

Review of Saint, Jennifer. *Ariadne*. London: Wildfire, 2021. By Shelby Judge

Ariadne by Jennifer Saint follows the life of the eponymous mythical woman, from the birth of her brother the Minotaur, her aiding and subsequent abandonment by Theseus, and her life on Naxos with her Olympian husband, Dionysus. Ariadne shares the narrative with her sister, Phaedra – the novel also covers myths about Phaedra, including her marriage to Theseus and her complex entanglement with Theseus' Amazonian son, Hippolytus. This review will consider *Ariadne* within the broader literary context of its publication, which is to say to review the novel as one of the latest contributions to the ever-increasing corpus of contemporary women writers rewriting Greek myth.

Ariadne is specifically marketed to fans of Madeline Miller's novels and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, firmly establishing Saint's debut novel within the same 'literary ecosystem' – to borrow Ratner's (2018: 733) intertextual term – as its contemporaries, characterised as they are, by their revisitation of Greek myths from the perspectives of the sidelined women of myth. A gynocritical approach would suggest that this increasingly popular genre is a 'female literary tradition' (Showalter 1990: 189). Gynocriticism depends, at least in part, on the intertextual relations between women writers; if Jennifer Saint's '10 Essential Books Inspired by Greek Myth' for *Publishers Weekly* (2021) – or, to cast the net further, Natalie Haynes' reviews for the *Guardian*, or the quotations from other mythic adapters on the covers of such novels – is any indication, *Ariadne* is definitely a part of a female literary tradition, Hydra-esque in its multiplication and, perhaps, power.

Ariadne can be read as a paraquel to Madeline Miller's *Circe*. Drawing on Margaret Atwood's definition in 'Dire Cartographies' (2011: 66-96), paraquels are stories that cover the same period of time (unlike prequels, that precede a story's events, or sequels that follow on), which typically depict the same events from a different perspective. Before considering the content, there is evidence to support this paraquelic interpretation in the titles and front covers of the novels. The title *Ariadne* mirrors *Circe*, because both novels are named after the protagonist, a previously sidelined woman of a heroic epic. Though Circe is the sole autodiegetic narrator of her novel (while Miller's other novel, *The Song of Achilles*, features Patroclus as a homodiegetic narrator), Ariadne shares

the narrative with her sister Phaedra. Notably, the novel is not called *Ariadne and Phaedra*, because this would not create the same link within the literary ecosystem to *Circe*. Equally, the hardback cover of *Ariadne* is dark blue with gold decals, recalling the iconic black and gold aesthetic of *Circe's* cover. Hence, the title and editorial paratext of *Ariadne* gesture towards *Circe*, instantly implying a connection between the novels.

In terms of mythic lineage, Circe is Ariadne's aunt, and they share a relation to Helios, who is Circe's father and Ariadne's grandfather. The novels are paraquels in that they follow members of the same family, and they both cover some of the same myths. In Miller's novel, their myths intersect when Circe assists in the birth of the Minotaur: during her trip to Knossos, she meets a young Ariadne and an enslaved Daedalus. The motif of Ariadne dancing and being cautioned against happiness lest she invite a god's wrath are central to *Ariadne*, but they are foreshadowed in Miller's novel, where 'Ariadne's light feet crossed and recrossed the circle. [...] I wanted to say, do not be too happy. It will bring down fire on your head. / I said nothing, and let her dance.' (Miller 2018: 118). In making the adaptive choice to include the same traits in her characterisation of Ariadne, Saint's novel inextricably recalls its award-winning predecessor. On the other hand, *Circe* and *Ariadne* interpret Pasiphaë differently. In *Circe*, Pasiphaë is a cruel sister, and unrepentant for her sacrilegious bestiality 'Bitch, [...] I fucked the sacred bull, all right?' (Ibid., 109), which contrasts to her more sympathetic portrayal in *Ariadne*, where she is described as 'a fragile sunbeam. The furnace of pain' (Saint 2021: 18). Though the characterisation of Pasiphaë is different, this quotation from *Ariadne* illustrates another way in which the novel is a paraquel to *Circe*, where the poetic language and deliberate word choice that invokes the sun (therefore providing a reminder of the characters' Titanic heritage) is a replication of the same linguistic methods deployed in Miller's novel. This speaks to the generative potential of mythic adaptations, as the same figure is adapted in completely opposite ways yet the novels deal with the same myths, and can therefore be considered paraquelic.

Contemporary women's revisionist myth writing is often considered in terms of its fidelity to the "original" myths, despite, of course, the considerable contention that there is no one correct version of any myth. Theseus' reputation is preserved as 'The great Athenian hero' that 'had so many adventures and took part in so many great enterprises that

there grew up a saying in Athens, "Nothing without Theseus." (Hamilton 1942: 208). In Apollodorus' *Library* alone, Theseus performed six Labours en route to Athens; where he then faced Medea whose plot it was to poison him, but 'Theseus drove Medea from the land'; he then famously delivered Athens from its duty to send youths to Crete to feed the Minotaur; Theseus was also involved in the hunt for the Calydonian boar, the Argonauts, Heracles' katabasis, the Theban Cycle, the mythos of Helen and, of course, the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus (Apollodorus, trans Hard 1997: III.16; Epit.1; I.8; I.9; II.5; III.6-7; III.10; Epit.5.2). "Nothing without Theseus", indeed. Ariadne initially describes Theseus thus:

He did stand alone amongst men, this great Athenian hero, of whom so many legends would be woven. He was taller, broader, handsome, of course – and of the bearing not just of a prince but the poised strength of a panther waiting to strike. A man who would inspire songs and poems, whose name would be heard to the ends of the earth.

(Saint 2021: 54)

His heroism, demonstrated by his beauty, status as Athenian royalty, and ferocity, is deliberately accentuated here – it is this heroic reputation that the novel later works to counter-write.

This analysis relies, however, on the misconception that there are "original" myths, rather than myths existing in a perpetual state of adaptation, translation, and informal dissemination. Ovid, for instance, is an example of an ancient writer, adapter, and alterer, of myth; the *Heroides* stand as one of the earliest examples of rewriting myths from the perspectives of the women, and they are one of the key sources for contemporary adapters of Classical women. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is clearly informed by *Heroides* I: Penelope to Ulysses; Briseis has become a significantly adapted figure, such as in the works of Emily Hauser and Pat Barker – though she is an obscure figure in the *Iliad*, she is the narrator in *Heroides* III: Briseis to Achilles. *Ariadne's* epigraph is taken from *Heroides* X: Ariadne to Theseus, and Saint's characterisation of the eponymous character is overtly influenced by Ovid's rendering of Ariadne. Ovid's Ariadne is angry at her errant lover: 'All wild beasts are gentler than you and not one, / could have abused my trust more than you'

(trans. Isbell 1990; 2004: 1.1-2). As Isbell notes, 'It is difficult to find in this letter anything of love. [...] She succumbed to the conniving opportunism of a man who desired her only peripherally while he acquired everything she could give' (Isbell 1990; 2004: np.). Saint's Ariadne shouts 'You are no hero, you faithless coward!' (Saint 2021: 128). In this exclamation, Ariadne literally strips Theseus of his heroic legend. She rhetorically proposes that 'he would not tell of how he had crept out before dawn and left me sleeping, unsuspecting, whilst he slunk away. That shameful retreat would not feature in his boasts, would it?' and 'How many women had he left in his path before me? How many had he charmed and seduced and tricked into betrayal before he went upon his way, another woman's life crumbled to dust in his fist, claiming every victory for himself alone?' (Ibid., 128). As well as her personal anger, Ariadne considers his broader pattern of behaviour; there is an element of dramatic irony here, as the reader may know of Theseus' other wronged women, including the assaulted Amazon, Hippolyta, as well as Spartan Helen and Phaedra while they were both still children. Here, Ariadne's anger, originally given voice in Ovid, and once again voiced in Saint's novel, is not only indignant about her personal treatment at the hands of Theseus, or Theseus' treatment of women more generally, but the valorisation of mythical heroic men whose actions were ruinously misogynistic. 'I could not have been Ariadne', reflect Cixous and Clément in *The Newly Born Woman*, not because of the shame of sex outside love and marriage, but because 'Theseus doesn't tremble, doesn't adore, doesn't desire; following his own destiny, he goes over bodies that are never even idealized. Every woman is a means, I see that clearly' (Cixous and Clément, trans. Wing, 1975; 1986: 76). For Cixous and Clément, it is clear that Theseus exploits women; they are only valuable as they supplement his ambition for heroism.

Though mythic adaptations can be considered in terms of their fidelity to ancient source materials, it is their subversions and alterations that are particularly generative. Interestingly, Saint's Ariadne ultimately forgives Theseus when they meet again, unable to find 'any words of reproach or anger' (Saint 2021: 265) because of her second life with Dionysus, whereas Phaedra never forgives him: 'I hated him for leaving my sister, for leaving me, for his lies, for all of it. [...] To think I had ever hung upon his words or gazed at his green eyes and thought him handsome or exciting or noble!' (Ibid., 288). Phaedra is incredulous that she

ever considered Theseus heroic, and she continues to loathe him throughout their marriage, while her sister's married life is comparatively idyllic. Phaedra in *Ariadne* is particularly interesting to consider, because Saint exonerates Phaedra from the crime of false rape claims, and places the blame back onto the hero, Theseus. In Saint's adaptation, Phaedra had only written Hippolytus' name, and it is Theseus' hotheadedness and recollection of his own behaviours - including 'rapes, forced marriages, kidnaps and child rape,' (Ibid., 206) - leading him to conclude that he 'know[s] what men do'. In this version, then, it is Theseus, not Phaedra, who falsely accuses Hippolytus of rape. It is arguable that Saint's rendering of Phaedra prematurely forecloses any discussions around adapting women that do not fit easily into heroic or pathetic moulds, though perhaps it would be more useful to look to that which this significant change highlights. This adaptive choice gestures towards the issue that Phaedra poses in terms of contemporary feminist mythmaking, in that it is remarkably difficult to consider her mythos through any feminist lens. Indeed, Professor Edith Hall has reported an 'intuitive loathing of Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus*' due to its 'toxic ideology in which Hippolytus' stepmother Phaedra falsely accuses him of rape', thus providing evidence in favour of the misconception regarding the regularity with which women frame innocent men for sex crimes (Hall 2015: np.). Natalie Haynes builds on this in *Pandora's Jar*, where she writes that 'Phaedra can be used to legitimise the myth that many women lie about being raped' (Haynes 2020: 210). Moreover, Phaedra's mythos 'adds in no small quantity to our own prejudice: against step-mothers, against female sexual desire and, yes, against women who accuse men of injuring them, rightly or wrongly' (Ibid., 201). Thus, her myth can be weaponised to discredit women, particularly those who are speaking up against their abusers.

It is almost difficult to review *Ariadne* on its own, born, as it undoubtedly is, from the current literary momentum for women rewriting myth. It poses, as so many of its contemporaries do, questions of whose story is being told and whose is not, the question of who will be remembered favourably and who will not, and whether it is at all possible to preserve the legends of mythical heroes with modern ethics in mind. This is by no means a criticism of the novel – there are, evidently, many mythical figures waiting for their stories to be told from their own

perspective, and the proliferate retellings of certain myths from original perspectives, such as the Trojan War and the Theban Cycle, indicate that there is no immediate risk of the well of mythic inspiration running dry. There are plenty of myths, and mythic retellings, to go around.

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