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Icarus extended paper 3

From *now* to *once upon a time*: reading the Book of Myths

Abstract:

Myths distil the ethos of a rich cultural past and some still influence the present. Characters such as Icarus, Artemis-Diana or Circe have appeared since the classical period in literature and art. Most myths in some way address distributions of power – between genders, between spiritual and social hierarchies. In order to critique these so-called truths or discover new ones, twentieth and twenty-first century writers have sought to understand them from the inside out – whether we call this activity reinterpretation, writing back, textual intervention or rebellion – or subsume those under the label of practice-led research. Wrestling or playing with stories is a way of breaking their hold if that is necessary, a way of exorcising the demon past, or alternatively a way of fulfilling their imaginative potential for another era. Writers accomplish this as variously as their backgrounds and personalities allow.

Writing back to myth has a particular political and social history in the twentieth century that continues to the present, however. The feminist project of the 1970s, particularly in the United States and Canada, envisioned this critique of patriarchal language and mythic structures as imperative. Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood's early work ('Diving into the Wreck' and the 'Circe-Mud Poems' respectively) exemplifies this drive to peel back the cultural flesh of mythology, to strip it down to its bones in order to reveal the architecture of thought. Diana, my character from a verse-novel manuscript Vanishing Point, who has several namesakes in the past, is also used to demonstrate contemporary writers' approaches to myths. Writers today intervene in the texts of past centuries for a range of purposes, therefore, attempting to negotiate with ancestors in order to return to tell their tales for social and cultural as well as individual benefit.

Biographical note:

Jeri Kroll is Professor and Programme Coordinator of Creative Writing at Flinders University in Adelaide. She has published over twenty titles for adults and young people, including poetry, picture books and novels. *The Mother Workshops*, *Creative Writing Studies* and *felis domestica* are recent books. In 2009, she was a Visiting Fellow at George Washington University in the US collaborating on a staged reading of her verse novel, *Vanishing Point*, and later took up a Varuna Fellowship to finish the novel. In 2011, Palgrave will publish *Research Methods in Creative Writing* and Picaro Press a selection of children's poems.

1 Introduction: Once Upon a Time

> All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending on how you look at it. (Atwood 2002 'Negotiating with the Dead': 178)

Margaret Atwood's cryptic qualification, 'Depending on how you look at it,' encapsulates a writer's challenge – how to respond to stories that distil the ethos of a rich cultural past, recounting why things are as they are and how human beings need to behave to live in harmony with gods and nature – in other words, with spiritual and physical dimensions.[1] These stories still influence the present as, for example, variations on the hero's journey.[2] Myth and legend's tenacious roots hold fast in our collective conscious and unconscious, according to James Fraser (1922, 1967) and Carl Jung (1958), grounding or immobilising our psyches as the case may be. Sacred stories from a range of religions have been studied too by those who do not view them as religious documents. Most of these texts in some way address distributions of power – between genders, between spiritual and social hierarchies, for example; and of course they tell us about human frailty. In order to internalise these so-called truths, or to critique them and discover new ones, twentieth-century male and female writers [3] have sought to understand them from the inside out – whether we call this activity reinterpretation, writing back, intervention, or rebellion – or subsume those under the academic label of practice-led research.

This preoccupation with comparative mythology has not abated in contemporary times, and has broadened to include seminal stories from world cultures. Suniti Namjoshi (1996) in *Building Babel* interrogates mythology from a Hindu perspective, focusing on how it engages our spirituality:

> We try to visualise the mystery in any way we can, particularly by means of poetry, but the images are of our own making. They are snares, devices, nets, in which we try to catch some sense of the unknown, Crone Kronos, if you like. This means that to insist that a particular story about a god is a 'fact' is to 'fantasise.' It is to insist that a particular snare or device is the definitive one, and that it is something more than a human effort, however inspired. (xii-xiii)

This limitation is not a negative, since it only means that writers must keep reinterpreting in order to keep connecting with that 'other' realm. After all, once you have listened to, read, or studied those potent stories, you cannot forget them, especially the ones that impress you not only imaginatively but also viscerally. Characters such as Icarus, Artemis-Diana or Circe, for example, have appeared since the classical period as allusions or characters in literature and art. Consider, too, the unicorn, which has achieved a kind of bestial immortality, according to Matti Megged, 'induc[ing] so many poets and artists across different epochs and cultures, to bestow on him the power to exist-and-not-exist' (1992:18); he plays hide and seek in books about real and imaginary beasts as well as in novels and poems. Re-immersion in myths is not an academic exercise if they have colonised the writer's consciousness, become part of the fabric of a mind. Wrestling or playing with stories is a way of breaking their hold if that is necessary, a way of exorcising the demon past, or

alternatively a way of fulfilling their imaginative potential for another era. Writers accomplish this as variously as their backgrounds and personalities allow. They fill in gaps, tell about what happens next, follow up clues, turn ghostly presences into full-blooded characters, rewrite endings and respond to or in other art forms.

2 Reading the Book of Myths

Textual intervention as an academic or even writerly exercise might have several aims therefore. According to Rob Pope, 'The best way to understand how a text works is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in some way … and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done' (1995: 1). This goal might be designed to educate as well as to perfect craft. Certainly mythology has been a staple inspirational source for artists as well as writers over the centuries. Ekphrasis, the 'literary subgenre' (Verdonk 2005: 232) that involves 'a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art' (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* www.aolsvc.merriam-webster.aol.com/dictionary/ekphrasis), has continued to link myth, visual art and poetry into the twenty-first century. For example, in 'The Poet in the Art Gallery: Accounting for Ekphrasis' (2010), David Kinloch discusses the challenge of composing a collection based around museum art funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The form his interaction/intervention ultimately took surprised him, because it did not neatly divide into creative and critical. He found himself creating a hybrid work where 'criticism and poetry co-exist in the form of a ''poessay'' or ''essoem''' (27).

Writing back to myth has a particular political and social history in the twentieth century that continues to the present, however. The feminist project of the 1970s, particularly in the United States and Canada, envisioned this critique of patriarchal mythic structures as imperative, since the pattern of gender relations embedded in so much Greek and Roman mythology as well as Biblical texts underpins the sexual politics of Western culture. Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood's early work exemplifies this drive to peel back the cultural flesh of mythology, to strip it down to its bones in order to reveal the architecture of thought. In her seminal essay, '''When We Dead Awaken'': Writing as Revision' (1971), Rich manipulates the term *revision* for the purposes of feminist critique. 'Re-vision' (90), as she defines it, is 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' (9). For those who want to re-imagine the future, this re-engagement with the past 'is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival' (90). Her unpacking of the way in which this is true involves not simply gender relations, but the role of language in determining how we think about ourselves and therefore act. Her poetic manifesto, 'Diving into the Wreck' (1973), reveals how poetry can function as a type of psychological and cultural research as her narrator descends into the unconscious to probe, document and understand.

> First having read the book of myths,
> and loaded the camera,
> and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
> I put on the body-armor of black rubber

the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask . . . (65-66)

Whatever formal and informal conventions must be followed for an epistemological journey of this type, language, however constricting, must be involved as the writer's necessary tool: 'The words are purposes./The words are maps' (67). Words must be used to argue about what the book of myths contains and also they are what aids the speaker – an androgynous he/she – to determine what is 'the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth' (67). This poem is about taking imaginative as well as literal risks, because if writers – and readers – do not drown in outmoded certainties that surround primal human truths, when they break the surface they will be faced with admitting that myths no longer tell us what we need to know about ourselves and our culture. Who then will create the myths that offer new ways of being in the world? The poem implies that writers must understand the old stories first and then take the risk of imagining new ones.

3 Interfering with the Goddess

Intervention is a loaded term that has positive as well as negative connotations, depending on where and on whom the intervention takes place. Government intervention involves 'the interposition or interference of one state in the affairs of another …' (*Macquarie*). On an individual level intervening can mean 'to come between in action; intercede,' as a negotiator might, but it can also mean 'to come in, as something not belonging' (*Macquarie*). The notion of interference sometimes implies sexual misconduct; it is a euphemism for abuse. In classical mythology the heavenly crew continually interfere in the affairs of men – and women – playing out their divine power politics and satisfying their appetites. Their cultural legacy encompasses stories that reveal both gods and human beings driven by pride and passion. Transformations, metamorphoses, incest and dismemberment jostle for attention amidst heroic deeds.

Margaret Atwood's collection, *You Are Happy* (1974), which features 'Songs of the Transformed' (29-44) and a hybrid piece, the 'Circe-Mud Poems' (45-70), appeared only a year after 'Diving into the Wreck,' which Atwood knew[4]. It is a rewriting of a brief interlude in the *Odyssey*, summarising the hero's one-year stand with the witch Circe on her island, before he inevitably makes his way home to Penelope and Ithaca, where domesticity and the patriarchal order are re-established. A contemporary frame and prose poems enrich and complicate this poetic analysis of the relationship between hero and goddess, man and woman, sex and love, past and possible futures [5]. Circe, for her part, once the first blush of the affair is over, admits

Men with the heads of eagles
no longer interest me
or pig-men, or those who can fly
with the aid of wax and feathers . . . (47)

Hybrids, gods, demi-gods and supreme artificers like Daedelus and his foolhardy son, Icarus, only vary stultifying patterns. They do not promise change and, hence, escape from the rigidity of roles. Circe reveals that

> I search instead for the others,
> the ones left over,
> the ones who have escaped from these
> mythologies with barely their lives… (47)

Retelling the stories might provide a key to breaking out of them. Elsewhere Atwood has commented that

> I'm very interested in various mythologies…because I think most people have unconscious mythologies. Again, I think it's a question of making them conscious…And I don't believe that people should divest themselves of all their mythologies …It's just a question of getting one that is livable and not destructive to you (1992 Atwood in Kaminski 32).

In a key prose poem in the sequence, Circe conceives of these ancient stories as intransigent, as 'ruthless,' dictating how men and women behave and, therefore, how relationships will play out over the centuries.

> It's the story that counts. No use telling me this isn't a story, or not the same story . . . Am I really immortal, does the sun care, when you leave will you give me back the words? Don't evade, don't pretend you won't leave after all: you leave in the story and the story is ruthless. (68)

Here story is a treadmill that carries us on in the same direction unless readers and writers alike take control when the story 'doesn't say what happens then' (68) – to Circe and Odysseus' transformed men who are left on the island. Of course the hero of the epic has his heroic destiny fulfilled and his domestic rewards. That part of the story so far has been ruthless or unvarying. Atwood's project in this collection and in later work involves offering new ways of reading and creating texts, as it has other for other women writers in the late twentieth-century.

4 Reading as a Writer/Writing as a Reader

The notion of language, in particular words themselves, as a bridge between the divine and the human is embedded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, exemplified by Moses' Ten Commandments written by the hand of God and Jesus as the Word made Flesh in the form of the Eucharist. Other traditions too conceive of reading as an act that can join the sacred and profane by being spiritual, psychological and physical. Brenda Walker in *Reading by Moonlight* (2010), a creative nonfiction text subtitled '*how books saved a life*,' charts her personal journey to recovery from breast cancer and, in the act of writing about books that sustained her, embodies the meaning of reading's power. One of the ancient stories it recounts concerns a ruler who manages to save his people through reading and writing as a spiritual and physical act.

> A long time ago, the Japanese emperor Saga…made a copy of a Buddhist text in order to save his people from illness. Through the act of transcribing, he performed a full-

bodied reading, one that took place in the wrist, the fingers and the spine, as well as the eyes. An obedient reading of an important sutra; reading as an act of ritual and sanctity, of altruism, of personal and ceremonial involvement with a text and with the suffering of others. (133)

So reading and writing can be altruistic, heroic, sacrificial and sacramental. It can also be understood as an act of love based on sharing, jealousy or possessiveness, depending upon the writer-reader, who absorbs, ingests and/or cannibalises ancestors for varying reasons.

Suniti Namjoshi's *Building Babel* (1996) solicits reader involvement (VII The Reader's Text, 182-191) in a manner peculiar to the digital age; in fact the book is dedicated to the 'Reader/that Sweet Barbarian,' and altruistically opens out her texts to a global audience on the web. She intends to live by her premise, stated in her Introduction, that 'every re-telling of a myth is a re-working of it. Every hearing or reading of a myth is a re-creation of it. It is only when we engage with a myth that it resonates, that it becomes charged and re-charged with meaning' (1996: xi). She invites Readers to respond, providing questions, a website and guidelines negotiated with Spinifex Press. This invitation asks for a potential simultaneous engagement with mythology and, in particular, with the subjective myths she offers in *Building Babel*.

We could rip off our masks. My own name is on the title page. And yours? We could meet, have a conversation, exchange messages. But the point, surely, is to exchange masks, not rip them off. You too have something to offer no doubt … (182)

Namjoshi suggests, thus, that reading her book can lead to the act of writing for others. She has already negotiated with her familial and cultural ancestors; now it is up to her audience to decide how they will negotiate with their living and dead.

5 Namesakes: the House of Diana

'Names are the essential.' (*Watt*, Samuel Beckett)

As soon as the name 'Diana' came to me for the central character of my verse novel, *Vanishing Point* (Kroll 2010), I knew more about her. Diana is an anorexic seventeen-year old who feels as if she is trapped 'in her coffin of a house' with her overweight mother, her rigid father and her Downs-Syndrome brother. Anorexia for her is about control and a pathway to perfection. She reads myths too – her name resonates with meaning and she is desperate to use that understanding as a weapon to escape – whether into life or death is one of the work's questions. 'Names are the essential' says Samuel Beckett in his permutation-mad, punning early novel *Watt* (1953), which explores, among other things, how the mind constructs reality.

What do names say about us? Diana learns that her namesake has had several denotations with accompanying epithets and, consequently, several histories. The mythic past is not necessarily buried; patterns survive to cage the spirit. The more my Diana reads, the more versions of myths to ensnare her she finds; these myths are not only about Diana, but about her devotees, the girls and women who have dedicated themselves to similar ideals. She becomes determined to choose the ones she wants to

live by, striving for the isolate strength of the hunter, the cool, slim perfection of chastity. She intends to write her story with her body; to make her words into flesh.

Listen to her as she weaves a new history for herself that, she believes, will transform her from passive victim to triumphant ideal. In 'Namesake,' she begins with an Invocation (part 1) to the Lady of Wild Things, aka Artemis, Selene, Hecate and Diana, and then moves to baptise herself in part 2.

> 2 Baptism
> *What did Diana, chaste hunter,*
> *the sun's twin, love best?*
> *Hounds, woods, herself?*
> *Chase me for the answer.*
>
> I'm on her trail, hunting alter egos.
> She won't escape, my namesake.
> Scraps of myth, legendary lies,
> tales of haughty heroes.
> I century-hop, follow every scent.
>
> Moon goddess, she maddened poets,
> tantalising them in all her forms:
> a slim rip in the dark, bleeding light;
> a crescent hip draped in velvet,
> a silver disc no male could spend.
>
> Queen of Witches, Mistress of Magic,
> Celtic mother, caster of charms,
> prayed to by healing-women,
> not so wise –
> how many went up in flames?
>
> When I was born Diana was a princess,
> an English myth my mother loved.
> But hunters know the fate of prey.
> Stalked, snapped at, caught on film,
> finally bailed up, dispatched.
>
> I understand those royal secrets now.
> How she purged herself
> of everything that weighed her down –
> family and sex – but she lost faith
> in the one true path.
>
> The lone girl pleasing no one
> but her own cool self –
> that's my namesake's meaning.
> I snap my photos, film what's real,
> document this shrinking life.
>
> Subtract parents,

and brother fat with love.
Let my heart race on,
thrill at the chase:
untouched Diana's stern ideal.

Now pen my epithet
(I'm Libra, after all) –
Diana of the Scales
who hates the verb *to be*.
Listen. This is no passive voice.

I claim this name. This me.

Diana sorts through this wealth of alter egos and the cultural, literary and linguistic baggage they come with. She believes that no matter who you were or might become, you live in tension with those 'others' named before you. Reading or re-reading into her name, Diana searches for

that sliver of truth
in every myth,
a meaning small enough
to swallow whole.

Fine tuning her own version of reality in the above poem, 'Epilogue,' she critiques the past and sets her goals towards an uncompromising present, since she has been disappointed with family, school and love.

Long ago I read these tales,
long ago in another life.

I shed that self
like a pair of jeans
gone at the seams,

dressed myself in vogue,
the House of Diana's
all the rage for me.

Diana is not aware of the sexual politics of eating disorders or the risks she runs. Slimming for her is a manifestation of her drive to perfection. Her fascination with centaurs as a child and horse racing as a young adult (and the Irish trainer who introduces that sport to her) feeds into her understanding of the Lady of Wild Things, hunter-in-chief to the gods.

6 Conclusion: Rereading

'To narrate means to speak here and now with an authority that derives from having been (literally or metaphorically) there and then.' (Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath'* as quoted in Atwood 179)

'Everything possible to be believ'd is an image of truth.' (Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,' line 37)

Artists in cultures throughout recorded history have responded to those mythological stories that have endured, since they contribute to the social, cultural, psychological and spiritual ethos of a time. Reinterpretation is inevitably part of re-reading or re-creating according to one's aesthetic and cultural orientation. Sometimes how much one sees is determined by how much one looks for. My character Diana discovers this after she survives a brush with death, returns to life in hospital and emerges into the world again.

> I guess I'm reading back into my life
> and out of it again –
> revisiting old myths, old friends.
>
> Rereading

Diana is in sympathy with contemporary writers' approaches to myths in that she finally desires an open-ended engagement, one that emphasises possibilities rather than rigid outcomes. Healing involves coming to terms with the past and then moving on to discover subjective truths rather than the 'ruthless' sameness of old stories. This is true for my character Diana and it seems to be a possibility at the end of Atwood's 'Circe/Mud Poems,' where the man and woman, who appear now to be walking through a Canadian landscape, not a static classical world driven by the fates or fickle gods, experience the cold particularity of winter. Writers today 'intervene' in the texts of past centuries for a range of purposes, therefore, but not simply to repackage them in contemporary garb. They often want to enter the story's architecture, to live within its bones, to discover pathways in the human consciousness that have remained unexplored. This is not simply a manifestation of early or late twentieth-century solipsism or even, on a very specific level, the injunction to 'find your voice' that can turn into craft workshop narcissism. It means negotiating with ancestors in order to return to tell your own tale for social and cultural as well as individual benefit.

Endnotes

1. William Blake treated the intersection between myth and religion throughout his career in both major and minor poems and in his art. Note in particular his analysis of the connection between myth and religion in plate 11 of 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' (37).

2. The plot paradigm associated with this journey in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries takes its most familiar form in films and fantasy genre fiction. Christopher Vogler's 'how-to write a Hollywood film script' book, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, is based on Vladimir Propp's structural analysis of folk tales, offering convenient if oversimplified cultural and historical links. According to Vogler, the hero's journey underpins the most successful Hollywood adventure films (*Star Wars, Indiana Jones* cycle, et al). This pattern has also found its way into cyberspace and gaming. Lars Ole Sauerberg (2004) notes epic elements in modern long poems as well as in historical novels and 'epic' films (441).

3. For example, heavyweight modernists such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, H. D., W. H. Auden, and much later Angela Carter, among others too numerous to mention. In Australia writers such as Diane Fahey, Susan Hampton and Catherine Bateson have reengaged with mythology.

4. See Atwood's 'Negotiating with the Dead.' For years I coordinated a Flinders University topic, 'Fictions and Transformations,' and lectured on how 'Women Poets Respond to Myth and Tradition' (i.e. Margaret Atwood, Diane Fahey, Kate Llewellyn, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Judith Wright and

Fay Zwicky). See also 'I am a Desert Island: Postmodern Landscapes in Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems"' (Kroll 2001) for a full discussion.

5. The text reveals Circe wondering if men become as frustrated as women do, trapped by their roles: – 'Don't you get tired of saying "Onward?"'

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