

# Charlotte Higgins' *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* (2021)

## Review

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*Greek Myths: A New Retelling* is the first fiction book by classicist and Guardian chief culture writer Charlotte Higgins, whose previous works include *Under Another Sky: Journeys in Roman Britain* (Vintage, 2014) and *Red Thread: On Mazes and Labyrinths* (Cape, 2018). In terms of traction, *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* emerged at a precarious time. This anthology was but one in a wave of over twenty mythological retellings published in English since 2018, the vast majority of which were written by women. It also follows the roaring commercial success of Stephen Fry's myth series: *Mythos* (2017), *Heroes* (2019), and *Troy* (2021), making Higgins' anthology at risk of being dismissed as but another retelling riding the lucrative coattails of a profitable publishing trend. However, Higgins' anthology is far from just another retelling, and it goes beyond a women's perspective on the Greek myths. Higgins' anthology is women-centric, but her heavy scholarly approach and respect for the original texts whilst achieving an accessible presentation of a complex tapestry of mythological threads distinguishes her work from others'.

Though dwarfed by the canonical and commercial weight of male authored mythological compendia throughout time, including the works of Graves, Fry, Frazer, Bulfinch, Apollodorus and Ovid, *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* is not the first anthology written by a woman. Though Higgins is in the company of Edith

Hamilton's wonderfully detailed *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, her anthology is less encyclopaedic and more narratorial. Embracing the central metaphor—weaving—each of Higgins' chapters focuses on a mythological woman weaving a tapestry that skilfully and seamlessly interconnects many renowned and obscure stories from amongst a wealth of ancient sources. The first chapter focuses on the origin of the universe as told by Athena's tapestry as the goddess who invented weaving. The next chapter focuses on Alcithoë as the weaver whom Dionysus punishes for prioritising her weaving over his worship; then Philomela, who reveals the truth of her rape through her weaving. Philomela's chapter is followed by Arachne, who, in Higgins' retelling, is punished by Athena for showcasing the violence of the gods on her tapestry. The next tapestry is that of Andromache, whom Higgins decides to describe as weaving a meaningful image rather than the floral patterns and clothing for Hector that she is described as creating in Homer's *Iliad*. The latter half of the anthology focuses on the most renowned ancient weavers, such as Helen, who weaves primarily of herself and her experience within the Trojan war, and Circe, who weaves stories of her relatives, including Medea, Pasiphaë and Ariadne. The anthology ends with Penelope, but it is not her famed funeral shroud she is depicted as weaving. Instead, Higgins chooses to depict Penelope weaving after Odysseus' return. In this tapestry, Penelope details the murders of Agamemnon and her cousin, Clytemnestra, before the world as Penelope knows it unravels before her eyes.

By foregrounding the weaving motif, Higgins expands the space in which women have agency, both textually and physically through the image of their extensive, developing tapestries. Higgins does a wonderful job in expanding those weavers' lives beyond the confines of the myths we know them. Penelope weaves after her husband has returned and left again; Philomela starts her tapestry before she is raped; and Circe weaves just after meeting Odysseus' men, but Odysseus himself only features briefly at the end of her chapter, diminishing his significance and underscoring her centrality. Over the last few years, readers have seen a wealth of retellings spotlighting canonically peripheral mythological women, from Medusa to Briseis, Pandora, Penelope, Ariadne, Circe, Galatea, Antigone, and Elektra. However, Higgins actively distances herself from these retellings in her introduction, stating that her anthology is not being used as a framework upon which to hang modern stories nor bring psychological insight to bear on a cast of characters but aims instead to “underline the power of the

Greek myths to produce resonance for every new reader and writer, and for every generation” (7-8).

Despite this, the myths are often framed in a way that alludes to contemporary issues that are of concern for the reader, but never directly. For example, Higgins’ retelling of the myth of Phaeton contains some harrowing imagery that is only too familiar to the climate-conscious reader. Higgins is elaborative with the effects of Phaeton’s driving of the sun close to the earth, detailing what can only be described as an expedited description of our current climate crisis. In Higgins’ version of the myth, “disease ran amok ... the sea ice thinned”, the oceans, “swollen by the melting ice, began to devour the low-lying coasts, consuming towns and cities”, and the event became so intense that Gaia “could hardly breathe, so polluted was the air” (47-8).

Higgins also challenges gender conformity and details a version of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe that is more empathetic to trans, queer and women’s bodies which are systemically politicised and open to public scrutiny and opinion. Though most storytellers describe how the goddess Isis transformed Iphis into a man so they could marry Ianthe, Philomela’s tapestry refuses to illustrate a clear outcome: “[w]hatever it was that the goddess had wrought, whatever form love’s metamorphosis had taken—that was theirs to know. It is possible Isis transformed Iphis into a man as is often claimed. It is possible that they lived together, as two women who adored each other. All we know is that they were happy” (88). By leaving the power of the goddess Isis and Iphis’ transformation ambiguous, Higgins rejects the authoritative heteronormative nature of the myth whilst also passing subtle commentary on body ownership and people’s right to privacy regarding their body and their sexuality: my body, my business.

The strength of *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* is in Higgins’ ability to play with authority, canon and ambiguity. Higgins takes the source material and plays with it without distorting it; she reconfigures and challenges the authorial statements made and takes pieces from the original tale to allow for other women to take the spotlight. The best example of this appears in her retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in which Eurydice, not Orpheus, undertakes a *katabasis*, a journey to the underworld. However, rather than an entirely original story, Eurydice’s experience is taken loyally from Aeneid book 6 and Odyssey book 11. Higgins skilfully repurposes the canon in ways which centralise women without fictionalising their experience beyond its scope, and encourages readers to reconsider how they have understood and conceptualised the myths without inadvertently positing a new authorial perspective. However, Higgins’ faithful reconfigu-

ration does come at a cost to some characters, primarily Medusa, who is, unfortunately, only given three lines. Though she speaks for herself as a rape victim and is empowered to voice her experience, it is a shame for the reader that Higgins did not explore Medusa's story beyond her rape. Though Medusa's brief appearance may be somewhat disappointing to some readers, Higgins is refreshingly frank with her management of the rape in mythology. She does not employ romanticised euphemisms for sexual abuse and details these incidents as such, and we see through her Philomela chapter that there is more to a rape victim in mythology than her rape.

Additionally, *Greek Myths* subtly encourages introspection and question the authority of the stories we are told without asserting a new way of thinking. Her final chapter, Penelope, embodies this theme. Penelope who is unsure of how much of her husband's stories she should believe not only questions her role in the world (and mythology), but the universe in which she has been written,

She had only a husband's word for it—for any of it—and the only certainty about Odysseus was that he was a compulsive liar. Did Athena even exist? ... Were her best ideas really brought to her by Athena? Or were they, in fact, the product of her own intelligence? (269).

Penelope is left questioning the fictionality of her existence, from the gods she is taught to worship to the patriarchal narratives that glorify her husband and keep her a secondary figure in the shadow of his legacy.

Though marketed as such, Higgins might agree that her anthology is not intended to be read as 'feminist'. A reader hoping for a feminist disembowelling of the mythological canon will be disappointed in the anthology, but the fault lies in the marketing of this book as a 'feminist retelling' rather than Higgins herself. The women are not centralised to give a voice to the voiceless, but rather to challenge our perspective as readers by gently modifying the lens through which we read these tales. What we get from this anthology is astute poetic justice: Higgins delicately repositions the Greek myths in a way that introduces more intersectional points of discussion into the canon whilst fitting somewhat harmoniously alongside it. That will not be enough for some people, but Higgins does not set out to take that step. What she instead delivers with her anthology is a compendium of myths that is not only accessible and enjoyable to read but is also thoroughly researched, subtle but significantly socially conscientious, and unapolo-

getically confrontational when it comes to the dark side of mythology that has always made many people uncomfortable.

#### WORKS CITED

Higgins, Charlotte. *Greek Myths: A New Retelling*. Vintage, 2021.