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***‘Ancient myths have subversive power precisely because they can be told – and read – in different ways’  
(Helen Morales, Antigone Rising). Do recent retellings of Greek myth support this claim?***

Matthew Arnold, writing with the comfortable belief in the progress of 19th century England, deemed it ‘no longer possible that we should feel a deep interest in the Antigone of Sophocles’.<sup>1</sup> In a post-World War world, however, we see the grimy irony of such confidence in political stability and social advancement, and are made all the more aware of the subversive power of ancient myth to speak to modern political traumas.

One might muse, however, just as the tyrant Creon is deaf to criticism - ‘everything you say offends me!’<sup>2</sup> - modern dictatorships are hardly likely to allow for the staging of the play so clearly dealing with themes of resistance to the oppressive hand of the state; surely, if ancient myths truly possessed such subversive power, their retellings would be violently suppressed? However, Helen Foley argues that ‘Greek tragedy permits a political response to irresolvable, extreme situations without being crudely topical’<sup>3</sup> - it is precisely the allure of Greek myth being set in a distant, unimaginable past of alien customs and convention which appeals to writers looking to balance upon the thin and tricky tightrope of criticism, but not so explicitly that they may be persecuted. Jean Anouilh’s 1944 staging of the play in German-occupied Paris seems at first the perfect example of coded resistance against an immoral power, in which we see Antigone represent the French resistance to Nazi military police, who in an eerily similar fashion to Creon, exposed the corpses of executed rebels as a deterrent<sup>4</sup>. Though Sophocles could not have predicted his work to be reinterpreted to impart such a meaning, Helen Morales argues that the very nature of myth is that they ‘endure as they have always been serving political agendas’ and therefore ‘can be used as models of resistance whether or not they are interpreted accurately’<sup>5</sup>. Though we might mock the occupiers as ignorant not to recognise this allegorical criticism, allowing its staging

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<sup>1</sup> Fagles (1982) pg 35

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pg 74

<sup>3</sup> Foley (1999) pg 2

<sup>4</sup> Fagles (1982) pg 36

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=779RqKNbrD0>

and even joining in the applause, it is important to note Anouilh's portrayal of Creon - not as an unforgiving oppressor, but as a fair and pragmatic ruler in a difficult position - undoubtedly how the occupiers saw themselves. This suggestion of Anouilh's Nazi sympathies is not helped by his refusal to condemn the Axis powers, leaving us with the uncomfortable realisation that myths cannot always be idealised as always having subversive power, and a tool for social progression - they can, in fact, also reinforce a violent status quo.

Nevertheless, we see the subversive power of myth in part lies in its ability to transcend the Athenian stage, and encompass a wild variance of culture - or rather, contemporary directors are *forced* to adopt aspects of their own theatrical tradition when confronting a 'profound ignorance of music, dance, and theatrical context that conditioned its first presentation'<sup>6</sup>. However we should not mourn this loss of accuracy to the original Greek when the removal of barriers, especially in language, allows for bold experimentation. This is especially true of Non-Western adaptations of Greek myth; Suzuki Tadashi brought Noh - a classical Japanese dance-drama - to his stagings of 'Bacchae' and 'Trojan Women'<sup>7</sup>, surprisingly harmonious with the original plays which also revolved around the use of mask, music and ritual. Ariane Mnouchkine's 1990 'Les Atrides' is a multicultural melange of Eastern tradition, drawing from the Kabuki choreography of Japan to Indian Kathakali dances to various folk improvisations. Greek myth, in its evident compatibility and harmony with cultures outside of the West, therefore subverts the often white, misogynistic Alt-Right claim to the Classics; Donna Zuckerberg observes that the "white men of the Red Pill have appeared as the self-appointed guardians and defenders of the cultural legacy of Western civilization"<sup>8</sup>, propagating ideas of supremacy in doing so. Against such notions, non-Western retellings seem to prove that ancient myths do not belong in a pure unadulterated state in the distant past, but are meant to evolve to encompass the social context of the present-day for the political involvement and education of a diverse audience, as Aristophanes observes 'children have teachers to teach them, and grown-ups have playwrights'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Foley (1999) pg 3

<sup>7</sup> Ibid pg 4

<sup>8</sup> Zuckerberg (2018) pg 5

<sup>9</sup> McLeish (1993) pg 352

Sara Uribe brings the myth to Tamaulipas - a region of Mexico equalling Thebes in political violence and bloodshed. The suffering of the classical character is assigned to the titular protagonist 'Antígona González', obsessively seeking justice in her search for a disappeared brother - her Polynices. Structured as an anthology of poems and testimonies to those lost to the fierce territorial disputes between cartels vying for power, Antígona is offered comfort in shared suffering by other victims of violence, as they weave stories of similar traumas into her narrative, subverting the traditional vision of Antigone as a lone and strange figure in her rebellion. The recurring war cry of the book is 'we are many'. Just as Sophocles was writing largely in response to the horrors of his military exploits during the catastrophic Sicilian Expedition of 411 BC, and Helen Morales is spurred to write out of anger at the 2014 Isla Vista massacre<sup>10</sup>, Uribe shows ancient myth to be inherently subversive as a tool to speak out against real-world political traumas.

Uribe's multiple 'Antigones' become the representation of all the victims that conflict left behind, as Natalie Haynes muses, 'a war does not ignore half the people whose lives it touches. So why should we?'<sup>11</sup>. In this case, the subversive power of myth lies in its reinterpretation to not just hail a sole heroine, but to encompass an audience as characters within its narrative. Ismene manifests in the general fear and hesitancy of Tamaulipas to seek justice, as Polynices represents those killed in the drug trade - Antigone speaks for those made collateral damage. With the final line of direct address "Will you join me in taking up the body?", Uribe makes clear we do not have to be descended from the blue bloodline of Cadmus to also feel the weight of social oppression. This notion of taking up shared suffering is made all the more resonant after a summer of social unrest and conversation surrounding race relations; state violence is a problem that transcends ancient Greece, and so Uribe seems to suggest that the quest for political justice alone is enough to make anyone 'Antigone'.

This last question is posed at the site of San Fernando, the mass grave where Antígona is finally led. Among carnage, it is interesting that she should be one of the only living - after all, the defining moment of the traditional myth is Antigone's suicide. With Sophocles representing Antigone as the noble, long-suffering

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=779RqKNbrD0>

<sup>11</sup> Haynes (2019)

martyr whose blood lay on the hands of the tyrannical Creon (with a continued association of the rule of kings to disaster and death), his loyalty to democracy could not be made clearer. This tragic suicide was also key to upholding ancient patriarchal norms<sup>12</sup>; Antigone, while noble in her loyalty to Polynices, was nevertheless dangerously transgressive so long as she refused the rule of her patriarch. So much so, that Antigone is referred to by masculine pronouns and participle, as opposition was not in the nature of any 'real' woman; it is only with her death (as suicide was seen in classical mythology as feminine, and by association, cowardly) that Antigone reverts to a traditionally feminine role, and order between the genders is restored<sup>13</sup>. Notably, the character of Antigone would have been performed by a man in the first Athenian stagings - even underlying this talk of her supposed 'manliness', she is male at core. The final image of Uribe's book is therefore made all the more surprising - surrounded by fallen men, Antigona herself is (at least physically) unscathed. Madelline Miller laments that 'humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep.'<sup>14</sup>, of which, Antigona does neither - rather she is defiant. Classical ideas of womanly weakness are subverted by Uribe, who remimagines a more dignified end to the myth, and advises a modern generation of women that perseverance is the nobler course of action.

Edgar Allan Poe writes that 'the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world'; for all such subversive reimaginings, this sustained interest in myths of suffering women seemingly proves true Hecuba's laments that female pain serves only to 'give poets a theme for their plays'<sup>15</sup>, this ironic line of metatheatre showing Euripides as being aware of his own position of power to give voice to the underprivileged. Though 'mocked as a misogynist', Kenneth Leish argues 'few dramatists have written more extensively of better about women'<sup>16</sup>; in placing his arguments in the mouth of Hecuba and her companions to evoke great pathos, Euripides persuades his audience to pity and condemn the treatment of woman prisoners of war, and to reevaluate their acceptance of the Greek victory. Margaret Atwood seems to draw from Euripidean technique in 'The Penelopiad'; as in 'Troades', the novel lacks developmental action, reading as a a sombre

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<sup>12</sup> Pomeroy (1975) pg 100-101

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Miller (2018) pg 171

<sup>15</sup> Mcleish (1995) pg 62

<sup>16</sup> Ibid pg 10-11

reflection of the sufferings of woman more than the dramatic and action-packed epic on which it was based. Penelope's excellence in her endurance and fidelity ought to have been the objective set for all other women to pursue. In a Euripidean style, Atwood however, criticises these notions by putting her own feminist argument in the mouths of a revered, mythologised woman, thereby giving authority to her views; here, the subversive power of ancient myth lies in its ability to ennoble modern thought.

The grandeur of the title, 'The Penelopiad', places the long-suffering 'faithful Penelope' in the realm of heroes - in asserting, 'I'll spin a thread of my own'<sup>17</sup>, the act of a woman reclaiming her story is indeed subversive and heroic. However, Penelope is not smug in being cast as the paradigm of virtue, but bitterly self-aware as she reflects on becoming 'an edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with'<sup>18</sup>; separated by her chastity to following generations of women 'forever sullied by Clytemnestra's sin'<sup>19</sup> - she is the infallible Madonna to future 'whores'. In response, Atwood's reimagining of Penelope is pointedly human and multifaceted; in spite of indignation at being used as a pawn to shame women, she directs her ire at Helen's inability to live up to her own reputation. Catty and resentful, Penelope complains that the 'Intolerably beautiful' 'Helen was never punished, not one bit.'; for all her criticisms of male poets, she only contributes in the same way to the slander Helen suffers from men throughout the ages, who is spurned by her own husband as 'Hell to her native land!', 'snail-slime to all of Greece'<sup>20</sup>. Elaine Showalter's argument that "[the] feminine heroine grows up in a world without female solidarity, where women in fact police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny"<sup>21</sup> seems particularly resonant. Penelope is both a heroine and a hypocrite; while emblematic of the social progress of the 20th century (as a woman is finally offered control over her own narrative), we are also reminded of our enduring prejudices, and the dangers of compliance within systems of oppression. We are taken back to the double entendre introducing the novel, 'I'll spin a thread of my own'; for all her newfound autonomy, Penelope is still stuck at the loom, at her womanly place, chained to patterns of patriarchal thinking. Atwood does not idealise, nor disparage Penelope - instead, the subversive power of the novel lies in presenting nuanced,

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<sup>17</sup> Atwood (2005) pg 4

<sup>18</sup> Ibid pg 2

<sup>19</sup> Pomeroy (1975) pg 22

<sup>20</sup> McLeish (1995) pg4 5-48

<sup>21</sup> Showalter (1978) pg 117

‘powerful and subtle female roles’; this realism allows a modern audience to relate to an ancient character, and in doing so, re-evaluate their shared flaws and prejudices.

‘The Penelopiad’ is as much a novel about social oppression, as it is gender oppression, however, (with the victims of both being the twelve maids) as Atwood identifies in their plight, modern female suffering within a system that too often caters to powerful men. With ‘The Trial of Odysseus’<sup>22</sup> for his crime of hanging the twelve maids in a seeming fit of arbitrary violence and bloodlust, the hero’s virtue and reputation is called into question. Yet ultimately, the courtroom shares little of this same outrage, as the judge rules that ‘It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career’<sup>23</sup>. This chilling trivialisation of the traumas of women is eerily reminiscent of modern high-profile cases; with the conviction of Brock Turner in 2015 on the account of rape, his father similarly protested that “[the sentence] is a steep price to pay for twenty minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life”<sup>24</sup>. In drawing parallels between the injustices seen in ancient myth to that of today, Atwood presents a bleak vision of little changing over millennia; perhaps, however, it is this grim realisation of the little social progress we have made that contributes to the subversive power of the Penelopiad - we are almost shamed into change.

Hesiod’s Theogony riles against ‘the deadly race and tribes of womankind, great pain to mortal men with whom they live’<sup>25</sup>. One such deadly woman is Medea, whose character ‘transcended history because she enacts a primal terror universal to human beings’<sup>26</sup>; an infanticidal sorceress, she was once the antithesis of everything a woman ought not to be, yet was hailed as an icon of rebellion during the suffragette movement. Acting only in response to the injustice she faces - not from aimless cruelty - she is seen by early feminists as the ‘archetypal victim turned victimiser, the powerless who empowers herself’<sup>27</sup>. Gilbert Murray’s ‘Medea’ of 1907, set against the backdrop of the defeat of the Private Member’s Bill (which allowed women to vote) and the mass arrests of

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<sup>22</sup> Atwood (2005) pg175

<sup>23</sup> Ibid pg182

<sup>24</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/06/father-stanford-university-student-brock-turner-sexual-assault-statement>

<sup>25</sup> Pomeroy (1975) pg3

<sup>26</sup> Hall (1990) pg 1

<sup>27</sup> Wilkinson (nd) pg 2-3

suffragettes, only strengthened the reputation of the anti-heroine; the retelling of the myth to pointedly parallel the political turmoil of the era seems to be warning from the suffragettes of the devastation that may similarly ensue if they are not afforded justice. Though of course, we cannot excuse the trail of bodies Medea leaves in her quest for revenge, Natalie Haynes argues we can, indeed, understand ‘how easy, how reasonable, monstrous behaviour can appear to someone who feels wronged’<sup>28</sup>. Retellings of the myths of ‘Antigone’ and Penelope seem therefore to implore justice for wronged women, while those of ‘Medea’ demand it. The transformation of her story shows the subversive power of ancient myth to confront systems of oppression, as Medea, once having inspired fear in men, inspires resistance in women.

George Steiner argues that retellings of ‘Antigone’ serve as ‘a pivot of consciousness’ for moderns<sup>29</sup> - equally applying to the reimagining of Penelope and ‘Medea’, as we see subversive power to lie in the inherent ability of ancient myth to echo real-world political turmoils - in particular, the ongoing march for women’s liberation. Modern retellings, by imbuing myth with 20th century feminist thought (as in ‘The Penelopiad’), and cultural tradition outside of the West (as in ‘Les Atrides’), ultimately show the universality of the plight of the three heroines, and the way in which classical characters can ennoble radical modern thought, inspiring systems of oppression today.

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<sup>28</sup> Haynes (2010) pg 152

<sup>29</sup> Holland (1998) pg 1

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