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The High and Low Fantasies of Feminist (Re)Mythopoeia

Abstract

Discusses elements of myth and fantasy in the works of five contemporary women poets. Notes the use of mythopoeia in a feminist context is used for "revisionist mythmaking."

Additional Keywords

Fantasy in poetry; Feminist poetics; Myth in poetry

The High and Low Fantasies of Feminist (Re)Mythopoeia

Patrick D. Murphy

"These Fragments I have shored against my ruin" may have been T.S. Eliot's and many other modernists' approach to the use of myth in poetry. Such is not the case, however, in much contemporary poetry. The difference is particularly well demonstrated by the revisioning of myth, or "remythopoeia," of North American feminist poets, such as Ursula Le Guin, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, and Ann Stanford. The re-mythopoeia involves the use of both low and high fantasy situations. That is to say, settings located in the recognizable world but complicated by fantastic aspects – whether of the uncanny, hesitational or marvelous (see Murphy, "Mythic" 291-93); or, settings that create an alternative, secondary world either of the poet's invention or already provided by literature. Such fantastic situations allow either a contrast or provide free space for the presentation of a feminist critique or perspective of the "real" world established by patriarchally imposed cultural consensus. They also enable the insinuation of an alternative mythopoeic heritage to compete with the culturally received one in the reader's mind and to provide a foundation for other poet's work. This alternative heritage is often based on theories of pre-patriarchal goddess worship in matrifocal cultures; or, as Mary K. DeShazer puts it, "women poets frequently look within for their lost roots, that matriarchal and mythological heritage from which their creative energy emanates" (38).

Since the early days of Hilda Doolittle, one of the original Imagists, who struggled in the midst of an aesthetically and individually male-dominated high modernism to work out a new perception of classical mythology, women poets have played a major role in contemporary mythopoeia. But it should be recognized that this mythopoeia is different from both traditional and modernist forms. Contemporary work, particularly by women poets, is revisionist mythmaking. As Alicia Ostriker defines it, "the poet simultaneously deconstructs a prior 'myth' or 'story' and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself" (72). I would like to emend this by saying that this concept of revisioning should include mythic symbols, locations, and terms, such as "henge," as well as mythic stories, and that both male and female poets can participate in a revisionist mythmaking that subverts patriarchal stereotypes (see Murphy, "Sex-Typing the Planet"). The vast majority of the re-mythopoeia being conducted by women, and some men, is feminist. And "feminist" here refers to a work that, whether or not self-consciously guided by feminist theory, contributes to the struggle against gender oppression. In

that sense it is a reader-response-based judgement that defines the poem according to its affect in the world rather than defining its cultural role according to author intentionality or self-consciousness. I should add that much of this re-mythopoeia is self-consciously and intentionally feminist, although the definition of "feminism" varies widely from author to author.

Individual Poems by Rukeyser, Levertov, Rich, and Le Guin

"The Poem as Mask" opens Muriel Rukeyser's book, *The Speed of Darkness*. In this piece, subtitled "Orpheus," the poet attacks her earliest writing of the poem by that name because it reflected the influence of traditional patriarchal mythology and an attendant repression of the woman as subject. When she wrote of the things in that poem, "it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself" (*Speed* 3). As Rachel Blau DuPlessis has observed:

Thus her old use of the myth blunted her access to herself; the myth of Orpheus was a "mask" which now must be removed. . . . So she makes a vow at the end of the poem: "No more masks! No more mythologies!" But, while the vow is specifically and understandably antimythological, that refusal is an enabling act, and "for the first time" the myth is alive. (293)

That is to say, for the first time, the poet feels free to rewrite the mythology, to write to include herself and the experience of women. "The Poem as Mask" concludes: "Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand, / the fragments join in me with their own music" (*Speed* 3). She has appropriated the patriarchal myth to express her own power to perform a revisionary poesis.

Although "The Poem as Mask" may present the experience of Rukeyser's intellectual breakthrough in which she self-consciously empowers herself to rewrite mythology to include women, she had already begun the process at least a decade earlier in "The Birth of Venus" (1958). While a majority of revisionary poems use a female character as first-person narrator, Rukeyser presents the myth from a third-person point of view, but one that is decidedly female. This shift in point of view is emphatically foregrounded in this poem: "Risen in a / welter of waters // Not as he saw her / . . . // But born in a / tidal wave of the father's overthrow" (161). For Rukeyser herself, Venus becomes the muse and goddess of hope in what she perceives as the jingoistic wasteland of "Happy Days" America built on past wars, suicides, and cement as

depicted throughout *Body of Waking* (the volume in which "The Birth of Venus" originally appeared).

But for the most part, for Rukeyser, as well as others, the remythopoia does not signal so much an entry into mythopoia as a liberating act. Like the process of resolving the struggle either to secure a muse from patriarchal poetic tradition who may serve the woman poet or else to abjure the notion of an external muse altogether, the remythopoic poem may free the poet from patriarchal ghosts and self-repression to enable her to undertake a new poesis. This new poesis, however, need not be revisionist mythmaking. In the case of Rukeyser, this meant the beginning of a series of poems defined as "Lives," the depictions of female and male heroes who could provide an alternative heroic tradition for the American people (see DuPlessis 288). But it has also meant, that from time to time Rukeyser has returned to myth for poetic material, inevitably for revisioning rather than simple retelling. In the late-70s poem "Myth," for example, she writes the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx from the Sphinx's feminist point of view (quoted in Gunbar 301).

Denise Levertov is a poet who shares many of Rukeyser's thematic concerns, particularly the opposition to war and the repositioning of women within American culture. She is a particularly good example of the woman poet wrestling with the myth of the Muse and its exclusively male-inspiring role in the Anglo-American literary tradition. In "The Well," Levertov begins as if presenting a romantic high fantasy with a vague general description of the maiden Muse fetching water from a spring, but then she renders it low fantasy by the lines:

Her face resembles
the face of the young actress who played
Miss Annie Sullivan, she who
spelled the word "water" into the palm
of Helen Keller, opening
the doors of the world. (40)

Levertov uses the traditional feminine symbol of water to link two events, one historical and one visionary, of a woman sharing the gift of language with another woman. By the low fantasy grounding of the historical event, Levertov is able to emphasize the natural bond between female Muse and female poet without the sexual overtones that have been historically employed to define the muse/male poet relationship as a heteroerotic bonding, and by implication by the muse/female poet relationship as a taboo homoerotic bond. As DeShazer observes:

For the modern woman poet, it would seem, the re-mythologized female muse offers an important metaphorical source of imaginative energy. . . . If woman is to transcend her role as muse and assume that of poet, of powerful yet interdependent creator, she must revise these male myths, substituting for them stories and metaphors true to her female experience. By invoking a potent female muse, . . . She defines a whole new psychic geography of women's literary imagination. (44)

But Levertov is not yet content with her revisioning of the myth of the Muse. In "The Illustration," Levertov cites the source of the Muse as neither external nor transcendent as her earlier poem implied, but rather as internal: a vision produced from memory. This reinscribing of the muse from the external to the internal negates any metaphysical, transcendental idealism that posits the power for poesis outside the individual, and affirms the internal self-actualizing creativity of the female poet. Levertov concludes "The Illustration": "mistaken directions, forgotten signs / all bring the soul's travel to a place / of origin, a well / under the lake where the Muse moves" (42). While the origin of the vision of the Muse is the individual memory, Levertov suggests that this memory is not the Freudian-conceived personal consciousness, but a memory derived from individual experience and grounded in and made meaningful by a collective unconscious, one that is implicitly female. This conception of the Muse as an internally originating source of inspiration, both from the individual consciousness and female collective unconscious, is reinforced in "Song for Ishtar," where "The moon is a sow" and "I a pig and a poet // When she opens her white lips to devour me I bite back" (75).

Levertov's changing depiction of the Muse demonstrates not only a progression in her own conceptualization of woman as poet, but also reflects nonpatriarchal archetypal patterns strongly at work in the development of her remythopoia. Again, to quote from DeShazer:

For both sexes, the Jungian analyst M.L. von Franz asserts, the most powerful symbol of human totality and integration is the authentic self. . . . man in his dreams usually represents this integrated self as a masculine guardian of some sort, a guru or wise man. But 'in the dreams of a woman this center is usually personified as a superior female figure - a priestess, sorceress, earth mother, or goddess of nature or love.' As Franz further explains, such goddessness often appear as wise old women or supernaturally gifted young girls. (34-35)

For Levertov, the Muse began as the gifted young girl and then became the wise, but dangerous goddess. But unlike the traditional male depiction of the Muse/poet relationship of passive receptivity, sex, or marriage, Levertov revises the relationship as a joyful struggle between two women of near equality. One sees another important development in this metamorphosis of the Muse from gifted young girl to dark goddess: the rejection of the angelic, wanton yet virginal image of the female Muse so often figured by the male poet. This depiction of the mutually constituted opposition of light and dark, inspiring and devouring, angelic and demonic, is explicitly presented in terms of the female poet's own growth as an artist in Levertov's "The Wings." This poem describes the speaker as having a hump that she cannot see, and that the male has described as "black // inimical power" (161). But she questions his interpretation of it, and asks "What if released in air / it became a white // source of light?" (162). To the male the female's potential power as a poet, as a speaking subject in her own right, rather than the

object of a male poet's speaking, is "inimical," but the female speaker sees its potential power. Yet, she does not fall into the trap of the virgin/whore dualism. Levortov closes the poem by asking: "Could I go / on one wing. // the white one?" (162). The answer is obvious even if the male would wish to deny it.

Like Levortov, Adrienne Rich has also occasionally availed herself of remythopoeia as part of her feminist poetics, in part to address the problematic of the Muse for a female poet, and in part to call for a creative, anti-patriarchal mythology. Here I would like to discuss only a few poems from *Diving Into the Wreck*. "Incipience" is not a revisioning of myth per se, but a poem declaring the necessity for such revisioning presented through a short dream or fantasy sequence. Part I presents the metanarrative, the story of the poet herself struggling to envision and to write a new future for women: "to feel the fiery future / of every matchstick in the kitchen" (11). Part II establishes an us/them relationship between the man asleep in the next room and the women, poet and lover, awake talking. In the first stanza the women are trapped in the mythic vision of patriarchy: "We are his dreams / We have the heads and breasts of women / the bodies of birds of prey" (11). But in the second stanza, a woman neurosurgeon enters the man's room "and begins to dissect his brain" (12). The woman's seizing of a traditionally male role parallels the exploration of the man's brain, which can open up not only new patterns of behavior and relations of power between men and women but also empower women to explore new paths into the future. At the end of the middle stanza, Rich declares of the neurosurgeon: "She is not/might be either of us"; and in the final stanza announces that "Outside the frame of his dream we are stumbling up the hill / hand in hand" (12).

The "we" have broken the ideological hold of the man's power to dream them as "other," as mythic beasts, and in this regard the poet is able to explore the alternative dream of woman-to-woman relationship. But this ability to break the male dream is implicitly dependent not only on the assumption of new social roles but also on the ability of the poet introduced in Part I to write her life and envision a new future for women, "imagining the existence / of something uncreated / this poem / our lives" (11). As DeShazer notes, quoting Rich, "when a woman seeks a poetic voice and stance, 'she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. . . but precisely what does she find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together'" (26). Rather than being able to find this person, the woman poet must write her into the story, so that "the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy" (Ostriker 73).

In "Diving into the Wreck," the title poem of the book, Rich extends the audience of her revisioning of myth to

include men, like the lost dreamer of "Incipience" and "the drowned face" of this poem. Both men and women must be freed from the old myths and given new myths in order to establish new relationships of power and love. First, the speaker rejects the patriarchal version of history in order to locate reality: "the thing I came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth" (23; Gubar 313). Having found "the thing itself," she begins to construct a new myth in which the dichotomous alienation of otherness may be banished. This takes the form of the androgynous doubling of self in the eighth stanza, in which the poet becomes mermaid and merman: "we dive into the hold. / I am she: I am he" (24). Both have been drowned by the past, but now are being reborn by returning to the primal amniotic scene "carrying a knife, a camera / a books of myths / in which / our names do not appear" (24). Cutting themselves free and at last seeing a true picture of who they are, these new people's names will not appear in the old "book of myths," because they are a type of humanity that has either not yet existed or has not been inscribed in the traditional mythologies.

That the envisioning of this new humanity cannot be accomplished simply by new mythopoeia without revising and critiquing the old mythology is patently presented in "Living in the Cave." In this poem, Rich revises Plato's idealist "Parable of the Cave," exposing the way in which it codifies the very concept of otherness upon which patriarchal power is founded: women perceived as other, as objects, by men without any possibility of constituting themselves as mutual subject: "None of them, not one / sees me / as I see them" (42). If this seeing is to occur, the recognition of the other as mutual subject, then the old myths must be destroyed. But since, as Ostriker suggests, "the need for myth of some sort may be ineradicable" (71), they must also be replaced.

Ursula Le Guin's widespread revisioning of myth actually begins with a broader perspective than the inclusion of women in myth. The "other" in a variety of its implications and transformations – woman, animal, earth – is provided with a voice, with inclusion, and constituted as a speaking subject in numerous poems and stories. Her work begins to focus more on women and feminist revisioning at it develops through time. In terms of poetry she initiates her practice of revisionist mythmaking in *Wild Angels*, her first chapbook, with "Mount St Helens/Omphalos" (reprinted in *Buffalo Gals*). This poem is a low fantasy that participates in a mythopoeia in which the traditional myths are not merely revitalized, as they are in other poems in *Wild Angels* like "Arboreal," but a new mythic tradition is being invented. Here it is a shamanistic and Taoist-oriented mythopoeia that takes the traditional henge and makes it a figure of life in the service of a decentering faith that places the earth, the mountain, and stone at the center of the world rather than "man." This poem by itself only hints in the direction of revisionary mythopoeia, and is reinforced in *Wild Angels* only by the closing poem, "Tao Song," that indicates Le Guin's commitment to Taoist philosophy.

The revisionary dimensions of this mythopoeia, however, are further adumbrated in *Hard Words*, in such poems as "Danaë 46" and "Carmagnole of the Thirtieth of June." "Danaë 46" explicitly develops a feminist revisioning through inverting the classic story of Zeus and Danaë. Le Guin presents Danaë's view of the god at the age of 46, when she is no longer so young and pretty. Danaë still passionately desires the pleasure of physical love, but, of course, her patriarchal god will not come again since he chauvinistically seeks younger fare. In "Carmagnole of the Thirtieth of June," one gets an intensely feminist low fantasy poem in which the narrator envisions herself first as a witch and then as a goddess dancing on Siva's chest. The poem is an intentionally bizarre mixture of diction, dialects, and imagery, shifting from contemporary America to the end of the Hindu kalpa cycle. Above all it utilizes the feminist revisioning of the "witch" stereotype to transform it into an image of power. This image carries over into the Hindu part of the poem in which the woman is dancing on Siva, who is traditionally depicted as himself the multi-armed dancer. Not only are we given woman as speaking subject in both poems, but in the second poem the woman's positive adaptation of male attributed negative stereotypes becomes a form of self-empowerment.

Believing in the necessity of myth for culture, and recognizing that the old myths by excluding women as speaking subjects have failed us, Le Guin has come to perceive her own poetic fabulation as part of the process of developing a new mythology for the future. In *Buffalo Gals*, Le Guin states that she is self-consciously engaging in the writing of fantasy poems as a feminist revisioning of myth. She notes in this regard that "very often the re-visioning consists in a 'simple' change of point of view. It is possible that the very concept of point-of-view may be changing, may have to change, or to be changed, so that our reality can be narrated" (75). Reality is not what we have thought it to have been, and so the old "realism," the mythology of patriarchy, must be replaced.

"Danaë 46" provides an example from *Hard Words* of such a change of point of view, but the speaker's perspective is not as overtly feminist as it is in "The Crown of Laurel," published in *Buffalo Gals*. Here Le Guin presents Daphne's viewpoint in regard to her existence as "Apollo's tree." Instead of Edith Hamilton's "the beautiful shining-leaved tree seemed to nod its swaying head as if in happy consent" (115), Le Guin emphasizes Daphne's reproach of Apollo:

He liked to feel my fingers in his hair.
So he pulled them off me, wove a wreath of them,
and wears it at parades and contests,
my dying fingers with their kitchen smell
interlocked around his sunny curls, sometimes he rests
on me a while.

Aside from that, he seems to have lost interest. (78)

As the poem proceeds we find that Daphne did not run from Apollo out of fear for her virginity, but because she "wasn't in the mood." Apollo failed to arouse her interest

because he had "one will, instead of wantings meeting; / no center but himself, the Sun." Rape is rape and Daphne will have none of it, even from a god. The poem closes emphasizing her final triumph: "He honors me, he says, to wear / my fingers turning brown and brittle, clenched / in the bright hair of his head. He sings // My silence crowns the song" (80). Susan Gubar has noted that "whether she is the epitome of male desire or the symbol of male fears, the representative of his needs or his revulsions, the woman of myth is not her own person" (301). While Daphne may remain silent in response to Apollo, Le Guin has made her a speaking subject, "her own person," who is not only included in the myth, but also through her voice utterly subverts the old version of that myth. It should be mentioned that Le Guin does this throughout *Buffalo Girls* in both prose and verse, providing the points of view of a variety of speaking subjects previously silenced through being rendered as the "Other," as objects for contemplation and appropriation through the excluding power of patriarchal perception.

Stanford's Mythopoeic Cycle

In the case of Rukeyser, Levortov, Rich and Le Guin, we have been looking at individual poems. These poems by themselves do not really suggest the far-reaching possibilities of this mode of writing. Ostriker argues that "since the core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (73-74). In other words, the poems so far studied can be seen as part of a sniping guerrilla warfare, quick, simple, efficient, and immediately and powerfully effective. But it would be a disservice to the breadth and significance of revisionary mythmaking to speak just of its poetic embodiments at this level of the struggle. Longer works have been written that go beyond defamiliarizing and letting the previously silent speak. Both cycles and sequences have attempted to engage in set-piece battles, to immerse the reader in this new mythic point of view. Here we can only look at one poem cycle, Ann Stanford's "The Women of Perseus," as an example of such work.

The title of Stanford's cycle, included in *In Mediterranean Air*, indicates the objectified status of the women about whom Stanford will write. These women, Danaë, the Graee, Medusa, and Andromeda, appear in mythology not because of their own deeds but because they facilitate Perseus's rise to heroic stature. Until now their point of view on Perseus and the adventures in which he is implicated have been left out.

The cycle begins naturally enough with Danaë, Perseus's mother, who is isolated in a bronze house by her father, where she may be watched and prevented from conceiving the child that the oracle at Delphi has prophesied will kill him. Part I of this six-part poem begins with Danaë reflecting on her imprisonment. Her life has

been suspended because it is subordinated to the will and desire of the Father: "I am caught here / in the held air" (33). She can only imagine the activities of society: "Unreal from this distance / the procession as on a vase / the lovers leaning on one another / the world going about its business" (33). Stanford has begun the revisioning of myth by altering the point of view to that of Danaë, as did Le Guin, and here she initiates a critique of patriarchal mythology and its attendant apologists and glorifiers throughout the history of English poetry. By comparing the external world that Danaë can only envision to idealized images "as on a vase," Stanford criticizes the idealizations and romanticizations of the oppression of women that have constituted much of the retelling of myths and glorification of Greek culture, particularly in the Romantic period. The latter is emphasized through the obvious allusion to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In refusing to entertain the woman's point of view, to consider the woman as subject in classical mythology, previous poets have rationalized and idealized a brutal system of patriarchal oppression that renders children and wives the property of their husbands and fathers, objects to be sacrificed, exiled, murdered, and raped for the pleasure of the gods or for their appeasement.

Part II of "Danaë" presents the individual freedom that Danaë feels at night because it protects her from observation: "Night is my own. / The tower a shadow in shadows" (35) with the only light coming from the moon. But this light, emanating from a goddess and a traditional symbol of the feminine, serves as a form of oppression, not only because it allows her father to keep her under surveillance but also because it is the means of Zeus's rape. But Danaë initially views this engendering act as one of love, saying that "Radiant with sun / my lover presses upon me" (36) in Part III, and then in Part IV "I have lain with the sun, my lover, / and the sun's child will burst forth from my dark / at morning" (37). In her desire for freedom from the Father, Danaë views her rape by Zeus as a means of liberation. This is reinforced by her musings in this section on her desire to escape from her palatial confinement and be "the wife of a fisherman" (37). Escape from the Father in this context cannot mean the kind of liberation that Rich writes of in "Incipience," but can only mean escape by means of attachment to, becoming the property of, another male.

This perpetual reality of subjection to the male begins to be realized by Danaë in Part V in which she reflects on her entrapment in the box with Perseus that has been cast into the sea by her father. She is repelled by the infant who is clutching at her, subject to him, as to Zeus, as to her father, as necessitated by the Law of Patriarchy:

Starve, drown, suffocate.

These are my gifts

from my father who starved me of love

from my lover who drowned me in love

from my son for whose birth I die in this stinking box.

(39)

Trapped, Danaë appeals to Zeus not for her own sake as lover, but for the sake of his son. Danaë realizes that her "value" now in society is only as a mother, and if Zeus is going to save her from the father who seeks to destroy her, he will do so only in her capacity to serve.

In the final section, Part VI, of "Danaë," she is now a fisherman's wife raising Perseus on a poor island. And here she is objectified and possessed not only as a wife and a mother but also as a sexual object: "and the king looks my way too often / The beauty that brought a god from heaven / withers in this forsaken land" (40). As in Le Guin's poem, this Danaë realizes that Zeus's interest was purely physical, as is the interest of the goat-island king, and that her deliverance from her father, her seduction by Zeus, and her deliverance from drowning in the ocean, none of these have provided her with freedom. Rather, she has traded one form of domination for another.

The next poem in the cycle, "The Graeae," is much shorter than "Danaë." The three sisters speak only of their fate, to be rendered "always old, always turning away / from ripeness" (41). There is no hope of change or freedom for these three, and Stanford seeks only to evoke the reader's pity by having us recognize that the monstrosity here is not the blind sisters who share one eye but the culture whose mythology would impose such a fate on any living being. This recognition of the true monstrosity is further emphasized in the following poem, "Medusa," which reminds the reader of that essential detail frequently omitted from the legend of Perseus: Medusa became a monster as a result of her being raped by Poseidon.

It is no great thing to be a god. For me it was anger —
no consent on my part, no wooing, all harsh
rough as a field hand. I didn't like it.

My hair coiled in fury; my mind held hate alone.

I thought of revenge, began to live on it.

My hair turned to serpents, my eyes saw the world in
stone. (42)

Poseidon is here revealed as the true monster, and Medusa can only respond to his brutality through her own monstrous obsession with revenge. As we know, revenge is one of the few motivations allowed to women in Greek mythology and drama; an emotion apparently so intense that it empowers women, if not to become protagonists of stories, at least to become antagonists. At the same time it reinforces the stereotype of women as essentially irrational. But in Stanford's revisioning, Medusa does not wish to have such power: "The prisoner of myself, I long to lose / the serpent hair . . . / . . . but there recur / thoughts of the god and his misdeed always" (43). It is the male's freedom from punishment that prevents Medusa from being able to relinquish her hatred. What a curious pattern Stanford exposes: rape depicted as the major motivating force for women shifting from passive objectification to active antagonism. The patriarchal mythology, even when it must depict strong, active women, refuses to present them as self-motivated but ever reactive to male initiative, and always some kind of monster.

The last of "The Women of Perseus" is "Andromeda." She speaks out against her father, who, like Danaë's father, gives more weight to the words of an oracle than to the blood-ties between father and daughter. Andromeda is his possession to be used as a sacrifice. But beyond this, Andromeda exposes the romantic illusion of the happy ending, that glosses over the repeated brutality toward children, particularly daughters, that appear throughout the old myths, "If this were a story there would be a hero," she says (44). Only in romance is the woman "saved" from patriarchal oppression by another male. But as Stanford's Danaë has already clarified, the deliverance is merely a change of masters, not liberation.

Many other individual poems and cycles revising the classical myths from a feminist viewpoint and/or presenting the female point of view within the myth focus exclusively on the women of such stories, since theirs is the voice that has been silenced and denied, the object refused the status of subject. But here Stanford also gives us the story of Perseus, but with Perseus having a very different point of view than traditionally depicted. In fact, by presenting Perseus's own ideas on the story, Stanford reveals the degree to which he too has been objectified and stereotyped, the degree to which the patriarchal objectification of women must inevitably objectify the men according to the necessities of oppression and the dominant ideology as well. In "Perseus," we discover that he too has been oppressed by the conditions of his mother's exile, having to live up to the expectations forced upon him by the stature of his father and fend off the lascivious king without incurring his wrath. And it is this king, wanting to get Perseus out of the picture so he can go after Danaë, who sends him on his first quest for the head of Medusa. Patriarchy, then, oppresses the son as well as the mother.

Stanford's Perseus is hardly a heroic figure. He agrees to get Medusa's head because, he tells us, he is young and apparently foolish. Of the Graecae, he says, "I felt sorry for them / but I took the eye and the tooth anyway" (46). And as for Medusa, he has a twinge of pity for her as well, recognizing that "Maybe she had once been beautiful / but no longer," as well as experiencing a moment of remorse: "I had never killed anyone" (47). As for Andromeda, he admits that "Had she not been beautiful I might have gone on. / It was none of my business what she was doing there" (47). Perseus it turns out is a very pragmatic hero as he reveals in this pun, "I married the maiden, freezing all objections / with the look on Medusa's face" (47-48). And, of course, he returns home and makes life better for his mother. How? By making the fisherman who is Danaë's husband the king. But despite all this, Perseus is not satisfied. He feels an emptiness as King of Argos, asking "And was that all? There must be more than this" (48). Perseus's glory has resulted repeatedly from the oppression and brutality directed against women, against women who have been denied the opportunity to live their own lives, to be their own heroes, to have adventures of their own choosing. His glory finally leaves him empty because it is

built on a system that may leave him master but finally cannot bring him into relationship with the other or himself as a genuinely free subject. He, like the women, is trapped by patriarchy, although he has the superficial benefits of that oppression. In "The Women of Perseus," Stanford tells us that no one can be complete while trapped in such mythology, and she begins the process of breaking that trap by revising one of its most popular myths.

In "The Thieves of Language," Ostriker makes the point that "revisionist mythmaking in women's poetry may offer us one significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture" (71). Feminist remythopoeia provides part of the answer to Perseus's complaint: "And was that all? There must be more than this." But it does so with a "could be" rather than an "is," exposing one of the ideological mechanisms that inhibit the realization of that "could be": the mythology of patriarchal ideology. But if indeed myth is necessary to civilization, and since the old myths have certainly been disseminated throughout our culture, then we must not only reject the old myths and their patriarchal ideology. We must also rewrite those myths to give women a voice as speaking subjects and engage in new mythmaking. Such contemporary feminist (re)mythopoeia as that briefly discussed here is an essential and leading force in this very process. ♀

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