MICHAELA KECK

Deliberately Out of Bounds

Women's Work on Classical Myth in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction

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February 2017,
Michaela Keck

1 Introduction: Classical Myth and Nineteenth-Century American Women's Fiction

> *Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a critical direction […] is an act of survival.*
> – Adrienne Rich ("When We Dead Awaken" 18)

> *I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions […]: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in* The Odyssey *doesn't hold water: There are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in* The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself.*
> – Margaret Atwood (*The Penelopiad* xxi)

1.1 Women Writers' Innovative Work on Myth, 1800-1900

When examining how women re-narrate and re-envision myth, it has become commonplace to celebrate women's liberation from their suppressed psychic and subconscious concerns, needs, and forces in the patriarchal societies of the Western world. Likewise, there seems to be a general consensus that myth—and classical myth in particular—is an authoritative and male-dominated tradition that functions predominantly as a cultural tool that perpetuates hegemony, oppression, and inequality. With this study, I wish to redirect these commonplaces by, firstly, focusing on women's intellectual and aesthetic achievements in their rewriting of classical myth and, secondly, by approaching myth itself as "logos" with as much potential to subvert as to confirm dominant cultural ideologies. Central to my argument is the notion of women's "work on myth," an expression coined by the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (see chapter 2), who approaches myth as the product of ceaseless re-narrations and interpretations based on the achievements and abstractions of the human mind instead of a release of irrational and

subconscious forces. Rather than approaching women's fiction from the perspective of psychoanalysis, then, this book focuses on and highlights women authors' innovative and—at times cautious, at times daring—feminist re-narrations of myth within the specific context of nineteenth-century American society and culture.

With its compilation of texts by women writers, this book also participates in the larger project of the recovery of nineteenth-century American women's fiction of different genres. By exploring the nexus of women's fiction and myth regardless of genre classifications such as the historical or sentimental novel, this study illuminates the hybridity, complexity, and multifaceted quality of nineteenth-century women's fiction. When taking into account that it was during the nineteenth century that women began to constitute an increasing presence and substantial economic pillars of the literary economy (cf. Coultrap-McQuin 7ff), and that they are by no means the homogenous, indistinguishable mass of scribblers as which they are often remembered (cf. Opfermann 40), it is remarkable—even scandalous—that their fictional works have remained a greatly underexplored field when it comes to their use of classical myth. This project contributes to closing this research gap by providing a kaleidoscopic cross-section of American women authors' rich fictional re-narrations of classical myth from 1800 to 1900. The novels selected for this study were chosen on the basis of their dates of publication as well as their breadth and variety in terms of their mythological reconfigurations.

Previous investigations of women's writing and ancient myth have explored American women authors' nineteenth-century re-writings of the myth of Demeter and Persephone (Louis; Walters), Antigone (Winterer), Niobe and Medea (Walters), and the Sphinx (Putzi; Barker). While Louis and Walters provide comprehensive literary examinations, Caroline Winterer instead approaches the relation of women to classical myth as an art historian. Winterer provides two significant contributions to women's socio-cultural re-interpretations and uses of myth with *The Culture of Classicism* (2002) and *The Mirror of Antiquity* (2007), but mentions women's fiction only briefly in her treatment of Antigone. Additionally, although Jennifer Putzi and Deborah Barker offer an insightful investigation into the meanings of the Sphinx in Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard's *Two Men* (Putzi) and Elizabeth Stuart

Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (Barker) through historical and cultural contextualization, they do so without drawing on theories of myth.

With the exception of the two works by Winterer, these few existing scholarly examinations of women's fictional reconfigurations of classical myth focus on the period between 1850 and 1920. This is partly due to the fact that women's mythopoeic work is generally linked to the rise of the women's rights movement and therefore dates from the period after 1850. It also reflects the fact that women's re-narrations of ancient myth are linked to classical education which, according to Winterer, remains a predominantly male elitist affair until the middle of the century (cf. "Victorian Antigone" 160). Yet Winterer shows that classicism did indeed constitute an important part of the mental, material, and social culture of America and its society *before* the middle of the nineteenth century (cf. *Mirror* 142ff). As my project likewise demonstrates, classical myth is an important medium between high and low culture that serves to both express and disseminate women's socio-cultural critique, self-knowledge, and self-exploration throughout the nineteenth century; further, it is a medium that archives, transports, as well as shapes cultural memory, specifically when it comes to female figures, experiences, and perspectives. Importantly, and as I will outline in more detail in the following, myth achieves this through both storytelling and images. Therefore an examination of (women's) re-narrations of classical myth requires including both textual and pictorial sources. This study seeks to expand our current understanding of the specific conjuncture of myth theory and feminist thought in the context of nineteenth-century women's fiction, as well as American and transatlantic literary and visual culture.

The novels examined here provide an important link to a larger ongoing, transnational, and highly pertinent literary and cultural project by women writers which the introductory quotations by Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood demonstrate. Rich's notion of "re-vision," that "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a critical direction" (18), has by now become the key statement of this transnational project of "revisionist mythmaking." It is clearly central to Atwood's adoption of the hitherto unwritten female perspective of Penelope and the twelve maids in her postmodern version of the Odysseus myth in *The Penelopiad*. Here, Atwood challenges the traditional patriarchal prerogatives and presumptions that are perpetuated in

these female figures, knowing full well that there is not *one* version of classical myth, but that throughout antiquity there circulated manifold versions, interpretations, and syncretistic narratives (cf. Introduction xx). Both Rich and Atwood emphasize that what is at stake in this endeavor, literally, is the survival of women. In both their quotations, the authors also point out the female intellectual labor inherent in the re-narration of myth and the interconnection of the visual (Rich's "re-*vision*") and the narrative (Penelope as *storyteller*). All these points relate directly to this study in a number of important ways.

In their fiction, women authors interlink myth with the historical and cultural context, contributing to the renaissance of antiquity while also transforming it. In so doing, it is thus not only that women writers revise, critique, and interpret the past anew, but through the medium of classical myth explore and re-envision their own culture and society as well as themselves. Finally, such transformations of the past and alternative visions of the present (and future) involve a literal revision in the sense of a critical and creative use of ancient myth through stories and images, which have remained central to women's lives and self-explorations. Indeed, the pictorial, as I suggest in this book, is an element equally important to both the narration of myth and the cultural contexts out of which women's revisionist mythmaking grew and grows. Images of myth were by no means restricted to the "high" art of painting or illustrations in the classical dictionaries of the educated elite, but were an integral aspect of women's lives, be it in such popular venues of entertainment as the theater, *tableaux vivants*, illustrations in periodicals (cf. Fiske 18) or in such everyday material, tactile objects as jewelry, home decorations, affordable prints, and porcelain.

In re-narrations of classical myth well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women as gendered "Other" have been predominantly constructed, imagined, and remembered by men, often with disastrous consequences for women's self-images and self-conceptions. In obvious contrast, the authors selected emphasize the perspectives of the female figures, some of them pursuing a straight-forward, almost narrow focus on a particular myth, e.g., that of the maenad in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale*, or that of Isis in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis*. Other women authors weave multi-layered versions that result in unlikely and novel reconfigurations. For example, in *Philothea*, Lydia Maria Child unfolds the drama of Psyche under the

auspices of Athena, while at the same time "woman's" fall is triggered by the goddess's biblical counterpart Eve; in Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard's *Two Men*, fictional characters in the mythological guises of Jason/Hermes, Priapus, and the Sphinx are embroiled in battles of class and race, identity construction and self-possession; and in Louisa May Alcott's *A Modern Mephistopheles*, two different Galateas—Pygmalion's marble woman and the figure of the sleeping nymph—converge in their sufferings and are further overlaid by a female Christ-like martyr figure. Once again, it is important to keep in mind that classical myth involves myriad versions and manifold interpretations, which means that these women writers continue in a tradition of re-writing and revising myth. Hence, these nineteenth-century re-narrations of myth provide an important textual body which constitutes a significant literary heritage and an archive for twentieth-century women writers' revisionist myth-making that awaits further excavation.

1.2 Literature Review

Throughout the nineteenth century, America witnessed an increasing amount of women's fiction that employs and re-imagines classical myth in manifold ways. In writing, the engagement with classical myth seems to be a predominantly, but not exclusively, white undertaking until the second half of the nineteenth century, when African American women authors and feminists such as Frances E. W. Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, or Pauline E. Hopkins entered the literary marketplace. In her book *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition* (2007), Tracey L. Walters singles out the poet Henrietta Cordelia Ray (1852-1916) and the poet-writer and dramatist Pauline E. Hopkins (1859-1930) as the two foundational mid- and late-nineteenth-century African American revisionists of classical myth (cf. 50). Walters adopts the scholarly perspective of *Classica Africana*, i.e. she approaches women's mythmaking from the black classical tradition and with an interest in its significance and influence for the works of black women artists. Her overview spans the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, the writings of Ray and Hopkins, and the poetry and fiction of twentieth-century authors such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, and Rita Dove, all of whom re-narrate myth at the nexus of race, gender, and American culture. Contrary to other scholars, Walters considers adaptations by black women writers of the

myths of Niobe, Medea, Persephone and Demeter, as central to their struggle "for the empowerment of Black women" (9) rather than "as Eurocentric and antithetical to a Black literary tradition—or Black aesthetic" (5). To Walters, the rewritings of Greco-Roman myth by Ray and Hopkins are informed by the double burden of gender *and* race (cf. 27). She argues that both writers turn to classical myth to prove their intellectual and human equality as well as to gain cultural capital through their mastery of the classics. Ray and Hopkins construct feminist (counter)representations of black womanhood and explore black women's sexuality and victimization in a quest for creative freedom and the liberation of black female voices from silence (cf. 50-66). With her focus on African American women writers and classical myth, Walters thus narrows this research gap.

Despite Walters' work, the broader project of nineteenth-century American women authors' re-narrating and re-envisioning classical myth in fiction remains largely underexplored and underrated, even when it comes to such well-known authors as Child, Phelps, or Alcott, let alone less widely-read authors such as Sedgwick and Stoddard. The absence of nineteenth-century women writers in the essay collection *American Women and Classical Myth* (2009) edited by Gregory Staley, or rather their substitution with the overarching figure of Margaret Fuller, is symptomatic of this lacuna in literary research. Although scholars have observed American women authors' use of classical myth, they have done so mostly in passing.[1] The most comprehensive book relevant to the study of this aspect of nineteenth-century American women's literature to date is Margot K. Louis's *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927* (2009). In her transnational study, Louis includes English, American, and Canadian women writers and poets (e.g. Margaret Fuller,

[1] For example, Carol Farley Kessler merely lists Isis as one example of Phelps's "exaggerated" (Introduction xxiii) imagery; and Kate McCullough remarks in passing that Alcott's novella "The Marble Woman" constitutes "[a] version of the Pygmalion-Galatea story" (60). Likewise, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser in *Whispers in the Dark* (1993), merely notes that Alcott, in "The Marble Woman" and *A Modern Mephistopheles*, draws "upon the myth of Amor and Psyche" and "the story of Pygmalion and Galatea" (32), even though Keyser renders a perceptive and convincing analysis and interpretation of the use and function of the popular nineteenth-century King Arthur myth in *A Modern Mephistopheles*.

Jean Ingelow, Dora Greenwell, Isabella Valancy Crawford, Caroline Fitz Gerald, Edith Wharton, H. D.), whose renderings of the Persephone myth she juxtaposes with those of their fellow male artists (e.g. A. C. Swinburne, D. G. Rossetti, Alfred Tennyson, W. C. Williams, T. S. Eliot). In so doing, Louis shows the indebtedness of the Modernists to their Victorian predecessors, arguing that the use of myth by all these writers "is informed by profound religious impulses," which, however, constitute a "non-Christian, or anti-Christian" (xi) spirituality.

Rejecting Jungian archetypal myth theory, Louis approaches myth with the help of new historicism, insisting on the thorough contextualization of "a mythical allusion or pattern […] within a literary text" (xi). This approach leads her to discern several parallel developments among the English and North American poets and novelists, developments that coincide with the emergence of feminism, women's education, an increasing secularization, as well as changes in mythographical scholarship and philosophy as the Victorian period ends and Modernism begins. Accordingly, Louis's readings of the manifold re-narrations of the Persephone myth reflect her assumed shift from representations of ancient myth as a harmonious, transcendent ideal that remains strictly separate from human suffering and pain "toward the orgiastic and ecstatic elements of the chthonic rites" (14). This shift goes hand in hand with a turn away from Christianity and towards a celebration of a pagan classicism, as well as an increasing Schopenhauerian pessimism at the turn of the twentieth century, which the Modernists, in turn, answer by resorting to a sensual, ecstatic, vitalist understanding of myth as ritual. The figure of Persephone is transformed from beatified goddess into an ambivalent female presence which expresses women's experiences of victimization and entrapment in a patriarchal society, sexual initiation and maturation, the confrontation between regeneration and loss, as well as the joyful union and tragic alienation between mothers and daughters. Placing her juxtaposition of women and men's re-narrations of the Persephone myth within the wider contexts of the late nineteenth century, Louis claims that during the Victorian period women stress "the social" and "human" aspects of the myth, in contrast to the men, who emphasize its "theological and philosophical" (55) dimensions.

While my own research supports Louis's in terms of a movement away from dogmatic, established Christian religion towards a spirituality that is heavily infused by Neoplatonism and classicist syncretism, my

findings profoundly question Louis's work in other ways. Sedgwick's re-narration of the Dionysus myth in *A New-England Tale* (1822) and Child's invocation of the Athenian mystery cults in *Philothea* (1836), for instance, demonstrate the centrality of the dynamic and chthonic life forces to American women's revisionist mythmaking from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Clearly, for these writers myth is inextricably intertwined with the turbulences of human and especially women's lives. Furthermore, Sedgwick's anticipation of Nietzsche's Dionysian-Apollonian dialectics and Child's complex and rich Neoplatonic and Transcendentalist thought provide evidence that women's revisionist mythmaking includes precisely "the theological and philosophical […] resonances" (Louis 55) with which Louis credits their fellow male artists. In fact, and as I hope to demonstrate with this book, women's re-narrations of myth include an immediate dynamism and material sensuality *as well as* the metaphysical and philosophical layers pertinent to their authors' concerns within their specific socio-cultural situation. Or, to expand on Louis's contrast, women's revisionist mythmaking involves the social *and* the philosophical, the human *and* the metaphysical. By embedding women's mythmaking within the socio-cultural and philosophical currents of their times, Louis actually highlights the ways in which women respond to these contexts and, thus, by extension their intellectual and rational achievements, even though she initially bases her argument for an emerging non-Christian spirituality on the common assumption that women's mythmaking and spirituality is directed not only against "a dogmatic Christianity," but against "rationalism" (1) as well. As a result, Louis's study to a certain extent perpetuates women writers' second-class status as authors who celebrate the spiritual, emotional, and sentimental in their art. Furthermore, she generally neglects the aesthetic dimension in women's writings.[2]

In contrast, in *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature* (2000), Deborah Barker focuses on women artists' aesthetic achievements.

[2] It is telling that, even on the rare occasions when Louis does refer to the aesthetic aspects of the texts, for instance, when juxtaposing Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* with Cather's *My Ántonia* (cf. 99), Hardy's anticipatory aesthetics are named (Cubism), whereas Cather's aesthetics remains merely a vague rendering of a glowing apotheosis of agricultural labor. Consequently, what is underlined is Hardy's rather than Cather's literary-aesthetic sophistication.

Aligning herself on the one hand with the scholarly work from the 1990s by, e.g. Nina Baym, Susan K. Harris, Susan Coultrap-McQuin, Jane Tompkins, or Richard H. Brodhead, who, as Barker claims, have finally taken seriously nineteenth-century American women novelists, she points out on the other hand the failure of their new historicist approach to examine the "still virtually ignored […] issue of [women writers'] aesthetic seriousness" (9). Barker contends that women saw themselves as significant artists and intellectuals "who engaged in a literary debate with both male and female writers" notwithstanding their exclusion "from the sphere of high culture" (9). While she embeds her study within the larger transatlantic literary-aesthetic debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, her time frame, similar to that of Louis, spans from 1850 to 1930.[3] Particularly relevant for my study of American

[3] Shanyn Fiske's *Heretical Hellenism* (2008) is another relevant study of women writers and classical myth, in particular of English women writers during the Victorian period. Contrary to Barker, however, Fiske's argument undermines women's claims to be serious writers and intellectuals in that she insists on the shortcomings and lacunae in the classical training of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Jane Ellen Harrison. Excluded from access to the classics as a domain of male scholars and writers, as well as alienated from men's interpretations of and scholarship concerning ancient myth, these women, Fiske claims, made up for their shortcomings in learning by envisioning myth in the form of Brontë's "deeply personal uses" (111), Eliot's "imaginative release" (119), and Harrison's "personal vision that deliberately challenged the conventions of humanistic Hellenism" (151). However, as Isobel Hurst points out in *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics* (2003), male writers were not necessarily as knowledgeable about the classics as their specialized education may have suggested. Not only was the range of classical authors studied at nineteenth-century English universities "remarkably narrow" (23), but writers such as Percy Shelley, Thomas Hardy, or Robert Browning, acquired and developed their classicist knowledge through extensive reading outside the classroom and discussions among friends and fellow artists just as their female peers Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett, or George Eliot did (cf. 23ff; 101ff; 164ff). Indeed, as Hurst goes on to state, in Victorian England, "the writing of interpretive studies or essays […] was largely left to amateur scholars" (24). While the great merit of Fiske's study lies in her examination of Victorian popular culture relating to classical myth (24ff), specifically the importance of the theater and such media as newspapers and broadsheets, it is unfortunate that she perpetuates the bias of nineteenth-century women as second-class

women authors and myth is Barker's examination of Phelps's use of the Sphinx in *The Story of Avis* (cf. 64-93). Apart from the general reading of the novel as feminist critique of the institution of marriage, Barker calls attention to Phelps's "nuanced and fundamental critique of the gendered nature of philosophy and aesthetics" (65) in Romanticism and realism, a debate which, in America, included texts by Herbert Spencer, Edward H. Clarke, Charles Darwin, and the philosophical treatises of Joseph Butler and (translations of) Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel (cf. 33ff). The ambivalent Sphinx, Barker posits, functions as a symbol of the liminal status of the feminine and racial "Other" on the one hand and Avis's own blindness in terms of her artistic ideals on the other. Ultimately, Barker claims, Avis cannot free herself from the masculine tradition of Romantic ideals of art and creativity (cf. 85ff). Unfortunately, Barker's analysis of *The Story of Avis*—indeed her entire book—remains indebted beyond measure to the writing and art of Nathanial Hawthorne, which obstructs the feminist influences in and revisionism of the novel, particularly Phelps's indebtedness to the Transcendentalist mythmaking of Margaret Fuller (see chapter 5).[4] Lacking the necessary

mythmakers and writers who compensate their lack of knowledge through their imaginative and highly personal experiences and expressions notwithstanding her emphasis on women's heretical challenge to established views of ancient Greece. In contrast, Yopie Prins in her essay, "Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters," is more appreciative of the artistic and aesthetic merits of British women writers and scholars, their different training notwithstanding. According to Prins, the Victorian writers Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, as well as the classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison mined the figure of the Greek maenad at the end of the nineteenth century to redefine "spinsterhood not only in their different styles of writing but also in the lifestyles they chose for themselves" (46). Like Fiske and Louis, Prins understands women writers' and scholars' preoccupation with classical myth, and in particular with the maenads, as a phenomenon germane to the late Victorian era.

[4] Fuller is, of course, the most influential and overarching figure of American feminist revisionist mythmaking during the first half of the nineteenth century. For her understanding and uses of myth, see the studies and books by Caroline W. Healey Dall; Robert D. Richardson, Jr.; Andrew P. White; Carl F. Strauch; Jeffrey Steele; or Melissa Boucher Hinton. In her brief introduction to Fuller's adaptations of ancient myth, Christa Buschendorf

major focus on classical mythology, Barker further overlooks that Phelps inextricably intertwines the Sphinx with the goddess of Isis, which significantly changes Avis's role and importance, in that with Avis as Isis-figure, Phelps anticipates such radical twentieth-century feminist ideas as Hélène Cixous's notion of "woman" writing for women (see chapter 5). Barker thus misses Phelps's embeddedness within and significance for the tradition of women's feminist revisionism of myth.

Even more than Barker, Putzi fails to extricate the mythological layers in her essay about "The 'American Sphinx'" and the Riddle of National Identity in Elizabeth Stoddard's *Two Men*." The Sphinx remains a mere cue for her otherwise thorough and insightful contextualization of Stoddard's fictional "riddle of American identity" (189) at the close of the Civil War. Putzi's essay presents a prime example of the new historicist scholarship of nineteenth-century women writers and its failure to examine the "rhetorical and linguistic complexity" and "stylistic sophistication" (Smith, "'Among a Crowd'" 38) so central to their fiction. In her seminal essay "Thieves of Language" (1982), Alicia Suskin Ostriker had already underlined the interconnectedness of content and form in feminist revisionist experiments, insisting that "new meanings must generate new forms" (236). Even though the last decade has seen a number of important scholarly publications concerning nineteenth-century women authors' relation to aesthetics (e.g. Barker; Smith and Weinauer; Dorri Beam; Birgit Spengler), women's use of classical myth has not been a major research focus in any way.[5]

sees her as an important predecessor to twentieth-century feminists and their revisionist mythopoesis (cf. "United States" 863-64).

[5] In contrast, twentieth-century women's fiction and poetry is a field of study that has remained well and alive since the 1970s. Rich's seminal essay, "When We Dead Awaken" (1972), was followed by Diana Russ's "What Can a Heroine Do; or, Why Women Can't Write" (1972), Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), and Alicia Susan Ostriker's "The Thieves of Language" (1982). In their essays, Rich, Russ, Cixous, and Ostriker pose fundamental questions and outline central concepts as to women's re-narrations and revisions of myth. Their work has spawned numerous broader literary studies such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis's comparative study *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985), Kristin Mapel Bloomberg's

Like Barker, then, I take women's literary mythmaking seriously in both, content and aesthetics and wish to demonstrate with this book that American women's re-visions of classical myth run much more consistently and pervasively through nineteenth-century American women's literary production than has been generally assumed. Indeed, classical myth as it is imagined, remembered, and represented by these writers—namely through a vibrant cross-cultural syncretism—is a vital aspect of their fictions and lives. Hence, I see this study as making a valuable contribution to nineteenth-century American literary and cultural studies, women's literature, aesthetics, and textual production, and thus help undermine our own assumptions of, as Sandra Zagarell wryly remarks, a "cultural terrain about which we already pretty much [think we] know what we need to [know]" ("Strenuous Artistry" 305).[6] In addition to my interest in the narrative and pictorial aesthetic experiments of writers such as Sedgwick, Child, Stoddard, Phelps, and Alcott, like Louis, Barker, and Putzi, I consider their use of classical myth to be a method of cultural critique and alternative social visions when looking at the larger issues that are at stake for women in nineteenth-century American society. Indeed, what function, one wonders, do these ancient myths and their figures have within a nineteenth-century American context? And how can we account for their migration across time and space?

In order to both explore the visual and narrative mediation, as well as the socio-cultural functions and meanings of classical myth in light of the historical currents that shape them and to explore nineteenth-century American culture and thought through women's reconfigurations of classical myth, I relate the theories of two German scholars, philosopher Hans Blumenberg and cultural studies scholar (*Kulturwissenschaftler*)

Tracing Arachne's Web (2001), Shanyn Fiske's *Heretical Hellenism* (2008), which focuses on British women writers and scholars; and, more recently, the interdisciplinary compilation of essays *Laughing with Medusa* (2006), edited by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard.

[6] In the specific context of her essay on Stoddard's novel *The Morgesons*, Zagarell ends with a plea for the further testing of established notions of "'nineteenth-century American women's writing'" instead of "taking it for granted as cultural terrain about which we already pretty much know what we need to" ("Strenuous Artistry" 305).

Aby Warburg, to each other.[7] Blumenberg's philosophical theory of myth is highly relevant in that it not only highlights and values the subversive potential of classical myth, but also illuminates the multi-faceted creative, aesthetic achievements and intellectual labor in the re-narrations and re-interpretations of ancient myth. In turn, Warburg's *Pathosformel* and theory of the polarity of the symbol make accessible firstly, the inherited, collectively-remembered pictorial elements that are central to these novels; and, secondly, the contemporary (visual) culture and cross-cultural influences that shape and transform myth and its novel figurations, their functions, and meanings. Above all, both scholars conceive of myth not as the incompatible opposite of rationality and logos, but as a means of overcoming irrationality in a process of logos. They thus overcome one of the major conundrums in the relation of women and myth, namely the frequently assumed binary opposition between mythos and logos, which casts women automatically in such gendered categories as the "feminine" body and, hence, governed by unreason, emotionality, and irrationality as opposed to the "male" mind and logic (cf. Zajko and Leonard 10). Instead, Blumenberg and Warburg's theories include and underscore both the imaginative *and* rational elements inherent to myth, opening new pathways for examining as well as appreciating women's creative-intellectual experiments in fiction throughout the ages within a larger, transnational project of, as Blumenberg calls it, work on classical Western myth.

[7] In spite of their different approaches to myth—the narrative (Blumenberg) vs. the visual (Warburg)—there is considerable thematic overlap in the research foci of these two scholars, be it their anthropological conceptions of myth as a human attempt of gaining distance from the terrors of an overpowering world and reality; their interest in metaphor, symbol, expression, and the history of astrology; or their focus on the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries (cf. also Kany 112). In fact, Blumenberg was familiar with Warburg's thought and work, more specifically with Warburg's *pathos formula* and the library of the Warburg Institute (cf. Kany 119ff).

2 Myth, *Pathos Formulae*, and Women's Revisionist Mythmaking

2.1 Working on Myth with *Pathos Formulae*

The works of both philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920-1996) and cultural scholar and art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) are occupied with the apotropaic powers and intellectual accomplishments of classical myth. They understand myth as a force which, through either stories (Blumenberg) or art and visual culture (Warburg), holds the fundamental terrors of the world at bay by creating distance between human beings and the hostility with which they see themselves surrounded in this world. Blumenberg approaches myth as a process and strategy that lessens human fright and helplessness in the face of overwhelming, unknown, and uncanny superior powers and phenomena. He does so with the help of an anthropological philosophy according to which myth does not signify a stage of irrationality from which humankind develops towards a higher intellectual level—so famously encapsulated in the expression "from myth to logos"—but is itself "a piece of high-carat 'work of logos'" (*Work on Myth* 12).[1] Central to Warburg's

[1] The expression "from myth to logos" goes back to Wilhelm Nestle's book *Vom Mythos zum Logos* (1940), referring to schools of thought in philosophical and literary history which outline the contrast between myth and reason as a battle of history and science against myth, lies, religion, and fiction (cf. Snell 65-76). According to William G. Doty, approaches to the study of myth based on the assumed contrast between myth as primitive and reason as sophisticated stages of cultural development emerged particularly during the nineteenth century and were corroborated by James Frazer's studies of patterns of myth and ritual in *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1890) (cf. Doty 169ff). Doty's overview shows the persistence of this contrast and its dominance of the entire study of mythology, which he traces back to the Hellenic and Roman opposition between mythology as the poetic, imaginative, and inventive and logos as the doctrinal, theoretical, and hence logical (cf. 3ff). Although Doty intends to "question this distinction"

approach to myth and "the continuing significance of the survival of classical antiquity" (Wind, *Eloquence of Symbols* 26) are what he calls *pathos formulae*, that is, iconographical and emotive expressions that simultaneously testify to and mediate the ever-recurring struggle of the polarities of the affects and the intellect, terror and logos, irrational-associational involvement and rational-dissociating detachment in the process of artistic-cultural production. Whereas Warburg's anthropological and psychological approach to classical myth lead him to examine it first and foremost from a cultural studies perspective, both he

(4), observing that "mythic language" involves both "poetic, emotive […] diction," "sensual experience," and "human rationality" (19), he nevertheless advocates that "scientific observation and experimentation, and mythopoetic creation and belief, are approached most fruitfully as different planes of thought" (61). Blumenberg's anthropological philosophy of myth counters such contrasts and distinctions. In so doing, he draws on the philosophy of myth by his famous predecessor Ernst Cassirer, a contemporary of Warburg. Cassirer groups myth together with language, art, and science as conceptual tools of human thought: "My contention is that the whole process that we may describe by the words reason, apperception, and reflection implies the constant use of symbols—of mythical or religious, of verbal, of artistic, of scientific symbols" (172). For Cassirer, myth is, like other symbolic forms that constitute human culture, a "refraction index" ("Brechungsindex") of reality (qtd. in Pedersen 180). He thus paves the way for both Warburg and Blumenberg's conceptions of myth as fulfilling an apotropaic function for humankind when dealing with the terrors of reality. Furthermore, Blumenberg defends and rehabilitates myth and its reception, as Odo Marquard notes, against that criticism of myth that understands it as a dogmatic, even coercive narrative tradition (cf. "Mythos und Dogma" 528). Blumenberg envisions "a philosophical theory of myth" that encompasses and "can make comprehensible the effectiveness and the effective power of mythical elements, both archaic ones and possible newly formed ones" (*Work on Myth* 66). Contrary to traditional theories of myth, Blumenberg is not interested in questions of origins since, as he claims, "[o]ne must already have the work of myth behind one in order to be able to apply oneself to work on myth and to perceive it as the stimulus of exertion directed at a material whose hardness and power of resistance must have unfathomable origins" (*Work on Myth* 266). His main point of interest lies in what classical myths still have "to offer that—even with reduced claims to reliability, certainty, faith, realism, and intersubjectivity—still constitutes satisfaction of intelligent expectations" (*Work on Myth* 67).

and Blumenberg are also concerned with aesthetics without, however, isolating myth and its function from the larger cultural contexts of philosophical history and anthropology (Blumenberg), as well as being interested in a broad range of interdisciplinary perspectives, be they socio-historical, religious, literary, economical, or ethnological (Warburg).

For Blumenberg, myth is a "millenniums-long work" of storytelling and "a miracle of interwoven reception and construction" (*Work on Myth* 26; 351) that has continuously and successfully rationalized human *Angst* into language and other aesthetic forms. To him, it is encapsulated and summarized in the metaphorical polarity of terror versus poetry (cf. "Wirklichkeitsbegriff" 13).[2] Like Warburg, he does not conceive of Western history as a linear progressive process leading towards the ultimate triumph of rationality, but as a ceaseless and renewed process of "depotentiating" (*depotenzieren*) the terror of what humankind sees as uncanny and threatening. Even knowledge of modern science, Blumenberg contends, does not terminate this process, since with new knowledge, new scenarios of the unknown will continue to emerge. In this process, myth itself functions to "depotentiate," that is, weaken the powers of and create distance from the frightening and hostile surroundings to which humankind sees itself exposed (cf. "Wirklichkeitsbegriff" 24ff).[3] In fact, Blumenberg goes so far as to claim that myth prefigures science in its goal to know about and thus make humankind familiar with what is unknown in this world (cf. *Work on Myth* 34ff). Reaching back as far as the oral traditions of the pre-literary phases of cultural production, he asserts that "[e]ven the earliest items of myth that are accessible to us are already products of work on myth" (*Work on Myth* 118), and, hence, of logos. Referring to classical myth in particular, Vanda Zajko similarly underscores mythographers' indebtedness and explicit references to the multiple sources and versions that merge with and inspire their own interpretations (cf. 389) so that by the

[2] In the German essay "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential," Blumenberg phrases it thus: "Ursprung und Ursprünglichkeit des Mythos werden im wesentlichen unter zwei antithetischen metaphorischen Kategorien vorgestellt. Um es auf die kürzeste mögliche Formel zu bringen: als Terror und als Poesie […]" ("Wirklichkeitsbegriff" 13).

[3] Wallace translates Blumenberg's term *Depotenzierung* as "power depletion" (*Work on Myth* 75).

Renaissance—at the latest—classical myth constitutes a body of texts which, in themselves, are rich, many-layered, and syncretistic.

This is why Blumenberg understands myth to be always "already in the process of reception" (*Work on Myth* 217). He therefore claims that the re-telling of myth cannot intend to recover a former lost meaning (cf. "Wirklichkeitsbegriff" 28). To the contrary, myth is constantly being transformed, revised, and retold;[4] and the more myth is transformed, the more its stories are being altered, often even deformed and violated (cf. *Work on Myth* 155). Hence, for Blumenberg transformation, and that least persistent and most fleeting of narrative forms, the "*metamorphoses* […] designates the principle of formation of myth itself […]" (*Work on Myth* 352). Characteristic of the ongoing transformation of myth is the tension between constancy and variability. Indeed, for Blumenberg, myth's great capacity for "iconic constancy" (*Work on Myth* 149) and the equally great variability of its more marginal elements are central to myth's potential. Accordingly, his interest lies in the innovative moments in imaginative mythical thought and re-narration, that is, in the very tension between myth's iconic persistence and its indefinite transformations, between myth as it is known as of old and as it is told and imagined anew.[5]

[4] While the translation of the German term *Rezeption* with the English "reception" seems imprecise with its reference to the reader reception of myth, Blumenberg's point, however, is that in the ceaseless process of myth's transformation any strict distinction between re-narration or revision and reception blurs and no longer even makes much sense (cf. Marquard et al. 528).

[5] Blumenberg's insistence on myth's inexhaustible variants and the importance of the polyvalences and polysemies that derive from the ceaseless transformations and re-narrations of myth distinguishes him from the structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss. The latter is concerned with the analysis of entire "systems and structurational patterns" (Doty 201) of myths, and of their underlying logical structures, as well as their similarities and dissimilarities in relation to each other and other societies and cultures, notwithstanding the constant transformation of a mythic system (for a brief, but comprehensive introduction to Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist study of myths, cf. Doty 192ff; for the distinction between Lévi-Strauss and Blumenberg, cf. Blumenberg, *Work on Myth* 271ff). For Robert A. Segal, who approaches theories of myth comparatively in his book *Theorizing About Myth* (1999), these distinctions boil down to the unbridgeable gulf between

According to Blumenberg, myth's durability is "a resultant form […] that has proved itself over long periods of time, that has been refined as the product of countless rounds of selection, but also something that did not at least immediately lead into fatal dead ends […]" (*Work on Myth* 164).[6] Despite its fundamental structures of constancy, repetition, and repeatability, and in contradistinction to biblical stories and materials, he posits that classical myth becomes neither ossified nor dogmatic, since its "consolidated core" (*Work on Myth* 150) can be combined with an abundance of variations, modifications, or even deformations and inversions, which account for myth's enduring fascination. Contrasting myth to dogma, Blumenberg concludes that myth is so malleable and pliable that clear distinctions of any binding normative commitment to what constitutes and what does not constitute a certain myth become moot. In fact, the more frivolous, audacious, or violently deformed variants of a particular myth testify to myth's general poetic-imaginary license, its playfulness and daring—in short, to its strength.[7] Like musical themes

"comparativists and particularists" (148) and are therefore, he claims, "moot" (148). While Segal's study is helpful by situating Blumenberg within a broader context of the study of myth, on the whole he deals rather abruptly with Blumenberg's lengthy, intricate, and often challenging philosophy of myth, listing points of criticism rather than going into in-depth argumentation. However, Blumenberg's emphasis on myth's liberality, its manifold exhilarating aesthetic possibilities, its function as poetry and logos as well as a means of coming to terms with the world's overwhelming and threatening forces, distinguishes Blumenberg significantly from semiotic and post-structuralist scholars of myth who focus on the naturalizing tendencies of signs and their meanings within a culture's worldview and value system (for the latter cf. Doty 216ff; for a more in-depth and comprehensive discussion of Blumenberg, cf. Marquard et al. 527-47).

6 Blumenberg also at one point compares the selection or testing process that myth has been undergoing from prehistory until today to "a piece of Darwinism in the realm of words" (*Work on Myth* 159); at another point, he compares that process of selection to "an antiquarian" who domesticates and administers myth as "one of the provinces of logos" (*Work on Myth* 350).

7 The potential of myth's constancy and variability particularly emerges when juxtaposed to the rigidity of dogma, which for Blumenberg differentiates myth from "book religion" (*Work on Myth* 217) and orthodoxy in general (cf. "Wirklichkeitsbegriff" 19). In "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos," Blumenberg directly defines inconstancy and