

# Myth, Creativity and Repressions in Modern Literature: Refigurations from Ancient Greek Myth

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## Abstract

The persistence of ancient Greek myth in the arts and cultural politics has, paradoxically, been energised by the capacity of myth to inspire and accommodate change. The malleability of mythological narratives has been a rich source of creativity and also an index of changes in horizons of imagination and understanding. This both permits and nuances the notion of 'Return' in cultural history. The essay explores distinctive features of these processes through selected modern case studies that map how myth can be adapted in different literary and performance genres, including new media. The first example compares and contrasts approaches by Margaret Atwood and Derek Walcott to the hanging of the maids in Homer's *Odyssey*. The second case study analyses the nexus between myth and history in Tony Harrison's film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. The third example discusses the adaptation of the Heracles story in Greek myth and tragedy for a modern radio and live theatre work by Simon Armitage. Aesthetic and socio-political forces interact, revealing how the re-imagination that is part of the formation of cultural memory can repress and erase as well as adapting. Thus the continuing Return to the Greek narratives not only renews their cultural force but also transforms it.

## Keywords

Adaptation. Memory. Myth. Repression. Re-imagining.

## 1. Myth and its histories

In both ancient and more modern cultures myth has had a central role in the creative arts and in ways of thinking about the world. Greek and Roman myth has functioned as an ever-present but malleable and even protean source of narratives and iconic figures, as a touchstone for comparisons, allegories and analogies, and as a nexus between the distant and the familiar and between perspectives on the past and the present. This sustainability of myth has been assured and enhanced by its plasticity, which ensures that refigurations of myth are crucial to the notion of 'Return' that is the

core concept in this collection of essays. The persistence and changes carried by myth both mark cultural horizons and map their shifts. Myth acts as a conduit, moving across and between the borders of fiction, imagination, religious practices and social norms. In Greek and Roman antiquity itself, myth was reworked and used in a variety of different ways. Creative engagement with myth spanned literature and visual culture as well as taking a central role in religion and highlighting threads in philosophy, science and politics. Different versions of particular myths moved in and out of prominence. Refigurations of myth signalled shifts and conflicts in ways of looking at the world. Research data on myth in antiquity provides an infrastructure that also sheds light on modern receptions. In this discussion I use the term “myth” flexibly to include not only the genealogies of the Greek and Roman gods and the narratives associated with them but also the non-historical stories that formed the major part of oral culture’s deployment of myth, for example in the Epic Cycle and the Homeric poems. An essential resource is the online *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, edited by Rosemary Wright and hosted by the University of Patras.<sup>1</sup> This dictionary includes alternative versions of myths in Greek and Roman sources. In her Preface to the *Dictionary* Wright comments that:

Different versions of the narratives and genealogies in this material are endemic to the study of the subject, since variations were preserved in the tradition of oral culture and then adapted to the interests of family and city propaganda, the literary contexts of drama and poetry, the evolution of ritual and the expansion of knowledge of the physical and human aspects of the inhabited world... and not only do we have the narratives preserved but also the ancient attempts to probe and interpret them through allegory, personification and euhemerism (an ancient form of reductionism), linked often with a healthy scepticism. (Wright 2012)

Sensitivity to the deployment and adaptation of myth in modern contexts involves “reading” modern sources which in their turn read ancient authors who were themselves reading myth.<sup>2</sup> I will explore this multi-layered dynamic through three short case studies. These examples represent different responses in different genres and media but I bring them into contact with each other through a linking theme – how they select from different aspects and alternative versions of the ancient myths and how as a result they shed light on issues of repression and on diverse ways of engaging with themes that are “difficult” or contentious.

## **2. Repression, erasure and reimagining: Margaret Atwood, Derek Walcott and the twentieth-century *topos* of the serving maids in Homer’s *Odyssey***

Repression of aspects of the ancient myths and of the narratives they generate has increasingly been a focus of recent research and provides one way into identifying and analysing shifts in cultural perspectives. A good example of a controversial trope that sheds light on such discussions is the hanging of the maids by Telemachus in Homer’s *Odyssey* 20. 436-479. They were killed after they had been forced to clean the

house that was bloodied with the bodies of the suitors who had clustered round Penelope during Odysseus' absence. The suitors abused the conventions of *xenia* (hospitality), gorging themselves on food and wine and misusing the slaves as servants and as sex objects. The suitors were slaughtered by Odysseus on his return to Ithaca and the female slaves paid with their lives for their (enforced) relationships with the suitors:

[Telemachus says:] "I refuse to grant these girls a clean death, since they poured down shame on me and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors"....  
the narrative then continues with a simile:  
"as doves or thrushes spread their wings to fly home to their nests, but someone sets a trap - they crash into a net, a bitter bedtime:  
just so the girls, their heads all in a row, were strung up with the noose around their necks to make their death an agony. They gasped, feet twitching for a while, but not for long".

(Hom. *Od.*20. 462-474. Translated by Wilson 2017, 494)

In the twentieth century this episode in Homer attained the status of a *topos* in feminist consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott's *Stage Version of the Odyssey* (1993) adapted that episode, possibly because of its association with the sexual slavery embedded in slave histories in the USA and Caribbean, and instead focused on Penelope's outrage when the slaughter of the suitors turns the house into "an abattoir" (Walcott 1998, 153, Act 11 scene vi). Walcott portrayed Penelope as forbidding the hanging of her maid, his treatment of the episode brings together the histories of slavery and of gender.<sup>4</sup> Walcott's revision involved partial repression of the Homeric episode. That decision may result from his view that attacking a tradition merely lends it authority and thus perpetuates it:

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters...The tough aesthetic of the new World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognise it as a creative or culpable force. (Walcott 1998, 35)<sup>5</sup>

Other late twentieth-century responses to the Homeric *topos* of the hanging of the maids range from complete erasure, as in Peter Oswald's dramatization of the *Odyssey* (Oswald 1998) which omits both the slaughter of the suitors and the hanging of the maids, to Margaret Atwood's creation of an alternative narrative in *The Penelopiad* (Atwood 2007). This alternative narrative retained the hanging but explored through song and dance the maids' perspectives on the suitors and Penelope, as well

as Penelope's eventual sense of guilt. In allowing herself to be sent back to the upper room she had been silently complicit in the killing of the maids, a killing of which Odysseus' trusted serving woman Eurycleia had been a leading proponent.<sup>6</sup> In the final scenes of Atwood's play the maids call on the Furies to bring them justice:

O Angry Ones, O Furies, you are our last hope!

We implore you to inflict punishment and exact vengeance on our behalf!

Be our defenders, we who had none in life! (Atwood 2007, Scene 30, 78)

Atwood's play-text engages with the challenge of giving a voice to those who were disregarded and left no trace in the sources. Her dramatisation of the maids as invokers of the Furies as agents of vengeance presents the other side of the coin of Walcott's distrust of literatures of revenge. In this discussion I take the issues surrounding repression one step further to probe the interactions between re-imaginings, triggers of readers' and spectators' awareness and understanding of both the world(s) of antiquity and their own. Atwood's "Author's Introduction" to the published text of *The Penelopeiad* opens with a comment on her creative dramatization that is also a challenge to the reader/spectator: "the play you hold in your hands is an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo" (Atwood 2007, v). Echo as a mythological figure who resurfaces in modern literature does not offer a pale imitation, rather can answer back and initiate and explore other reverberations. The echoes invoked by Atwood can also be read as foreshadowings, soundings that shape in the future how the past is heard. Ancient selection and rearrangement from myth serves to map fields of conflict and change in antiquity. It also informs the analogue approaches identified by Wright. In their turn, modern authors deploy allusions and analogues in order to turn the lens on repressions in their own cultural histories and reflect on these. James Porter has written in a recent study of the aesthetics of Walter Pater of the possibilities of a "new, expanded sense of time, temporality and experience" in which a two-way process of understanding, backwards and forwards illuminates antiquity as much as it does modernity but also highlights changes: "for antiquity changes with every interpretation of it, as does the meaning and character of the present moment in which antiquity is 'received', which is to say produced anew and seemingly for the first time" (Porter 2017, 151). Myth, inherently both transplantable and pliable, is a catalyst in that process. Myth can be energised through different genres and media and modern narratives can take as their springboards images and associations rather than (or as well as) more overt intertextual forms.

### **3. Tony Harrison's film poem: *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992)**

Tony Harrison's film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon* was first shown on television in the UK on BBC 2, 3 October 1992 (published text, Harrison 1992). It is important for two of the main themes of this essay: firstly because it exemplifies the plasticity of myth in terms of medium and secondly because it shows how, in a new aesthetic and technological context, Harrison uses myth as springboard for examining the dark side of myth and of history, thus exploiting different aspects of cultural memory in ways

that directly and indirectly challenge repressions. His techniques are associative rather than intertextual, drawing on viewers' and readers' knowledge of the image of the Gorgon and its associations rather than on their detailed familiarity with its treatment by ancient authors.

### 3.1. The myth

In ancient mythology, the Gorgons were emblematic of female monsters. There were three sisters, Stheno (*Strength*), Euryale (*Far-sprinting*) and Medusa (*Ruling*).<sup>7</sup> The iconography shows oriental influences.<sup>8</sup> Their heads were covered with writhing snakes, they had boar-like tusks, bronze hands and gold wings. Most important of all, the very sight of these grisly visages was said to petrify humans, turning them literally to stone. Of the sisters, only Medusa was mortal and in an initiation myth she was killed by Perseus, who had been sent by the king of Seriphos on a mission to bring back Medusa's head. The task was supposed to result in his death but Perseus was helped by Athene and Hermes. Wearing a cap of darkness which made him invisible, he found the Gorgons asleep and by averting his gaze and only looking at their reflections in Athena's polished-bronze shield he succeeded in cutting off Medusa's head. She was pregnant (by Poseidon) and the twins she was carrying leapt from her severed neck. One of these was Pegasus, the winged horse. Perseus escaped with Medusa's head and according to Pindar Athena invented the music of the *aulos* from the sounds of the lament of her sisters (Pindar, *Pythian* 12.6-27). Perseus was then able to use Medusa's head to turn to stone the enemy who had sent him on the mission.

The initiation myth narrative has two further turns that are important for Harrison's poem. The first is that Perseus gave the Gorgon's head to Athena, who put it at the centre of her *aegis* (a goatskin cape fringed with snakes) and on her shield as a threat to her enemies. Thus the image of Medusa became a significant one in ancient art and could be used to symbolise either threats or defence. The second important turn is that Athena gave some of Medusa's blood to Asclepius, the god of healing. According to whether the blood came from the right side or the left side of Medusa, it could be used either to kill or to revive.<sup>9</sup> It was even claimed by the Argives that the head was buried in their *agora* and averted evil.<sup>10</sup> This duality, when combined with the malleability of myth in general, was deployed by Harrison to use an image of horror as a means of bringing about a kind of healing, in this case recognition of the flaws and inadequacies involved in the forgetting or erasure of more recent narratives in European history.

Harrison's exploitation of the myriad resonances of the myth creates in its turn a double perspective on what has been called "new memoryism". The term provides a literary counterpart to the notion of "new traditions" which was coined by social historians to conceptualise ways in which new social practices that provided social "glue" in changing situations could be explained and legitimised by being given an "ancestry" in previous practices and traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The concept of new memoryism has been used to describe ways in which new writing uses

classical material. Authors (ancient and modern) and readers who are familiar with earlier material join a kind of co-authorship, creating new narratives and ways of looking at the world that are anchored in a shared (albeit constructed) memory of the classical and/or mythological past.<sup>11</sup> They in their turn extend this co-authorship of the past by bringing in a new cohort of readers to join a mythological narrative that functions as part of a continuously evolving text.

As a heuristic tool for approaching Harrison's film poem, new memoryism is one useful category but needs further refinement to bring out its full richness. Harrison is using the Gorgon as an image, drawing on its general familiarity to create certain expectations in the reader about how those who gaze where they should not are turned to stone. It is in the infrastructure of the poem, its formal elements and the other visual images that he deploys, that he extends the implications of the traditional associations of the image so that one 'memory' triggers another that relates to a different time and place. In initially "freezing" the viewer the image of the Gorgon brings about a clarity of vision, a vision that juxtaposes the deadly poison of the sometimes forgotten cruelties of modern European history with the kind of healing that results from a recognition and understanding of the past.

Harrison's choice of epigraphs to his poem is revealing. The first epigraph is taken from the essay by Simone Weil – *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* (1939): "To the same degree, though in different fashion those who use force and those who endure it are turned to stone".<sup>12</sup> The second epigraph is from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872): "Art forces us to gaze into the horror of existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision".<sup>13</sup> Harrison's poem itself has two dominant threads. The first is the mapping of the journeys of the statue of the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine (1798-1856), which was taken to the island of Corfu in 1892 by Elizabeth, Empress of Austria who greatly admired his work.<sup>14</sup> After the Empress was assassinated her palace on the island was taken over by the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, who ejected the statue which was eventually rehoused in Toulon. Heine stands both as an emblem of dissident poetry and of persecution of Jews and his statue is given a voice as the narrator/commentator in Harrison's poem. The Kaiser provides the link between Heine's statue and the Gorgon, since he claimed that while he was in Corfu he set in train the excavation of the fifth-century BCE pediment which included a giant Gorgon. The Gorgon was a favoured decorative motif of the Empress:

And this almost charming Gorgon stares  
From wardrobe doors and boudoir chairs,  
But unwittingly they laid the track  
That brought the grimmer Gorgon back. (Harrison 1992, 67)

Harrison brings together the threads of domestication and its masking of underlying ferocity, revealing the Gorgon as a metaphor for the destruction that the Kaiser, with others, brought on Europe in the First World War leading to the long

shadow that war cast on Germany and all the nations of Europe in the rest of the twentieth century.

Harrison's poetics fuse demotic and erudite. He deploys rhyming couplets, a verse form that sounds "popular" with some of the oral and aural qualities of the music hall and yet also has epic and satirical resonances, echoing eighteenth-century writers in English such as Pope. While Europe prepared for the outbreak of war in 1914, Harrison shows the Kaiser:

There in the trench to supervise  
The unearthing of the Gorgon's eyes ....  
The patient kaiser, piece by piece,  
prepares the Gorgon for release  
the Gorgon he let out to glower  
above us all with baleful power. (Harrison 1992, 70-71)

The ironic double-entendres of those lines modulate into a visceral image of the effects:

The *barbitos*, the ancient lyre,  
Since the Kaiser's day, is restrung with barbed wire  
Bard's hands bleed when they play  
The score that fits an era's scream, the blood, the suffering and the loss.  
The twentieth century theme  
Is played on barbed wire *barbitos*. (Harrison 1992, 71)

The word-play on *barbitos* and the barbed wire that is the emblem both of the trenches of the First World War and of the concentration camps of the holocaust and gulags that it presaged also harks back to the laments of the Gorgon sisters at the death of Medusa. The catastrophic events of twentieth-century history are also metaphors for the crushing of the human spirit:<sup>15</sup>

The Gorgon worshippers unroll  
The barbed wire gulags round the soul...  
Each leader on his monstrous plinth  
Waves us back into the labyrinth  
Out of the meander and the maze  
Straight back into the Gorgon's gaze. (Harrison 1992, 72)

### 3.2. Myth and medium

In exploring those issues via the medium of film poem, Harrison creates an artistic paradox, in which the medium of film, with its moving images and its technical capacity to use twenty-four frames a second, was a means of focusing on "still" works of visual art and symbols such as arrow motifs on pavements (Harrison 1992, 72, marginal "film direction" accompanying the lines "The Gorgon's henchmen try to force/History on a straighter course"). His use of film provides a distinctive insight on his long-term interest in statues and sculpture as frames for understanding the

interactions between aesthetic and political culture. In his later film-poem *Prometheus* (1998), Harrison would make the transport of a statue of Prometheus, the mythical bringer of fire to humankind, a central image in his reflections on the destruction through industrialisation and global pollution of communities from the north of England to Germany and eastern Europe (see Harrison 1998, vii). In *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, a statue of the German poet Heine takes on the role of narrator, providing a meta-poetic and meta-historical reflection on subsequent events and their multiple resonances. The history of the statue symbolises the attempted destruction by anti-semitism (culminating in the Holocaust) of the fabric of European culture. The work of Heine, especially through his use of the couplet verse form, also represent a seminal influence on Harrison's own poetics (Hall in Harrison 2017, 17). The symbiosis of words and images in the film poem not only forges an aesthetic but also choreographs in the senses and minds of viewers and listeners the macabre dance of the suffering of the twentieth century. The poem ends with a warning:

The Gorgon who's been running riot  
through the century now seems quiet,  
but supposing one who's watched her ways  
were to warn you that the Gorgon's gaze  
remains unburied in your day... (Harrison 1992, 74)

Despite the apparent closure implicit in the rhyming couplet form, the poem ends on an imperfect cadence, with an allusion to the (first) Gulf War using visual images of the eyeless dead in that conflict, the Gorgon's eyes as "tank wheel size" and a plea for Europe to be "open-eyed" (Harrison 1992, 75).

In *The Gaze of the Gorgon* Harrison exploits the flexibility of the ancient myth and the images associated with it in the modern medium of the film poem. This enables a combination of still and moving images and verbal dexterity to thread associative rather than intertextual threads through the whole poem. He banishes the threat that viewers and readers will be turned to stone if they face the image by following Perseus and mediating the face of the Gorgon. Perseus did this by using Athene's shield as a mirror; Harrison does it by positioning the viewer in front of the screen. Thus there is no hiding place for viewers and readers. In experiencing the force of the aesthetic and humanistic power of the film poem they must acknowledge the repressions and erasures that it uncovers and restores.

#### **4. Recovering and reimagining myth through drama**

My next case study sketches the career of a mythical narrative that has been mediated by drama. The foundation myth is that of Heracles. The term "foundation myth" has (at least) two senses. The first is used in the study of ancient cults especially those associated with the alliance between a mythological hero and a particular city that was represented by the foundation of a cult. However, the term can also be extended to indicate the origins of a particular mythological history. I use it in the second sense here (although analogies with the first sense may become apparent).

The purpose of this section of the essay is to track a double mediation of the Heracles myth – firstly in Greek drama, and secondly in the response made by a modern playwright to that myth in its fifth-century Athenian dramatic enactment.

#### **4.1. The Heracles myths**

Heracles<sup>16</sup> was said to have born in Thebes, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, the wife of Amphitryon (who was in turn a grandson of Perseus).<sup>17</sup> Zeus was supposed to have seduced Alcmene by appearing to her in the guise of her husband. She gave birth to twins, of which Heracles was the son of Zeus and Iphicles the son of her husband. Although his name is thought to signify “glory of Hera”, Hera – as the divine wife of Zeus – was unsurprisingly hostile to Heracles and was said in the myths to have initiated many of the ordeals of his life. In the narratives, Heracles was portrayed as the greatest of the Greek heroes, so great that after his death he was rewarded for his exploits with immortality among the gods. Homer portrays him before that apotheosis as an uneasy and terrifying shade in the Underworld:

Around his ghost the dead souls shrieked like birds  
all panic struck....He glowered terribly,  
poised for a shot. Around his chest was strapped  
a terrifying baldric made of gold...  
I hope the craftsman who designed this scene  
Will never make another work like this.

(Hom. *Od.* 11. 604-14, translated by Wilson 2017,300-301)

Visual images of Heracles therefore have something in common with the terrifying portrayals of Medusa but the range of stories associated with him is considerably more varied (March 1998, 192-197). The best known are the narratives of his (probably) Twelve Labours. These were tasks inflicted on him by Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns. Heracles had been sent to serve the king by the Delphic oracle as expiation for killing his children and his wife, Megara, while suffering from insanity inflicted by Hera. On completion of his Labours the promise was that he would be made immortal. However, this did not come about immediately. He first went to Calydon and married Deianira, the king’s daughter. He eventually died by burning on Mount Oeta, having retreated there in agony following inadvertent poisoning by a robe given him by Deianira in a vain hope to regain his love.<sup>18</sup> Because of his strength and violent achievements Heracles became the object of many hero cults. Historical evidence for these includes archaeological material from the site of his supposed death (Price and Kearns 2003, 251-3). The hero cults indicate the porous border between myth and religious practice in the culture of the Greeks and also point to the resonance of the Heracles myths for the values and practices associated with the idea of the hero.

#### **4.2. The Heracles myths in Greek tragedy**

This nexus between myth and values and the ambivalence of Heracles’ status as a symbol not only for strength but also for gluttony, drunkenness and sexual excess, provided fertile ground for the fifth-century dramatists – comic as well as

tragic. He has been described as “of all the characters in myth the one most flexible in Athenian drama” (Walton 1997, xx) and it is the flexible use of the myth by Euripides that sets in train the modern reception by Armitage. In Euripides’ *Heracles*, the hero is married to Megara, with whom he has three sons. Euripides restructures the mythical narrative into two parts. In the first part of the play Heracles’ family is threatened by a usurper. Heracles returns from his Labours in the nick of time, dispatches the usurper and is accorded a hymn of praise for saving his family and vindicating divine justice. Then in the second part of the play madness strikes and without warning Heracles murders his family, annihilating domestic and moral order and throwing into contention the supposed attributes of the martial hero. In reordering the mythological biography of Heracles and suppressing both the heroising and the apotheosis of Heracles, Euripides provides a counter-narrative that exposes and problematizes the norms that are depicted in the first half of the play.

#### **4.3. Simon Armitage’s modern tragedy: *Mister Hercules: after Euripides***

Armitage’s play *Mister Hercule: after Euripides* was commissioned by the West Yorkshire Playhouse in the United Kingdom (published text 2000).<sup>19</sup> It provides an interesting example of “stage to page” rather than the more usual “page to stage”. Armitage recognises that the text was the result of considerable experiment and changes made in the rehearsal process. Armitage used and adapted the dramatic structure and theatrical conventions of Athenian tragedy both to the WYP stage and to his own rewriting of Euripides’ version of the myth.<sup>20</sup> His published text contains significant para-material in which he comments on these issues. He opens by setting out direct questions:

What do we mean by hero? What is the greatest atrocity a man can commit?  
Who can apportion blame to the workings of the human mind, and who has  
the power to forgive? These are the questions that face any reworking of  
the Heracles fable. (Armitage 2000, vii)

Armitage goes on to comment on the bewildering and sudden transformation of action and tone in the Euripides’ play (“shocking and strange”) and comments that “the audience is left in the same mood as Heracles himself, puzzling over an extreme act of brutality against loved ones, the cause and effect of which demand explanation and resolution” (Armitage 2000, viii). He observes that, while the play’s formal structure may be classical (and he attached particular importance to the Chorus), its contemporary relevance is striking (“its issues no less pressing than they were four hundred years before the birth of Christ”, Armitage 2000, viii). This relevance presents opportunities and challenges in translation and Armitage emphasises that his priority was to “translate” sentiment and setting rather than to replicate language “it is probably more useful to think that the play has not only been interpreted from Ancient Greek into English but that it has been inferred across time” (Armitage 2000, viii). He judges that because Heracles is a mythological figure who never actually existed there are no problems around veracity or authenticity or reverence or in taking latitude with the

myth. Significantly, however, Armitage retained Greek tragedy's convention that the murders were to be described rather than to be seen on stage. The scope left to the spectators to imagine what had occurred offstage enhanced Armitage's conception has occurred a play in which "it is as if the whole human history has occurred within the lifespan of one family. Atomic weapons and spears are spoken of in the same sentence, quantum physics and spinning wheels considered in the same thought" (Armitage 2000, ix-x). This eclecticism works in several different ways to assist the "inferring across time" to which Armitage refers. He removes the details of names and genealogies but retains verbal allusions. This allows him to shift the focus to the deprivations and catastrophes of war and its aftermaths that unite ancient and modern contexts and experiences. The play offers a commentary on the post-traumatic stress disorders that have been increasingly recognised in war-veterans. This is an aspect of Heracles' psyche that is explicitly taken up in Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*, a version of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, in which the Heracles' figure is cast as The General.

The distinctive features of Armitage's version of Heracles' madness narrative are that it deals not just with the exceptional flexibility of the myth but also draws on its adaptation and reception in a particular play of Euripides. Unlike the oral tradition behind mythical variations the play does present an established text. Thus there is a double layer of transmission and adaptation, through which Armitage cuts to bear directly on the "dark side" of Heracles' career and the wider issue of the nexus between the adulation of violence in one context and the horror it inspires in another.

### **5. Coda**

The exploration in this essay opens up some questions that also need to be pursued in other areas of research. In discussing media I focused only on those of the film poem and the staged drama, both of which yielded published texts. In addition, the relationship between myth and fiction has recently attracted considerable attention (McConnell and Hall 2016 and for the repression theme within that, Hardwick 2016)<sup>21</sup>. Recently published fiction such as Colum Toibin's *House of Names* (2017), an account of the events dramatized by Aeschylus in his trilogy *The Oresteia*, will certainly generate further insights. It seems to me that there are two conclusions developed in this essay that need to be tested in further research. The first is the duality of perspective involved in considering how repression and retrieval functions in literary and dramatic rewriting of myth. One perspective looks at aspects of the myth that are selected, reshaped and invented. Another perspective looks at how the rewriting opens up or in its turn represses questions that are vital in the receiving context. When those perspectives collide, they can provide startling insights into both ancient and modern. The second aspect that I would like to explore in the future results from and is enabled by the first. It involves what I call (for want of a better term) a reverse ethnography. Scholars of ethnography excavate the lost people, the lost voices, the lost world-views in societies built on erasure and repression (whether of colonised people or

suppressed classes or genders). Revisiting and re-imagining Greek myth and the historical contexts in which it has been received and adapted may help to retrieve the lost voices of the past. However, most notably, it also enables the lens to be focused on the rewriters and reimaginings and thus on the repressions and taboos that they seek to remedy, those they perpetrate and those they invent. That focus helps to retrieve the lost voices of the more recent past and those of the present that we do not easily hear, or may not want to hear. In encountering a mythology that is not their own and seeking to relate to it in a way that does make it their own, the works by Margaret Atwood, Derek Walcott, Tony Harrison and Simon Armitage shed light on those reversals, testifying to the unique capacity of the arts to bring together aesthetics and cultural politics in ways that heighten receptivity to both the past and the present.<sup>22</sup> Return to the ancient myths that have persisted across time and place involves a *nostos* that has been and will continue to be signposted by adaptations, repressions and re-imaginings.

### Notes

1. For additional material on Greek and Roman myth, see March (1998) and Price and Kearns (2003).
2. For the significance for world literature of receptions of classical myth across linguistic and cultural boundaries see McConnell and Hall, eds.(2016, especially 1-11).
3. Emily Wilson in the Translator's Note to her translation of the *Odyssey* points out that most classicist translators used derogatory language ("whores", "sluts") to suggest that the women were being punished for moral outrage in which their sexual history justified their deaths, whereas the Greek signals a different kind of sexism, based on the notion that women are objects – property that can be destroyed once defiled because of the "dishonour" caused to their "owners" (Wilson 2017, 91).
4. For detailed discussion of the dramaturgy and Walcott's desire to recognise the force of history without becoming its prisoner, see Hardwick (2000, 118-125) and Hardwick (2007a, 63-66), which partially revises the judgement made in the earlier publication. Documentation of the stage production, including reviews, can be accessed at <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greekplays>. Data base ID 845.
5. Elsewhere, in a reflection on his long poem *Omeros* (1990), Walcott has described such disruptions of the conventions of historical temporality as "complete erasure" (Walcott 1997, 237) but in his stage play the encounter between myth, epic poem and histories of enslavement and gender enable him to write the story differently rather than to erase it.
6. Scene 29(76- 9) portrays the difference in language and attitudes to the maids between Eurycleia ("the ones who'd been rude") and Penelope ("the ones who'd been raped"). Atwood had already, in her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, depicted so-called delinquent women hung in a line in a rope ceremony (a Salvaging) which was overseen by women who, like Eurycleia in Walcott's play are called "Aunts".
7. For ancient sources relating to the myth, see especially Homer(*Iliad* 5.738-42); Hesiod (*Theogony* 270-81); Apollodorus (2.4.3 and 3.10.3); Ovid (*Metamorphosis* 4.614-20, 770-803).

8. For discussion of Mesopotamian sources, see Price and Kearns (2003, 231).
9. Gorgons sometimes appear with an apotropaic function in archaic temple pediments.
10. See Homer *Iliad* (11.36-7); *Odyssey* (11.634-5); Euripides (*Helen* 1315-6).
11. Discussed in relation to epic poetry and modern media in Greenwood (2017 forthcoming). Greenwood draws on the insights of Middleton (2005), who pointed out how in a span of 11 Whitbread Prize for Poetry awards (1990-2000) winners included classically-orientated work by Michael Longley, Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. Harrison won the award in 1992 for *Gaze of the Gorgon*.
12. Weil lived from 1909 to 1943. The essay was first published in French in 1940 and in English translation in 1945.
13. Harrison's third epigraph is a quote alluding to the ignorance of European literature attributed to the US General Norman Schwartzkopf by cultural commentator Kurt Vonnegut.
14. Heine was born in Dusseldorf and died in Paris. He was a distant relative of Karl Marx. His lyric poetry was set to music in lieder by Schumann and Schubert. That element is also a motif in Harrison's film poem. Heine's work and memorials to him were attacked by the Nazis in Germany from the 1920s onwards.
15. The awful conjunction between the materiality of trenches and their symbolic force in the history of human suffering did not stop with the First World War. In the first Gulf War heavy equipment was used by coalition troops to move sand and 'fill in' the trenches occupied by Iraqi soldiers. Harrison opens a window on to that conflict in the final section of *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. In other poems in the collection he draws on the Gorgon tradition for verbal pictures, grotesque visual images that recreate the masks of the incinerated dead ("A Cold Coming", Harrison 1992, 48-54).
16. The Hercules Project, based at the University of Leeds, UK, charts and explains the significance in western culture of the classical hero Hercules from late antiquity via the Renaissance to the present day ([www.herculesproject.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.herculesproject.leeds.ac.uk)).
17. Ancient sources for Heracles' ancestry and Labours include Apollodorus 2.4.8-7.8; Diodorus Siculus (4.9-39); Vergil (*Aeneid* 8.175-279); Propertius (4.9). There are also many references in Pausanias. Heracles was a frequent figure on painted pottery, especially associated with his accoutrements of lionskin, club and bows and arrows. The main appearances of Heracles in tragedy are: Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (in which Heracles has the function of a *deus ex machina*), *Women of Trachis* and Euripides' *Heracles*, *Children of Heracles* and *Alcestis*. Heracles also figures in Aristophanes' comedy *Birds* and was the title character of a satyr play.
18. The magic potion given to Deianira by the centaur Nessus, from whose attempted rape Heracles' had rescued her. Deianira's part in the narrative was used by Sophocles as the basis for *Women of Trachis*, which in its turn was an ante-text for Martin Crimp's 2004 play *Cruel and Tender: after Sophocles' Trachiniae* (see Hardwick 2013b for discussion of the relationship between the two plays).
19. Documentation of the performances at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2001, including reviews, can be accessed online at: <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greekplays>. Data base ID 2584.

20. Adaptation of classical material to modern media and contexts is a feature of Armitage's creativity, for example in his Homer's *Odyssey*, 2006, commissioned for BBC Radio and his *The Last Days of Troy* (2014), which dramatized episodes from Homer's *Iliad* and Vergil's *Aeneid* and was commissioned for staging at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester.
21. I discuss in more depth the relationship between receptions of classical texts, repression and taboo in Hardwick (2017, forthcoming).
22. I discuss the theoretical implications of this heightened receptivity in Hardwick (2018, forthcoming).

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