

Le Juez, Brigitte and Metka Zupančič (eds.). *Le mythe au féminin et l'(in)visibilisation du corps*. Brill, 2021, ISBN: 978-90-04-47021-7

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Historically, in Greek, Biblical and African myths female figures have been portrayed as inferior to male ones. Masculine characters were considered heroes, whereas feminine were punished, or even eliminated. In this book the place of women in the collective conscious is explored through myths. The idea of producing this volume has its origins in the VIII Conference of the European Society of Comparative Literature that took place in Lille (France) in 2019. It is a collection of theoretical and interpretative feminist studies within the mythical approach. As the editors Brigitte Le Juez and Metka Zupančič explain in the introduction: the volume permits each essay define the most suitable mythopoetic parameters according to the points proposed. The essays offer new perspectives on the nature and function of diverse myths studying aesthetic, philosophical, political, and sociohistorical issues. This volume provides updated interdisciplinary research from thirteen authors from ten different countries and four continents exploring the nature of myth and interrogate the universality of myths to analyze the flexibility of their reception in a global and contemporary level. The feminine body, the imaginary and collective conscious are examined in this volume: comparative studies of feminine characters from ancient and contemporary literary works, analyses of feminist rewriting of myths and theories about feminine myths in literature, art, cinema, and philosophy. The volume is divided into four parts: the first focuses on Medusa, the second on Orpheus and Eurydice, the third on Body (Re) construction, from mother to daughter, and the last one on the presentation of the feminine myth.

In the first chapter Metka Zupančič explains why Medusa has been traditionally portrayed as a monster, in the collective imaginary and how, in the contemporary imaginary she is represented as a strong and benevolent character in art and creativity. Medusa myth is considered a vast symbolic ensemble that gathers the double quality of protection and destruction. Like a mother, like the sun and the sea

she can give and destroy life. Nevertheless, she has been portrayed as the incarnation of the archetype of the femme fatale and the castrating mother. For Zupančič, Medusa incarnates a feminine figure that represents our profound terrors and those terrors become tangible through art. With the attempt to find the reason why the image of the monster Medusa has been created, in her reading of Dimitris Karakostas and Le Run she finds that she represents the primitive femininity of prehistorical matriarchal societies. Against the established paradigms of the collective conscious, the feminist assertions of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous are used to reevaluate the Medusa myth giving it a conciliator ability for art and creativity, especially feminine.

In the second chapter Christa Stevens analyses the notions of the obscene, the apotropaic and the abject in the scenes from three stories by Marguerite Duras: *The Man Sitting in the Corridor*, *The Malady of Death* and *Blue Eyes, Dark Hair*, in which a woman offers her sex to a man. Stevens considers that with these scenes Duras defies Sigmund Freud's theory of the feminine sex as monstrous which has persisted in the Western imaginary. Freud's identified Medusa's decapitation with the feminine genitals. For Freud, the story of Medusa shows the primitive and universal proof that corroborates his theory of the anguish of castration. Stevens concludes that these stories show an impossibility of erotism, a diagnosis of crisis of sexual difference between the man and the woman who suffer from his impossibility of loving and her departure.

In the following chapter Irène Kristeva examines the elements that come from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* in Pierre Klossowski, Pascal Quignard and Roberto Calasso's treatment of Diana's myth. Klossowski connects through Diana's veil tension between erotism and chastity, Quignard links the complexities between exhibitionism and voyeurism, and Calasso between hunting and chastity, considering Diana as the goddess of purity and sovereign of separation.

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Kristeva's study shows that Diana's fascinating beauty incites the desire to penetrate the unknown and makes Acteon have the desire of contemplating Diana with an animal regard. Kristeva concludes with the idea that Diana's myth can only be represented nowadays through its fragmentary aspect.

Part I finishes with a chapter about a character that reverses Medusa: Hélène de Sannis in Pierre Jean Jouve's: *In the Deep Years*. According to Dorothée Catoen-Cooche -author of the essay- Hélène symbolizes sexual pleasure and death, however, she is physically the opposite of Medusa, as the former represents beauty while the latter ugliness. Both characters incarnate the woman and her dangers, but Medusa is mixed with adolescent love. Hélène invites to the sexual act, which is the original sin for John Baptiste, and produces the conflict Eros-Thanatos that is frequently found in Jovian writing. Acknowledging the fact that the complex figure of Hélène renders multiple interpretations, Catoen-Cooche chooses Béatrice Bonhomme's proposal of Hélène seen as an archetype of different images of women.

Part II starts with Gina Stamm's study of Eurydice and Orpheus in Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps Lesbien*. Stamm studies how Wittig transforms Orpheus into a serpent in *Les Guérillères* and into a woman in *Le Corps Lesbien*. After contrasting different versions of Orpheus myths by Apollonios de Rhodes and Virgil with Monique Wittig's feminist rewriting, the reversal of heteropatriarchal values is highlighted in *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps Lesbien*. In *Les Guérillères* the strong African woman represents light and power. The narrative voice of *Le Corps Lesbien* inverts the roles and Stamm finally celebrates Wittig's vindication of self-love learnt from Black feminists from her adopted country: the United States. Stamm celebrates Monique Wittig's inversion of the oppression structures sending the message of the importance of self-care.

Nathalie Ségeral examines the process of mythification of the Holocaust and analyses the use of the figures of Orpheus and Eurydice in Charlotte Delbo and other survivor stories and the apocalyptic writing of Cécile Wajsbrot and Sarah Chiche. Ségeral emphasizes how the collective memory keeps the invisibility of the feminine body that took place in the concentration system through the study of Charlotte Delbo's Auschwitz after revealing how pregnant women and mothers with children were immediately killed, and other women lost their femininity due to starvation and sterilization. Ségeral's study finally emphasizes that the survivor of Auschwitz accomplishes the function of rehumanizing and re-feminizing with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and Wajsbrot and Chiche's testimonies create an anticipatory memory to avoid future genocides and halt the present climate catastrophe.

In the following chapter Kamila Ouhibi Aitsiselmi offers a comparative analysis of Léopold Sédar

Senghor with Orpheus. The Senegalese poet Senghor goes back to the origins of the loved Africa, the Black woman, who is his Eurydice. Orpheus myth gives poetry of negritude a universal dimension and a complete legitimation. The chapter concludes with the idea that Senghor's poetry is marked by its will of rooting the original cultural values.

Part III focuses on the feminine body and mother-daughter relationships in myths. In the first chapter, Cheryl Toman analyses Scholastique Mukasonga's *La Femme aux pieds nus* in which two maternal bodies appear: Rwanda -the native country of the author-and her mother, Stefania. Mukasonga's stories correct the stereotypes of false euro-centric representations of the African continent. The use of myth in Mukasonga's work is not only used as a tool to decolonize the literary text but also as a consolidation of what was destroyed in the genocide in Rwanda. For Toman, Mukasonga stories revisiting myths that were silenced are used to help not only the author herself, but also the Rwandan society to raise from a past marked by violence.

In the second chapter, Salomé Paul analyses Marguerite Yourcenar's *Qui n'a pas son Minotaure?*, Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and Marina Carr's *Phaedra Backwards* (2011). Paul compares each play with Hippolytus and Phaedra's myth in Euripides, Seneca and Racine and discovers that in the contemporary transpositions of Phaedra's myth the question of a sexual body occupies a new place compared to the ancient myth. In the traditional myth sexuality is reserved to the incestuous desire that Phaedra feels for Hippolytus, and in the three contemporary transpositions is enriched with the aim of reshaping the figure of the female heroine.

Sophie Emilia Seidler examines four versions of Persephone and Demeter's myth from different literary genres: *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lotta Olsson's poetry and *Hades* comic by George O'Connor. In the *Homeric Hymn* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* hunger strike works as a revolt against patriarchal authority. Lotta Olson's sonnets simulate the body of an anorexic woman. In George O'Connor's *Hades* the obligation of eating substitutes Persephone's rape. In all of these versions Persephone rebels against the patriarchal constraints and becomes an independent woman. Seidler confirms that Demeter and Persephone myths and its adaptations propose a solution to overcome misogynistic mechanisms.

The last part of the book focuses on the presentation of the feminine in myth. In the first chapter, Brigitte Le Juez analyses Marguerite Duras's short film *Les Mains Négatives* in which there is a contrast between the people who live in modern cities and do not communicate with each other with the message of love to humanity sent by an imaginary prehistoric human. Le Juez explains that the myth in *Les Mains Négatives* is a verbal gesture that preceded writing language, a mysterious history of humanity that reveals where humans come from and where they

should go. She concludes by interpreting Marguerite Duras' short film as a warning of the inhumanity of modern societies and questions our relationship with the other, revealing a collective blindness.

In the following chapter, Yaosca Bautista's offers a comparative and transatlantic study of "cohesion mythology" in the writing of Gioconda Belli, poet of Nicaraguan nationality and Montserrat Roig, novelist born in Barcelona. In her study, Bautista uses Northorn Frye's mythological categories of "cohesion myth" and "freedom myth" to explain how both writers: Gioconda Belli and Montserrat Roig, even though being geographical distant from each other, both lived two dictatorships, shared the same expression of "freedom myth" and changed ideological myths through their writing. Bautista affirms that both authors deconstruct gender stereotypes and follow the process of moving from cohesion to liberty, through two fundamental themes: politic and genre.

The book finishes with Anne-Laure Bucher questioning if Emmanuel Lévinas succeeded in emerging the feminine as an ontological and ethical event, or if his step went against his intention. Bucher discusses different aspects of Lévinas theories on feminine: the feminine as mystery, the epiphany of the beloved, the feminine death, feminine and masculine fertility, and metaphorical maternities.

Bucher concludes that Lévinas tried to release the feminine myths by using the metaphor and the imaginary, however, *la parole* to define what is a woman is masculine. Bucher finds that in Lévinas philosophy, the feminine becomes absent, a mystery and therefore, invisible. The feminine is sent back to a pre-ontological past, the original absence.

The book succeeds at making visible the feminine presence in myths and its importance in the collective conscious. The authors of these essays analyze and compare works and theories from female and male authors from multiple disciplines with the aim of explaining the feminine myth. The matriarchal origin of Medusa myth is retrieved, the myth of Persephone and Demeter is interpreted from its original meaning, present the prehistoric myth of love, highlight the importance of reconstructing the body of those who were made invisible like non-heterosexuals, survivors of dictatorships as well as of the holocaust, African ignored narratives, and finally deconstruct the feminine myth theories. It is a book that unveils traditional myths providing updated studies from a feminist perspective that every scholar should read, not only those interested in myth criticism and comparative literature, but also those who are eager to learn about myths projected in philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature, art and cinema.

