths: it disguises, under an innocuous, unusual or enchanting appearance, realities whose crude expression can be prosaic, bothersome or, in some cases, unattainable through literal expression. Technically, it is a “continuous metaphor”, made up of metaphors and comparisons that tend to replace the apparent or literal sense of a text with a deeper or “allegorical” meaning.

Most of the mythical texts lend themselves to an allegorical reading. The purifying virtue of the flood through aquatic symbolism, the vivifying power of the Grail through the sanguineous symbolism or the beautiful quality of Helen of Troy, possess a transcendent value that goes beyond the mere symbolic scope of water, blood or body. These three body elements purify, vivify or shine for being, respectively, water of God, blood of Christ or daughter of Zeus (Helen, Ἑλένη meaning torch). These sacred values revert to a reinterpretation of the various facets of humankind: philosophy, morality, psychology, society, economics, politics or religion thus acquire a dimension profoundly marked by myth.

An example can help us gain a better understanding of the allegorical meaning that surrounds mythological texts; it will guide us, moreover, to focus on the monographic theme of this volume 11 of the *Amaltea* journal. The *Ballet comique de la Reine* was celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1581 at the Louvre for the marriage between the Duke de Joyeuse and Marguerite de Vaudemont, sister of Queen Louise de Lorraine-Vaudémont, in an extravagant spectacle of poetry, song, dance, music and scenery. Circe has defeated all of her opponents, including Mercury, but nothing can be done to Minerva, who comes to restore order and harmony. At the end of the volume edited for such a lavish occasion, after precious illustrations of characters with all their court, the choreographer Balthasar de Beaujoyeux—following the Scotsman Gordon, gentleman of the king’s chambers—explains the “Allegory of Circe” in these words:

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In order to understand the allegory of Circe, it is important to consider that, generally, all the allegories of poetic fiction refer to the natural and moral philosophy, or supernatural and divine philosophy, or a combination of both. The specific allegory of Circe, in accordance with Homer's description in Book 10 of his *Odyssey*, seems to be able to refer partly to that which is divine and supernatural, and that which is natural and moral<sup>2</sup>.

Beaujoureux continues by explaining the (erroneous) etymology of the name Circe ("mix"), her genealogy (daughter of Helios and the Oceanid Perseis), the link to Aphrodite's voluptuousness and an inference about the ultimate meaning of the enchantress:

[...] It is not without reason to take Circe for the general desire that reigns and dominates over everything that has life, a combination of divinity and sensitivity, and produces very different effects leading some to virtue and others to vice. This corresponds with the fact that she is described as a Queen who has at her service and submission the nymphs and beasts: the virtues are represented by the nymphs, who participate in divinity, and the vice and sensuality, by the wild beasts<sup>3</sup>.

The moral interpretation extends for a page to explain the significance of the seduction of the (captive) crew and Ulysses' resistance thanks to "moly" (a symbol of reason and divine spark in the human soul)<sup>4</sup>. This "potent herb" given by Hermes to Ulysses is an antidote (φάρμακον) against the poison that the sorceress puts in the hero's food. The hackneyed allegory is a form and a way of interpreting the meaning of mythical texts. It coexists with parables and fables, with all kinds of exemplification in general. What defines the literary event is the assumption of a way to assign a theme, the linguistic embodiment to explain the world: Circe symbolises vital desire in its two aspects: divine (the nymphs) and animal (the beasts). It is worth questioning, from a myth criticism perspective, why Circe and the nymphs or the animals (but not Ulysses or his crew) represent the compendium of virtues or the den of vices, why a sorceress (and not a sorcerer) first transforms and then seduces the sailors with her nymphs; why, ultimately, it is usually a woman and not a man who embodies the virtuous and vicious aspects of humankind.

Examples of this unequal treatment between female and male characters are legion. In the story of Atreides, Electra, vengeful soul of parricide, always wins the public or reader's favour thanks to her strong and flawless character<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps for this reason she has become an exemplary, heroic character. In *The Libation Bearers*, Aeschylus has left, immortalised, the dramatic sequence of myth: after the murder of Agamemnon, Orestes returns to his father's house and meets with his sister Electra, always expectant character; after the sibling reunion, Orestes kills Aegisthus and

<sup>2</sup> B. de Beaujoureux, *Balet Comique de la Roynne*, Paris, Adrian le Roy *et al.*, 1582, p. 74. (Our translation).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> "So speaking Hermes, the slayer of Argos pulled the herb from the ground, and gave it to me, showing me its nature: it was black at the root, but its flower was like milk. *The gods call it Moly: it is hard for mortal men to dig it up, but the gods can do all things.*" Homer, *The Odyssey*, x, 302-305. Hermes gained his epic epithet Argeiphontes ("ἀργεῖφόντης") when he killed the giant Argos with a stone who guarded Io in Hera's Argive sanctuary, *vid.* Apolodoro, *Biblioteca mitológica*, II, 3, J. García Moreno (ed.), p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Vid.* P. Brunel, "Retour à Électre", *Dix mythes au féminin*, Paris, Jean Maisonneuve, 1999, pp. 99-134.

Clytemnestra. In his *Elektra*, composed for the opera by Richard Strauss (1909), Hofmannsthal respects this “scene”, with slight variations (the death of Clytemnestra precedes that of Aegisthus, like in Sophocles’ piece). The Electra of Giraudoux’s homonymous piece (1937) presents an extremely rigorous heroine: against Aegisthus’ bourgeois policy, which he would be contented with defending Argos from the Corinthians, the heroine prefers the destruction of the city. Six years later, Sartre’s Electra adopts the intransigent attitude of a young woman who makes an extreme decision in a battle of an unexpected outcome. The movie *Elektra, My Love* (Miklós Jancsó, *Szerelmem, Elektra*, 1974) highlights identical problems with the communist state. A fundamental element of the character is her ambivalence regarding matricide, central element of the plot. Her constant instigation of her brother and her exultation after the murder (Hofmannsthal) are compensated by her remorse (Sartre); Electra simultaneously wants and rejects revenge; this also attracts the benevolence of the public and the readers.

We could focus on matricide from the victim’s point of view: In *Apologie pour Clytemnestre* (2004), Simone Bertière gives Agamemnon’s wife a voice, so that she shares her view of the facts and is exonerated from regicide. This action –contributing to the female perception of the world– is characteristic of modernity. Many female authors, logically reluctant to an exclusively masculine view of history and literature, adopt the woman’s perspective who, until now, was just a mere observer of the plot.

A paradigmatic case is Penelope. In *Ithaca* (Francisca Aguirre), the heroine devotes herself to her key role: waiting on the small island for the traveller Ulysses and noting, on his return, the changes through the years. The poem “The Welcome” makes it clear:

At my table Circe is seated with her mermaids,  
Nausicaä with her youth.  
With him, like a trace of nostalgia  
that seems like guilt  
are the lives and the faces of the women he loved,  
the implacable charm of what he risked  
and the joyful abandonment  
beyond feelings and morals<sup>6</sup>.

When the hero returns, there is hardly any news to tell him (“Ithaca’s story may be summed up in everyday occurrences”). The world is outside of Ithaca, the husband brings it, who does not come alone... And Penelope then revives all her years of loyalty which come across, suddenly, as an unspeakable frustration. In order to know this, it was necessary that another voice, other than Ulysses’, tell us the other side of the story.

Few contemporary mythical stories have seen the success of *The Penelopiad* (Margaret Atwood, 2005). The patient wife recounts the years of her childhood, her difficult relationship with the hundred suitors who pursue her, and –according to the news that is coming– Ulysses’ events, accompanied by her twelve maidens, cruelly hanged on the arrival of the hero for their alleged betrayal. Here we also witness the other side of the story, which only Penelope lived, and Homer ignored:

<sup>6</sup> Francisca Aguirre, *Ithaca*, Ana Valverde Osan (transl.), Rochester, NY, BOA Editions, 2004, p. 47.

What could I do to stop these aristocratic young thugs? They were at the age when they were all swagger, so appeals to their generosity, attempts to reason with them, and threats of retribution alike had no effect. [...] Telemachus was too young to oppose them. [...] The men who might have been loyal to Odysseus had sailed off with him to Troy. [...] I knew it would do no good to try to expel my unwanted suitors. [...] For this reason I pretended to view their wooing favourably, in theory<sup>7</sup>.

Daughter of a Naiad, Penelope knows thanks to her mother and from her own experience that when faced with obstacles it is better to behave like the water: escape and flow around them. Only then, with prudence, she achieves her goals, while mindful of the murmurings that her apparent behaviour could unleash. As a result of this game of mirrors, the reader (and the public: the novel has been dramatized on many occasions) gains another perspective, no less important than the traditional one, and questions the latest principles of the concept such as justice and truth.

There are hardly any mythical heroines in the Middle Ages (Morgan the Fairy may be one), let alone in modern times: no woman in the mythical narratives of Faust, Frankenstein or Dracula reaches the status of a heroine or mythical character. Better billboards have enjoyed some of Don Juan's lovers (Isabela, Tisbea, Ana de Ulloa, Arminta, Elvira...), who are not mythical characters. This would confirm our hypothesis that the true modern myths of the West are men who embody an open rebellion against God: of knowledge (Faust), of love (Don Juan), of human creation (Frankenstein) or of life (Dracula).

Ultimately, the attraction and repulsion that inspire mythical female characters deserve an in-depth study.

*Amaltea, Revista de Mitocrítica* publishes these original articles that study the relationship between myth and women, paying particular attention to the moral perception of the latter (sometimes virtuous, at other times perverse), in literature and art since 1900. Authors have felt free to choose whatever texts, literary genres or epistemological treatment they have considered suitable for their study.

As usual, articles on any mythical themes in contemporary literature and art (since 1900 onwards) have also be considered for publication in the "Miscellany" section. We have also accepted "Reviews" on publications related to mythology.

*P.S. If you hold a PhD and wish to be a part of the Amaltea Reviewers Team, please notify [amaltea@filol.ucm.es](mailto:amaltea@filol.ucm.es) (certificate included).*

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, Edinburgh, Canongate, 2005, xiv, pp. 107-108.