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Don't Look Back In Anger: The Mythic World-building of Melinda Salisbury's *Her Dark Wings*

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Abstract

Through a close reading of *Her Dark Wings* by Melinda Salisbury and Ash Bond's own work-in-progress this article examines the use of mythology as a megatext. It explores how both texts handle alternate narratives existing in parallel, and the use of the Underworld as a realm of initiation and transformation. It concludes that while the framework of myth can attract the reader, the subversion of an expected mythic narrative can be a useful tool to incite a reader's curiosity and propel them through the story.

Keywords: *mythology, creative writing, young adult, fantasy*

But the Gods are like publishers,
usually male,
and what you doubtless know of my tale
is the deal.

Eurydice, Carol Ann Duffy

At the beginning of *Her Dark Wings* we are told that Corey's best friend Bree has betrayed her by sleeping with her boyfriend, Ali. With this parallel betrayal, Corey is left marooned, heartbroken, and filled with an all-consuming, seething rage. She cannot even fulfil the traditional post-break-up rites of gathering with friends, singing favourite 'fuck-you-forever' songs and burning 'everything they ever gave you.' (Salisbury, 2022: 7). A few weeks later at an island festival called the Thesmophoria, Corey kisses a mysterious masked stranger and wishes her friend dead. A few minutes later, Bree is found drowned by the water's edge.

'Tell me what happens next, Muse,' Salisbury nudges in her prologue. 'Sing' (Salisbury, 2022: 1).

In her artful Young Adult (YA) reworking of the Persephone myth, Melinda Salisbury plants a story seed in this myth's rich, fertile soil. As Gaiman notes, 'myths are compost, in which stories grow' (Gaiman, 2016: 64), and Salisbury's story grows and grows into a tentacular many-branched narrative, with roots both in myth and in contemporary teenage experience. This is not a dead, dried-up myth, this is a myth that is very much alive. This is a myth that bites.

I would argue that the reader's experience is enriched by their own understanding of the mythic roots of these stories, which allows the reader to revel in anticipation, but also to notice when the narrative branches away from mythic tradition. As *Her Dark Wings* unfolds the reader recognises that it *is* the story of Persephone and Hades, but it also isn't; it *is* the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, but it also isn't. The reader's expectations are consistently subverted, and they are propelled to read on, hooked by the conflict between the mythic and the modern, and the quintessentially adolescent tension between familiarity of what has gone before and the suddenly unknowable future. This dynamic discourse between past, present, and future, makes mythic retellings a perfect vehicle to explore the transformations and tensions inherent in the young adult experience.

We are invited into Salisbury's approach to mythic fantasy in the opening lines of the novel where she, in the mode of the ancient poets, calls upon the Muse: 'Tell me, of a world where the gods still rule Olympus' (Salisbury, 2022: 1). With this request, Salisbury does not follow Barker, Haynes and Miller in inviting us *back* into the mythic

past with 'when', but instead invites us *sideways* into an alternate version of our own world 'where the gods *still* rule' [my italics].

The initial setting of Salisbury's novel, simply called 'the Island' throughout, is familiar enough. Hebridean in its weather and home to barely twelve hundred people, the Island is a place where a friend can ghost you over text but also where coins are put in the mouths of the dead. Much like the Oxford of Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, or the America of Gaiman's *American Gods*, the Island is our own familiar world, but sideways. As Gaiman himself notes: 'it is the function of imaginative literature to show us the world we know, but from a different direction' (Gaiman, 2016: 64).

Salisbury's sideways world is perhaps best explained by her protagonist Corey when she, in a characteristically wry observation, compares her own belief in the gods to her belief in the Mariana Trench, or Antarctica in that, 'I know they're out there but it's not like I'm ever going to see them' (Salisbury, 2022: 55). They are – like myths – there, but for the most part remain hidden. That is, until Salisbury lifts the lid on the mythic landscape and the parallel world of the gods is revealed: 'Legend has it, if you [look over your left shoulder], you might catch a glimpse of one of the entrances to the Underworld' (Salisbury, 2022: 48). And she does.

This alternate world is presented as tentatively close, just at the fingertips of reality. This plays on the enchanting idea that if you cast the right spells, perform the correct rites, then you might just be able to see an alternate version of our world or even step into it, through a wardrobe or perhaps even a train station platform. For my own work in progress, like Salisbury, I wanted myths to be part of the soil of my setting so that when a god appears – which is much earlier in my plot – it is not a reality-shattering experience, but one that the audience can read as possible (though still wondrous) within the offered world.

There is an ephemeral quality to the liminal, transient space that adolescence occupies. This is perhaps reflected in the qualities of the mythic landscapes that we see depicted in the literature written with this audience in mind. The YA mythic retelling is uniquely situated to retain the enchantment, without yet being exposed to the realities revealed by the harsh glare of an adult fiction writer such as Barker. Salisbury's novel neither lacks grit, nor enchantment; the reality is there – as is the magic – but the readers, much like the characters, are able to choose to look away.

The tension between two worlds – adulthood and childhood, the magical and the real, the mythic and the modern – is reflected in Salisbury's worldbuilding, but also in the language of the novel itself, where phrases such as 'fucked up' (Salisbury, 2022: 3) sit comfortably alongside words like 'ekphora' and 'Nepenthe'. This bridging of the classic and the contemporary is perhaps best represented in the character of the oracle who we are told, 'isn't really an oracle, not like the celebrity ones... What she actually is, is a witch' (Salisbury, 2022: 73). Described as having three shadows and many faces, the oracle exists in many alternates, all at once. She is a witch, an oracle, a youth, a crone, and someone who gives snarky – though wise – advice to both Bree and Corey on their roles in the story. She, like Salisbury, is aware of the mythic tradition but, unlike

the god-figure Hades, does not feel beholden to upkeep it. Instead she is gleefully irreverent, lining up liquor bottles on Bree's headstone and offering Corey a 'vodka and pomegranate juice', adding knowingly that it is 'normal pomegranate' (Salisbury, 2022: 299).

While none of my own characters sport iPhones – or even iGods (as in Hermes in Maz Evans's wickedly funny *Who Let The Gods Out*) – Salisbury's humour side-eyes myth in a way that I find shocks life into the work, and I have tried to draw this into my own novel, *Daughters of Artemis*:

Apollo lowers his imaginary bow and opens his hands like sun rays. 'A girl snatched from the maw of death. Oo!' He shivers. 'What a story – what a song – that will be! How should it go? Something in a minor key perhaps?'
Artemis growls. 'Brother—'
'—No, you're right. Don't want to give the ending away too soon—'

The protagonist of *Daughters of Artemis* is Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, who was sacrificed to ensure good winds for the ships that were to set sail for Troy. In chapter one, we meet her as she steps towards her pyre, resigned to how she thinks her story will play out. She, like much of the readership of mythic retellings, has a pre-existing understanding of how this story will unfold. She does not run, remarking that 'there are tales enough of girls who try to flee their fate'. She has an awareness of herself within the mythic landscape, but we as the reader are one step ahead; we know that her story does not end here as we, in our reading experience, are just at the beginning. We know something is about to happen.

When playing with myth, a writer must expect comparisons between alternate branches of possible narratives to become part of the readers' experience. It is a fun game, and almost as old as the myths themselves with players such as Virgil and Ovid trying to outdo their predecessors as to the complexity of their intertext (Marciniak, 2017a: 2). Salisbury overtly acknowledges this discourse between author and audience, as when Corey arrives in the Underworld, and Hades – in a remarkable example of man-splaining or, perhaps, god-splaining – states, 'You want to ask if you can have your friend back.' When Corey says that no, no she doesn't, he counters bitterly: 'That's all anyone wants when they come here' (Salisbury, 2022: 123). Hades is correct, in that mythic tradition would dictate that Corey ask for her friend back and Hades, presumably diachronic in his divine viewpoint, is a fitting advocate for that tradition. Equally a reader familiar with the referenced mythical narrative would also expect that Corey, overcome with remorse, go racing down to the Underworld Orpheus-style to reclaim her friend's future.

But Salisbury has other plans, she subverts the mythic, and does so in a quintessentially young adult fashion. Corey's story is one that harnesses the liminality of adolescence, but it also revels in its extremes: the mythical magic of first love, where you would *die* for someone, and the epic furor of first betrayal where you would wish

somebody dead, and not regret it. Corey then does not forgive Bree, 'I *hate* her. I will always, always *hate* her' (Salisbury, 2022: 35).

We are often taught that good stories are born from conflict, and in my own novel I have also sought to harness this conflict between the mythic and the modern by, like Salisbury, offering the reader an alternate, and conflicting, narrative that exists alongside the familiar myth. As mentioned, my story begins with Iphigenia, readying to be sacrificed. So far, so mythic. But at the very last moment, Iphigenia is plucked from the fires by Artemis who – in my alternate at least – carries her to the safety of Artemis' own island, the island of Mora.

In some versions of the story Iphigenia is dead, in others she is alive. In the opening lines of my novel, I set up these parallel narratives, aligning the first-person narrator herself with the reader's myth-informed perspective. 'There are many ways of telling this tale, but... Don't worry, I don't die, not in this story anyway.' (Bond, 2023).

Though Salisbury writes the prologue to *Her Dark Wings* in the omniscient god-like third person, she swiftly switches to first person – a point of view favoured by the YA genre for its immediacy. This immediacy reminds us that while we have one foot in the mythic past and the other in the present – much like our intended readership might have one foot in childhood and one, tentatively, in the adult sphere – anything could happen in this new narrative. I have also chosen to adopt the first person, though allowing my protagonist just a hint of god-like omniscience at the very start of the novel as she herself, in a way, acts as the poetic voice of Salisbury's prologue.

The YA genre is one unsurprisingly concerned with the act of growing up; the metaphorical stepping across (or – more pertinently – being thrown into) the void into adulthood and the unknown realities that await there. Indeed, Marciniak argues that this is the basis for the Persephone myth being amongst the most popular myths to engage with on fanfiction sites (2017b: 446), referring to it as, 'a story about initiation – the passage from a girl's world into womanhood.' (2017b: 447). I agree in part, though I would suggest anecdotally that this perhaps underplays the erotically-charged nature of the plot that so often magnetises the YA audience.

Unlike many of the 'fanfiction' retellings, Salisbury's protagonist exerts her agency and autonomy forcefully throughout the novel. Corey's own tumble into the Underworld, while shocking, is a relatively painless exercise compared to the fate of Ovid's Persephone (Ovid. *Met.* 5.465ff). Instead of being seized, Corey sees a single narcissus and, thinking it's a sign from Bree, reaches out and takes it herself (Salisbury, 2022: 103). She is then dropped into a fully mythic landscape where she is groomed by the vengeance-hungry Furies to take on a role at their side as one of them, a role which Corey repeatedly refuses – insisting that she is mortal, insisting that she wants to go home – until, that is, she is confronted with Bree herself.

Mirroring this thrust into adulthood, my protagonist Iphigenia is also taken from her homeland by force, and deposited on an island where she too has to make a home. Salisbury's Erebus is, quite literally, a hell, whereas the island of Mora is different. There are no fiery pits or Asphodel fields, instead there are temperate forests, and

rocky crags and standing stones. I have pulled characters from classical texts and deposited them into what I conceive of as the mythic landscape of my childhood, the compost where these stories played out in my mind.

For Iphigenia, it is when she connects with this landscape that she is able to tap into the power lain dormant inside of her: a magic inherited from her mother, Clytemnestra. And it is within the dark cocoon of the Underworld that Salisbury's Corey discovers her own gift: that she can grow plants, even in the barren soil of the land of the dead, much like her estranged mother – whom the reader *au fait* with their myth might imagine to be the Greek goddess Demeter. The immortals – first Allecto, then Hermes, and then Hades – are amazed at Corey's generative ability. Hades comments, 'There has never been life like this here, before you' (Salisbury, 2022: 213).

With the discovery of my own protagonist's power, comes her transformation into the witch-goddess Hecate. Fuelled by a desire to burn down the world that has abused her, Iphigenia creates a plague that rips through the Greek army. While – at this stage of writing – Iphigenia's metamorphosis does not change her physical appearance, the transformation that comes with Corey's initiation into the mythic landscape is deliciously literal: she grows talons, teeth and even wings (Salisbury, 2022: 265). The Furies are delighted with Corey's transformation, crowing to Hades that they 'have claimed her' (Salisbury, 2022: 267) and offering Corey a scourge to exact 'justice' on Bree. As Corey looks at Bree cowering before her winged form, she remembers the day that she and Bree had their ears pierced (Salisbury, 2022: 268) – another painful rite of initiation. Corey drops the scourge and in so doing rejects the Furies' claim that she is entirely one of them. Her talons recede, but her hands still ache, reminding her that the talons, as well as her mythic alternate reality, lie just underneath the surface.

Here Salisbury clearly and viscerally reflects the young adult experience. Adolescence is a time of experiential gateways – gateways that come with physical change and emotional impact, and gateways that once you have gone through, lock behind you; Corey's time in the Underworld has physically – and emotionally – transformed her, and she cannot entirely go back to being who she once was. Unlike the other inhabitants of the Island who drink the memory-sucking waters of the Lethe via the island tap-water, Corey cannot forget who she has become.

Though the transformation isn't physical, Iphigenia's witch-like power does change her, and while it is tempting to write an ending that shies away from the truth of her transformation, I find Salisbury's approach galvanising. Iphigenia was snatched from her first home, and at the end of the novel finds herself exiled from her adopted homeland. I leave her on her own island where she is forced to curate her own destiny, to plant her own seeds. It is a blank space but one – like the wilds of untested adulthood – that is also filled with possibility.

Though Corey's final destination as Queen of the Underworld is comparable to that of Persephone's, the landscape is so much of her own design that we might read *Her Dark Wings* as a redemptive tale. As in Coehlo's recent *The Boy Lost In The Maze* (Coehlo, 2022) where Coehlo ultimately frees the minotaur from the labyrinth, so too

Salisbury reaches back into myth and pulls Persephone out, offering her a way out of the Underworld and out of the confines of the anticipated narrative.

In *Her Dark Wings*, Salisbury demonstrates the unapologetic, winged freedom in shaking off the expectations of the mythic narrative, mirroring the possibilities inherent in adolescence itself, when external expectations are rejected in favour of self-determination. I am reminded of Corey describing the moment she is able to produce her Fury-style wings independently: 'I feel them unfolding... lengthening, tension, and then release.' (Salisbury, 2022: 325). With this new-found freedom we now, as Hades warns, actually 'don't know what will happen' (Salisbury, 2022: 258). It is this step, leap, flight into the unknown that propels the young adult reader to keep reading, and the writer to keep writing with an oracle-like irreverence.

The threads of my own novel's ending are not yet woven but, inspired by Salisbury and the palimpsestic qualities of re-imagined myths, I am now leaning towards leaving the ending somewhat undone.

So, what happens next? We might imagine the Muse's answer to this question: Anything. And that, dear reader, is the fun of it.

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Author Biography

Ash Bond has a BA in Classics from the University of Oxford and an MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University. She is now currently studying for a Creative Writing PhD at the University of Bristol where she researches, and writes, myth and fantasy. Ash is also a Bridging Histories ambassador, organising the St Paul's Poetry Slams that celebrate voices within the community. Her first Middle Grade novel, the first of a fantasy adventure series, *Peregrine Quinn and the Cosmic Realm*, will be published by Piccadilly Press in Spring 2024.