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GREEK
MYTHOLOGY

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Edited by

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13: Women and Greek Myth

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What I want is a mythology so huge
That settling on its grassy bank
(Which may at first seem ordinary)
You catch sight of the frog, the stone,
The dead minnow jewelled with flies,
And remember all at once
The things you had forgotten to imagine.

<div align="right">Rebecca Elson</div>

The question of how to characterise the relation of women and myth is primarily one of definition. For just as myth is widely acknowledged to be a problematic category that signifies quite differently at various historical moments, so too the designation of woman has no clear definition outside of specific cultural formations. There is an aspect of the combination of women *and* myth that complicates the issue still further: are we concerned here with myths in which women are regarded as the main protagonists or myths that have been creatively interpreted by or for women? Although both have continuously provided a resource with which writers and artists have explored the relations between the sexes, either within the landscape of myth itself, or in relation to the particular social and historical contexts of its various instantiations, the latter category has become particularly associated with the feminist interpretation of myth and thus with its explicit positioning as either liberating or oppressive for women. This essay will explore some of the tensions surrounding the description of stories about women as being either 'pro' or 'anti' women and the ideological entailments of such descriptions. It will also argue that the way the category of myth itself is conceptualised has a direct bearing on

what it is perceived to be able to say 'about women.' There is a sense in which the categories 'myth' and 'women' ought both to be regarded as imaginative constructs.[1]

Myth has generally been negatively defined against other forms of discourse, against history, philosophy, theology, or science, and it has been claimed that it was the Greeks themselves who invented this kind of taxonomy. Marcel Detienne uses as an example the genealogy of criticism of the oldest Homeric stories and argues in *The Creation of Mythology* that the single most important reason that an individual or a group stood outside the corpus of myth and commented upon it was that it had been scandalised. When practitioners of philosophy and theology felt themselves under attack, they reinterpreted myth using strategies such as allegory and euhemerism, rather than rejecting the offending stories outright. The debate concerning whether the resulting interpretations constitute new versions of the original scandalising myth or interpretations of it continued and continues to participate in the process of defining myth negatively against what it is not, although these days it tends to be resolved by a recourse to pragmatism. A scholarly consensus may highlight the provisionality of any definition of myth in the diversity of narrative contexts that existed in ancient Greece,[2] yet a graded nomenclature indicates the scale of value used to differentiate between different kinds of stories: a narrative in Apollodorus is likely to be designated a 'version' of a Greek myth; Ovid and Servius may also offer us 'versions' but may alternatively be involved in 'interpretation'; Frazer and Lévi-Strauss without doubt 'interpret,' whereas Hélène Cixous and Donna Haraway are more likely to 'appropriate' (where the term appropriate signifies an account of a myth that overtly displays its ideological commitments).

Even within the time-frame accepted as 'the ancient world' it is a far from simple procedure to identify which narratives should be regarded as constituting a particular myth and which should be excluded for not being sufficiently or primarily 'mythological.' If we take as an example the myth of Atalanta, there are traces of her story across the whole tradition, from the earliest literate sources onwards, and yet some of these traces are from sections of fragmentary texts, such as Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, that have been reconstructed from papyri or from citations in considerably later works. How are we to contextualise these fragments, particularly when the preliterate Greece where such a myth has its notional origin is unavailable to us, and other accounts that may have been hugely influential in the shaping of the tradition are now lost to us too? Even explicitly mythographical sources, namely

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those self-consciously concerned with the collation of mythic narratives, can hardly be considered neutral: of the more complete collections, Apollodorus is at pains to show the variety of versions available to him, Ovid is regarded as giving traditional stories a subversive Roman twist, and Hyginus is undatable and judged to be a poor narrator. The medieval collection of earlier sources known as the 'Vatican Mythographer,' which includes material from Servius as well as commentaries on Pindar, Theocritus, Statius, and Apollonius, is also undatable and, in the fashion of its time, not attributable to any one particular author.

Given the complexity of the tradition, the pragmatism of the critics can be seen as an appropriate response to an intractable problem, but it may also be motivated by a desire to preserve a space for myth that is untouched by criticism or interpretation. And when schematised as above, the pragmatic distinctions between the various terms for myth may seem simply arbitrary. The word "mythology" combines both 'muthos' and 'logos' and so can be seen to encode the struggle for mastery between the story and the explanation. I have argued elsewhere that if those working with Greek myth want to use it as a source for religious and social practice or as a guidebook to understanding something about the way the Greeks conceptualised their world, then it is convenient to emphasise the historical particularity of their material and to downplay the inconveniences of its sometimes fragmentary form and muddled genealogy. But if the myths are being examined as part of a study of the history of Western thought, or as a construction of symbols in whose repetition psychological truths emerge, what will be highlighted is not what the stories may have meant to the Greeks but the use that has been made of them by succeeding generations or the extent to which they might contribute to an understanding of mental life.[3] In the latter case the category of 'myth' is much more capacious than in the former, and both examples demonstrate how the categories of myth and interpretation fluctuate, depending on the work that myth is being required to do.[4]

We have examined so far the 'myth' part of the equation. What, then, about the role of the 'women'? First, there are the ancient Greek women whose lives must be reconstructed from disconnected evidence and whose 'mentalité' belongs primarily to the realm of the imagination. These women are less visible in the historical and archaeological record than women from later periods, and there are only a few textual fragments that we can confidently assert were produced by a woman's hand. There are significant effects of this absence: despite the exhaustive collation of the sources relating to women, which span a wide time

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frame and a variety of genres, the impression still dominates of women being the absent presence of the ancient world, and a frustrating sense of lack often seems to characterise the endeavours of those wanting to form a connection with them. As a result of this, myth becomes a haven of plenitude, a place where women thrive and behave in provocative and interesting ways; myth helps fulfil the fantasies of those who are unwilling to face the prospect of a past inhabited by cowed and sequestered women and allows the possibility that women then, in their imaginations at least, participated in more contemporary kinds of defiance. Alternatively, an excavation of the 'mythic imagination'[5] has been seen as providing a way of exposing the deep roots of the misogyny that continues to contribute to the inequity of the world; once exposed, there is the opportunity for regrowth and change.

One area where there is a clear desire for there to have been dynamic women is the area of storytelling itself. Although there is very little explicit indication from ancient Greece that women told stories to each other in a domestic setting,[6] material obtained from anthropological studies has been used to argue that women in preliterate communities are inevitably involved in creating, retelling, and passing down myths, often with a different emphasis and in a subversive way. Indeed, it has become something of a commonplace that women are 'natural' storytellers, and within many different spheres of feminist theory and praxis, storytelling has become a model for both the construction and the dissemination of knowledge. The following passage comes from Judith Plaskow's essay on 'The Coming of Lilith' in the feminist theological collection *Womanspirit Rising*, and it typifies the use of this kind of model: Lilith, Adam's first wife, who left the garden of Eden because she disliked being ordered around, is visited by Eve, who has come to feel excluded by the closeness that has developed between God and Adam and climbs over the garden wall to find her:

> She did not wander long on the other side before she met the one she had come to find, for Lilith was waiting. At first sight of her, Eve remembered the tales of Adam and was frightened, but Lilith understood and greeted her kindly. "Who are you?" they asked each other, "What is your story?" And they sat and spoke together, of the past and then of the future. They talked for many hours, not once, but many times. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried, over and over, till the bond of sisterhood grew between them.

Meanwhile, back in the garden, Adam was puzzled by Eve's comings and goings, and disturbed by what he sensed to be her new attitude toward him. He talked to God about it, and God, having his own problems with Adam and a somewhat broader perspective, was able to help out a little – but he was confused, too. Something had failed to go according to plan. As in the days of Abraham, he needed counsel from his children. "I am who I am," thought God, "but I must become who I will become."

And God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together.[7]

Here Plaskow 'retells' a story from the Jewish tradition in order to interrogate its authority, and storytelling itself forms the basis of, and makes possible, the epistemological shift that is described. The idea that women tell stories to each other more readily than men can, of course, be questioned from a variety of perspectives, but the point here is that a tradition has developed of associating women with potent and transgressive storytelling and this association is often retrojected to include women in ancient Greece.

A recent example from within Classics draws on an anthropological model of preliterate societies to discuss and demonstrate the feasibility of recovering possible traces of women's storytelling from the canons of literate Greece. Discussing the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, Lillian Doherty argues that 'before there was feminist thought, there were women's traditions and women's genres, forms of expression practiced by specific groups of women within larger cultural formations.'[8] She goes on to maintain that the effacement of these traditions by the written text of the *Catalogue* is replicated by the reluctance of modern scholarship to acknowledge that myths about women constitute its subject matter. In emphasising the importance of myth to the work of a 'feminist classicist,'[9] she articulates a sense of myth as plenitude as outlined above:

Myth is important to feminism because it is one element of literate culture that has the potential to incorporate women's traditions and perspectives. By this I do not mean simply that at some time in the distant past men's poetry incorporated a women's tradition once and for all – for example, by reflecting vestiges of matriarchal social or political organization.

Rather, because myths are stories that combine an imaginative fluidity with an authoritative force, and because they are told in a variety of contexts even when they are also written down, they provide a point of entry for women's perspectives and concerns in the discourse shared by women and men.[10]

For Doherty, myth is a place where the influence of women's creativity may legitimately be felt.

Another context in which the active participation of women is presupposed is that of ritual, and when it comes to interpreting myth, the use of a ritual framework clearly exemplifies the methodological point that the way the category of myth is conceptualised to some extent determines what it can say 'about' women. The whole question of the relation of myth to ritual is something that has been repeatedly discussed over the years, and there is a complex range of opinions as to how that relation should be expressed. On a large scale, it is possible to describe myth and ritual as complementary forms of expression, the former conveying in actions what the latter articulates in words;[11] alternatively, it is possible to describe them as contrasting forms of expression that operate in different ways, myth 'tending to make explicit and absolute' that which ritual leaves 'implicit and temporary.'[12] One of the benefits of discussing myth in the context of ritual is that it makes plausible the speculation about the meaning of myth within wide social groupings: while the claim that an audience would have a collective response to any particular myth is impossible to verify, the very existence of a 'myth and ritual complex'[13] testifies to some investment in the concerns of that ritual by a community or part-community. Ritual is above all a collective phenomenon and so it renders the category of 'women' visible.[14]

When it comes to piecing together the constituent details of particular rituals, deciding who took part in them, and speculating as to what meanings they had for the communities they involved, the problems are as great as those entailed in reconstructing the details surrounding the transmission of a myth. The sources for a ritual practice are generally taken from a similar variety of literary and archaeological texts, and only the argument that it is a feature of ritual to remain unchanged over a long period of time makes their synthesis respectable.[15] And in relation to certain rituals, such as that of 'the Bears of Brauron,' relatively late and obscure sources such as the scholiast to Aristophanes have surprisingly taken on something of a canonical status. This ritual, connected with the shrine of Artemis at Brauron, involved young Athenian women 'playing the bear' in order to be tamed for marriage.

It has become a *locus classicus* for discussing the conceptual importance of liminality in the ancient Greek world and has contributed significantly to the emergence of the picture painted by ritual whereby the process of moving between different stages of sexual life is central to the definition of women.[16] Since ritual is broadly conceived as functioning to ease societal anxieties, 'particularly those involving killing, sexuality, transitions, or death,'[17] the myths associated with rituals are regarded as expressing similar anxieties and as playing a part in alleviating them. Women within such narratives may temporarily escape restrictive conceptual categories, but the narrative is judged to be concluded when the categories are reaffirmed.[18]

Despite the obscurity shrouding the details of what they entailed, the idea that there were cults specifically designed for women, in which men played little or no part, has proved tantalising for those looking for contexts in the ancient world in which to imagine self-determining women. Even if only temporary, the stage of segregation such rituals required provides an uninterrupted period in which to envisage women engaging in 'women-identified' behaviour and telling subversive tales. An eroticised context that is particularly potent in this respect is that associated with the poet Sappho on the island of Lesbos at the end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth century BCE. Not only does this provide another so-called liminal space where young women may have spent time separated from men, but it also offers the unique and mouth-watering prospect of reconstructing the experience from textual fragments written by a woman. Margaret Reynolds has recently argued that, far from discouraging attempts at reconstruction, the lack of conclusive evidence for any aspect of Sappho's life has contributed compellingly to the Sappho myth:

> . . . we know very little about her poetry, hardly anything about her life, not much more about her society, nothing to speak of about her character and nothing whatsoever about her personal appearance. But this lack of facts has not stopped people – virtually from that day to this – making up stories about her. Quite the contrary . . . 'Sappho' is not a name, much less a person. It is, rather, a space. A space for filling in the gaps, joining up the dots, making something out of nothing.[19]

In her unknowability, Sappho functions as a metaphor for all the women of antiquity whose absence inspires both a sense of familiarity and an

overwhelming longing: 'Sappho seems known to us, familiar, capable of being translated into our everyday lives. Yet still she remains utterly remote – if anything, all the more insinuating and full of meaning because she is, and always will be, absent.'[20]

In an essay that is generally pessimistic about the capacity of Greek myth to say anything much about women ('the subject of women in mythology offers better value to the student of mythology than to the student of women'[21]), Ken Dowden suggests that it is the indiscriminate classification of 'Greek myth' as 'Greek myth' that encourages its use as the basis for large-scale generalised statements about the attitudes of 'Greek society':

> Any material which looks so non-historical misleads us into thinking that it is somehow unaffected by exact historical circumstance, that it is supra-historical . . . It is possible therefore to see in Greek mythology certain recurrent and characteristic social views. For instance, the categories of women visible in myth undergo a certain ideological distortion: females may be parthenoi (maidens) or gynaikes (matrons), but not unmarried women. Widows, too, barely register, except maybe for the Graiai who confront Perseus – marginal, disabled, disgusting. So, elementary social data of broad application, the constants of Greek society, are embedded in myth – even if a study of the orators might deliver this information more reliably.[22]

Dowden's argument is that if the different versions of a myth are amalgamated and treated as one account, as 'the myth of' x or y, which is very common practice both inside and outside the academy, the precise contexts of the myth will not form part of its analysis. From this standpoint, myth is not historically reliable enough to function as a source of information about women per se, but it can be envisioned as a complex narrative system that has the potential to supplement the information derived from less ambivalent sources, such as the surviving speeches of the professional orators. For Dowden, one task of the interpretation of myth is to measure the extent of its 'ideological distortion.' But this task is complicated by the way in which the representations of women in a wide variety of texts, some of which themselves might be described as mythical, have in the past been used to build up a picture of what women's lives were like, so that the two categories of women being assessed are not so obviously distinct. There is a tension between the

particularity of individual realisations of a myth and the wider system, which encodes broad ideological commitments: the former constructs a more historical woman, the latter a woman who inhabits the generalised Greek mind.

The tendency to think of myth as ahistorical has led, over the past 50 years or so, to its frequent association with structuralism, a mode of analysis that operates, for the most part, synchronically. For those engaged in structuralist analysis, we can see once again that the myths exemplify the principles of their own analyses, so that they become, in this case, stories 'about' binary oppositions and mediations.[23] Within such analyses, the male/female polarity operates as the primary model of binarism for the ancient Greek cultural system, and the female becomes an allegory for one side of all sorts of other oppositions which, on the face of it, have little to do with women. A particularly ingenious example of such an analysis is Jean-Pierre Vernant's treatment of the myth of Pandora in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (1980), where marriage, sacrifice, and agriculture are 'shown' to be intimately linked in myth, ritual, and institutional practice. Mapped onto broader cultural territory, this myth about the creation of woman comes to signify the need for regulation of women's sexuality. Commenting on this essay, Eric Csapo wryly points out the cost of the analysis:

> Not only is the place of women in society determined through the vast network of meaning that makes up the cultural system as a whole, it is rigidly overdetermined. Every place in the conceptual system is ultimately cross-referenced by every other, indeed ultimately determined by every other. Structuralism's model of ideology is a totalising system, from which there is no escape, and no position from which one can opt out or even criticize the system. It is a steel trap gripping the minds of men and women, without their knowledge, but naturally with full consent, since even prostitutes joyfully celebrate their uselessness and social inferiority.[24]

The woman who emerges here is a long way away from the subversive storyteller, the inheritor of women's traditions. She has been effaced in favour of a figure defined by her sexual behaviour, whose moderate compliance with the dominant social mores functions to reinforce the potency of the family. Even when she appears to choose her own destiny, the semblance of freedom is illusory: her only role in myth is to show a

male-dominated society the apocalyptic consequences of allowing her a choice:

> Marriage is violated in the myths by both sexes, but with very different consequences. Violations by men, though harmful to women, do not in themselves cause the collapse of order. But their actions prompt women in the myths to act, and when that happens, the female is released and marriage is undone as a structure of order. There ensues the downfall of the household, and, if the man is a king or leader, his city plummets into chaos.[25]

In querying the inevitability of the conclusions of this kind of study, feminist interpreters of myth are more likely to work with mythic amalgams than with particular variants, although there have been significant exceptions amongst those working within classics, the discipline that might be argued to 'own' Greek myth. Feminists have been inclined to turn to myth because they regard it as a potent discourse in the conceptualisation of women within the cultures of the West. The special relationship women have with myth because of this potency goes some way towards explaining why the editor of a collection such as *The Cambridge Companion* has commissioned an essay on women and myth but not an equivalent one pertaining to men. Feminist engagements with myth have taken many forms – optimistic liberationist readings are certainly not the only possible readings of myth that can be labelled feminist – and they have been shaped by developments in thinking about sex and gender across a wide cultural spectrum. Nor is there necessarily a consensus about what constitutes liberation: it could be argued, for example, that structuralism's exposure of the double bind, the 'steel trap' of patriarchy, is itself potentially liberating. But invariably at the heart of these engagements is the idea that classical myth possesses huge cultural authority and has operated, for the most part, to perpetuate the oppression of women:

> For feminists, the rewriting of myths denotes participation in these historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators. When feminists envisage that struggle, they often think of the rewriting or reinterpretation of individual stories: for example, by changing the focus of the narrative from a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of

the myth so that what was a 'negative' female role-model becomes a positive one.[26]

The rewriting of the myth of Lilith and Eve we looked at previously is an excellent example of such a shift in terms and shows that it is not only classical myth that provokes these responses. It also demonstrates the tensions inherent in the 're-' of rewriting: if the new 'version' of a myth changes its emphasis sufficiently radically, it may become difficult to associate it with the tradition, so that it becomes read instead as a story 'about' contemporary feminist experience. The editors of the collection from which the essay comes commented as follows:

> "The Coming of Lilith" retells a story from the biblical–rabbinic tradition. While this might mark the essay as reformist, the retelling threatens to move beyond the tradition from which it stems. Not only does it reverse the traditional image of Lilith as the archetypal evil woman, seeing her instead as the archetype of female freedom, but it also leaves open the question of whether Eve and Lilith will "reconstruct the garden or create it anew.[27]

Those with an investment in a particular configuration of a mythic tradition may police its boundaries with considerable vigour and authorise themselves as arbiters of what it can include. But tradition can be seen as a less static concept that is, and always has been, reshaped and reenergised by continual retellings. Doherty's statement that 'the modern rewriting of myths is a continuation of ancient practice'[28] subscribes to this kind of notion and emphasises that ancient poets and artists freely imported the issues of their own times into their treatments of myth. Feminist retellings can thus be positioned on a continuum with, say, Euripides' *Medea* or the *Heroides* of Ovid, in that all of these texts change the focus of traditional narratives to serve their own ideological ends.

Such rewritings of myth have not been restricted to the academy; there is an enormous amount of writing, both poetry and fiction, which has utilised the strategies outlined above to revivify myth for contemporary audiences. Indeed, feminist mythopoiesis can be seen as one of the areas where the distinction between the scholarly and the imaginative has been successfully deconstructed. The preponderance of the female characters who populate Greek myth has often been a source of comment, as has the discrepancy between the potency of women in myth and literature and the lack of autonomy of their more

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historical counterparts. Virginia Woolf famously summarised the position as follows:

> Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly spell, and was the property of her husband.[29]

The abundance and influence of women in the literary contexts of myth is something of a solace to commentators such as Woolf: even if women cannot be named as the indisputable creators of popular stories, they can at least inhabit a different status and achieve recognition as the driving forces of narrative:

> Mythical stories are fabulations of women, probably not created by women. In those narratives, as in other dominant discourses, they are used as metaphors. Still, contrary to official history, women have been important motors of mythical (his)stories. History comes from discord, and discord comes from women. Helen, Medea, Europa, Arianna, Io, Pasifae and Phaedra were objects of rape, kidnapping, abandonment and betrayal; but they were also subjects of pleasure, of movement, of revenge.[30]

Their centrality to mythic stories goes some way towards correcting the gender imbalance of our picture of the ancient world. But mythological women also take on a life of their own and provide modern women with personae with whom they can identify. Harnessing the power of a mythical name might be a means of legitimising an otherwise disreputable project, or invoking a genealogy for an innovative claim. Mythmaking for feminism has continuously functioned as a utopian activity and 'brings the imaginative possibilities of what is not into the concrete realm of what could be'.[31] But successive generations of feminist writers and critics have adopted different strategies of mythmaking in part determined by their commitment to particular models of sex and gender.

The grand narrative of the theorisation of woman is often troped in such a way that the most recent mode of analysis becomes the most sophisticated. And yet the idea that each generation has access to, learns from, and enhances an ever-expanding archive of thought and interpretation in a consensually minded fashion is easily challenged. Within the specialised field of classics, it is possible to give a similarly progressivist account of scholars' engagement with issues relating to women, but, again, it is undemanding to point to ways in which such an account does not represent the diversity of opinion or methodology that is current at any one time. There can be substantial value in gaining a sense of how particular accounts of the subject relate to particular discursive contexts, but all too often such accounts are emplotted within a broader narrative under the sign of progress and are marked by a tendency to take the earliest less seriously. This kind of teleology is paradoxically at odds with a subject matter which more often than not privileges the earliest telling of a story over versions from later in the tradition. In an explicitly self-reflective analysis of her own previous essay on the Vestal Virgins, Mary Beard shows how contemporary mythologies of women and gender constantly evolve:

> The mythology of the Vestal Virgins is on the move. *Our mythology*. The spinster dons of ancient Rome (Balsdon's vision of a Julio-Claudian Oxbridge) have had their day. So too have the pagan nuns of the Roman forum – Christian holiness and self-denial *avant la lettre*. *Our* Vestals are much stranger than that: they are touched with a primitive, anthropological 'weirdness'; key players in a game of sexual ambiguity (interstitiality, marginality, anomaly, paradox and mediation) that in Balsdon's time would have seemed – if anything – the concern of ethnography rather than Classics. But not now. We have decided to take the Vestals seriously – at the cost of turning them into a model of primitive strangeness, forever lodged at the heart of sophisticated Rome.[32]

In rejecting her earlier contribution to the formation of the myth, Beard could be seen as colluding with the kind of teleological narrative outlined above. But this second essay takes great pains to emphasise the open-endedness of the process of interpretation and to show how arguments about one specific cultural institution in ancient Rome are inevitably bound up with wider issues concerned with conceptualising

women's studies more generally. It argues that the limitations of the old myth of Vestal ambiguity are partly 'the limitations of a history of "women" conceived without reference to a history of "gender"; or rather the limitations of a history of "gender" conceived as an objective category, without reference to its debated and contested construction within the wider cultural matrix.'[33] But lest we begin to feel complacent, the essay ends with a rhetorical display that evades an easy sense of closure:

> Fifteen years ago it was very hard to rethink the Vestals: hard to identify the problem, hard to find the analogies, hard to deploy the anthropology of ambiguity. Yet at the same time, it was so easy to convince: so easy to feel that the effort had worked; so easy to show that the problem had been cracked; so easy to back a new orthodoxy. Yes, 'there *was* something queer about the Virgines Vestales'. The 'queerness' was the answer. If that is now changing, if what was easy now seems too easy, then it is, of course, because our story of Rome, and of gender within Roman culture, has moved on. Beard 1980 (and the work that followed from it) is in a sense a final flourish of a dead subject: 'the history of women'. Rewritten as 'the history of gender' the simplicities and certainties of ambiguity ('the Vestals were not either virgins or matrons; they were both, and . . . they were also men') could not and should not convince. Not, then, 'women in Roman history', but 'Roman history writes "woman"'; reading is always preliminary, before you . . .[34]

If the replacement of the history of women by the history of gender can be figured within descriptions such as Beard's as a sign of 'moving on,' there are other accounts of feminist-inspired thought that are much less sanguine about its onwards-and-upwards trajectory. The debate surrounding the status and value of so-called postfeminism' is a case in point. There are those who perceive this movement as nothing more than a media-inspired con trick that betrays the history of feminist struggle and rejects its considerable achievements. For others, it represents a more sophisticated continuation of that struggle, involving the replacement of 'dualism with diversity' and 'consensus with variety,' thus establishing 'a dynamic and vigorous area of intellectual debate, shaping the issues and intellectual climate that has characterised the move from modernity to postmodernity in the contemporary world.'[35]

feminist-inspired thought

If Beard's revisiting of the Vestal Virgins shows how the interpretation of a particular myth has been influenced by changing configurations of sex and gender in the wider cultural sphere, the reverse process is also demonstrable: classical myth has made a substantial contribution to the development of feminist thought in areas so diverse as politics, philosophy, and the history and theory of science, as well as in the highly influential psychoanalytically informed sphere.

In a whole range of projects undertaken by contemporary women, the reworking of myth exemplifies the enduring power of the past. Different strategies are used for a variety of purposes, although this diversity is not always recognised by those who are inclined to homogenise feminism. The classic statement of what has become known as 'revisionist myth-making' comes from Adrienne Rich's essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.' Here, Rich argues that the myths of the past continue to structure the experience and identity of women in the present and that their power must urgently be broken:

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter of cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge for women, is more than a search of identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in it impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh.[36]

Rich emphasises the continuity between representations of women in the past and those of the contemporary moment because of the shared assumptions that underlie them. The process of excavating these assumptions is the process of revision, which can thus be said to describe many mythographic enterprises. For example, we might think of Luce Irigaray's deconstruction of the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*, which works to dismantle the symbolic structure in its own terms, from within. Or we could consider Carol Gilligan's repositioning of the Psyche and Cupid myth as 'a feminist tale' by tracing its lineage from classical

mythology to its description as a narrative about the losses that constrain both men and women's capacity to love.[37] There is an optimism motivating the production of these texts that resides in the belief that the quarrying of myths can have an effect in the world. 'Entertaining an old text from a new critical direction' can either place the emphasis on the perspective of the reader, or it can take the form of revivifying the characters of the myth itself so that they become significant in newly imagined and sometimes surprising ways.

Hélène Cixous' laughing Medusa is probably the best known example of such a revivification. But empowering a formerly denigrated figure is not the only means of transforming her significance. Sometimes a notable female is domesticated in order to challenge prevailing cultural and literary hegemonies. So, for example, Dorothy Parker's neighbourly Penelope explicitly questions the idea that bravery consists in travelling the world[38] and, in one of her manifestations, Jenny Joseph's Persephone is removed from her mother by the decision of a family court.[39] Some readings of Sappho regard her as having participated in similar kinds of domestication. She is often described as being unconcerned with external affairs and continually rejecting the values of the male-dominated world in favour of the considerations of herself and her friends and lovers. She uses the language and imagery of war but redeploys it in articulations of female amatory activity and marriage. In fragment 1, for example, she speaks as a thwarted lover calling on Aphrodite for help in winning over the girl she desires. Concerned with erotic encounters past and present, the poem is like the prayers of epic heroes to their patron gods, which occur frequently in Homer and belong predominantly to the scenes of military encounters. The transference of theme, style, and phraseology from the 'elevated' genre of epic into a poem concerned with a love affair can be argued to have the effect of ennobling Sappho's passion for the girl while poking fun at the exclusivity of the heroic male stance.

It is interesting that the way of reading Sappho outlined above is not restricted to a feminist position that would regard her subversion of heroic values as an obviously good thing.[40] The identification of women with the domestic sphere has, after all, been controversial and something that some feminists themselves have resisted. Whether we are dealing with excavatory mythography or creative mythopoeia, there is no straightforward consensus as to the merits of any individual case, and mythmaking continues to be a contentious activity that divides opinion even as it supplies a means for the articulation of common aims. One of the things that myth has made available to feminists has been the

sense of a space prior or external to patriarchy where alternative models of societal organisation can exist. This has sometimes taken the form of historical claims about matriarchal or matrilineal societies that once were but have disappeared from view, and sometimes of a metaphor for resistance to dominant symbolic structures. Angela Carter, who herself engaged extensively in mythopoiesis, has contended eloquently that such escapist formulations function to dissuade women from actually intervening in the world:

> If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women, from the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsense; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults give women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place.[41]

Carter's position demonstrates how women's involvement with myth has been deeply problematic to some strains of feminism. It also suggests that feminist thought and practice may come at times to constitute yet another category against which myth is negatively defined. What emerges clearly from these debates is that the task of examining the topic of women and Greek myth is in no way a marginal or limited activity, but rather involves the scrutiny of the definition, operation, and potential of myth in its most capacious sense.

FURTHER READING

Representative of the 'second wave' collections on women in antiquity are Cameron, A. and Kuhrt, A. (eds.) *Images of Women in Antiquity*, (London, 1983), Peradotto, J. and Sullivan, J. P. (eds.) *Women in the Ancient World: the Arethusa Papers* (Albany, NY, 1987) and Skinner, M. (ed.) *Rescuing Creusa: New Methodological Approaches to Women in Antiquity* (*Helios* special edition 13.2, 1987). The classic statement of

a revisionist approach to myth is Rich, A. 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–78* (NY, 1979). Zeitlin, F. *Playing the Other* (Chicago, 1996) is a stimulating collection of essays that focus on the representations of gender in a variety of ancient Greek texts. Of more recent work, Doherty, L. *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth* (London, 2001) gives an overview of the mutability of myth within ancient and modern settings and Zajko, V. and Leonard, M. (eds.) *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (Oxford, 2006b) explores the multifarious ways in which myth has inspired feminist thinking in a wide range of disciplines. Recent fictional 'retellings' include Cook, E. *Achilles* (London, 2001) and Atwood, M. *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh, 2005).

NOTES

1. Two very real women have helped me with this piece: I would like to thank Miriam Leonard and Genevieve Liveley for their customary acuity and munificence.

2. The following extract from Buxton (1994) 14 typifies this kind of pragmatic rhetoric: 'Quite apart from this, it is convenient for us as observers to have a designation for a group of stories which are of outstanding interest because of their symbolic richness, their centrality to Greek culture, and the authority which they commanded. I propose, then, to retain "myth" to do what seems to me to be a respectable heuristic job. But I stress two reservations: (1) no automatic equation can be made between Greek myths and apparently similar stories found in other cultures; (2) mythology is not being regarded as constituting an autonomous, hermetically-sealed territory.'

3. Another possibility is that myth provides a language for the dramatisation of issues too painful for the ordinary world. So Hélène Cixous in Prenowitz (2004) 18, talking about her choice of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* as a vehicle for her play about blood contaminated by AIDS: 'This is where the Eumenides came to my aid. I immediately saw the transposition by way of *The Eumenides*. I thought: This can only take place in a mythic universe where there will be Aeschylus, the Eumenides. Something that is poeticised in such a strong way that the suffering will find expression in extremely poetic words.'

4. For an extended exploration of these ideas, see Zajko (1998).

5. See, for example, Froma Zeitlin's essay 'Signifying Difference: The Case of Hesiod's Pandora' in Zeitlin (1995) 53–86.

6. Some scattered exceptions are Euripides *Melanippe* Fr. 488, where a young woman hears the creation myth from her mother, Euripides *Ion*, and Plutarch *Life of Theseus* 23.3, where it is said that tales are told at the festival of the Oschophoria because mothers, for the sake of comforting and encouraging their children, spun out tales for them. Nurses are represented as telling stories to the children in their charge at Plato *Laws* 887d and *Republic* 378c and Philostratus *Imagines* 1.15. An example highly pertinent to this essay is the tale of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius *Metamorphoses*, which is intended to be told by an old woman to a young girl. Part of the long-standing debate about this myth is how to reconcile its framing

with its potential meaning and so whether to define it as myth (which is typically gendered feminine) or philosophy (typically gendered masculine). It is interesting therefore that Carol Gilligan's 2002 reworking of the myth sites it very firmly 'in the province of both women and men.'

7   Plaskow, J. (1979) 207.
8   Doherty, L. (2006) 421.
9   Doherty (2006) 422.
10 Doherty (2006) 423.
11 See, for example, Jane Harrison (1927) 16: 'Ritual is the utterance of an emotion, a thing felt in action, myth in words or thoughts.'
12 Buxton (1987) 74.
13 Versnel (1990) 27 comments thus: 'It may not seem adventurous to say that the concept of myth *and* ritual was engendered by the tension that sprang from having to choose: myth *or* ritual.'
14 There are those who would want to argue that for a myth to be classified as a myth it must be a narrative with some collective significance (see, e.g., most recently, Csapo (2005) 134). The point here is that ritual actualises that significance.
15 At the start of one such synthesising account of a wedding ritual, James Redfield (1982) 182 put the case as follows: 'Historically this will be in soft focus; I shall be mentioning items from various places and periods as if they were all part of the same ceremony, with the assumption that even features not in general use would have been generally intelligible to the Greeks. Of course from other points of view the differences might make all the difference.'
16 See Dowden (1989) 25–32.
17 Csapo (2005) 180.
18 For the imposition of limits on what constitutes any myth, the demarcation of where it begins and where it ends, is itself determined by the interpretative position being adopted.
19 Reynolds (2000) 2. This volume contains a comprehensive bibliography of the secondary material, which attempts to reconstruct aspects of Sappho's lifestyle on the basis of her poetry.
20 Reynolds (2000) 6–7.
21 Dowden in (1995) 56.
22 Dowden in (1995) 46.
23 There are those, of course, who would argue that there is a natural congruency between the binarisms embedded in the structures of ancient Greek thought and the binarisms beloved of structuralist analysis. See, for example, Paul Cartledge's *The Greeks* (1993) passim. Some myths may then seem to lend themselves to this kind of interpretation: 'Like Pandora, the mythic figure of the Amazon fits the structuralist approach hand and glove.' Doherty (2001) 137.
24 Csapo (2005) 276.
25 Blake Tyrrell (1984) xvi.
26 Larrington (ed.) (1992) 441–2.
27 Christ, C. and Plaskow, J. (1979) (eds) 194.
28 Doherty (2001) 10.
29 Woolf (1929) 43
30 Curti (1998) viii–ix.
31 Bartkowski (1989) 10

32   Beard (1995) 166.
33   Beard (1995) 167.
34   Beard (1995) 174–5.
35   Gamble (2001) 50.
36   Charlesworth Gelpi and Gelpi (1993) 167.
37   Gilligan (2002) 46–7.
38   In the pathway of the sun,
              In the footsteps of the breeze,
      Where the world and sky are one,
              He shall ride the silver seas,
              He shall cut the glittering wave.
      I shall sit at home, and rock;
      Rise to hear a neighbour's knock;
      Brew my tea, and snip my thread;
      Bleach the linen for my bed.
              They will call him brave.

39   Joseph (1986) 41.
40   See, for example, Page (1955) 110: 'We discern in both old and new the same
      narrow limitation of interests, the same simplicity of thought, the same delicacy in
      expression, the same talent for self-detachment and self-criticism.' See also Podlecki
      (1984) 82: 'Sappho's poetry is as empty of overt political allusions as Alcaeus' is full
      of them.'
41   Carter (1979) 5.