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Women and Witches: the Role of Classical Mythology in Socio-Political Change

How does the resurgence of classical divine and ‘dangerous’ feminine archetypes in art and culture illuminate contemporary feminist movements and broader socio-political dynamics?

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The Enduring Legacy of Greek Myth

Greek mythology, as one of the oldest surviving literary bodies, has never truly left the public eye. From its inception to its reinterpretation in Rome and its later preservation and reinvention, the cultural significance of Greek myth in literature, art, and politics cannot be easily overlooked. This essay traces how classical myths - particularly those featuring "dangerous women" - have featured in cultural discourse in different periods, with their narratives both being used to challenge and uphold existing hierarchies, whether that includes gender or class. Classical texts have ironically been preserved by the Catholic Church (Chiarloni, 2009, p. 18), contributing to the classical resurgence of the Renaissance, and later re-entered popularity through educational institutions in the 1800s and onward. This development culminates in the modern day, where we see immense popular interest in the classics, as demonstrated by the wealth of retellings, stage adaptations, and a renewed interest in paganism in online circles. While all of these have varied levels of scholarly basis in their formation, they each impact popular culture in different ways. Classics, though antiquated, have provided an invaluable lens of analysis for the progression of modernity.

Gender issues within the classics have been a popular topic of discourse inextricably linked to the study of classical literature and characterisation, a fact acknowledged even in periods where women were not considered equal to their male counterparts. As the common narrative on gender roles and hierarchy has evolved, so has our perception of these women. One key element of tragedy, for example, is its subjectivity – the tragedy of Cassandra, to the Ancient Greeks, may have been her failure to defend her homeland or her rejection of Apollo in the myths, whereas the modern reader's view of her tragedy would likely focus more on her total lack of agency and her treatment as a war prize rather than a person. Medea's tragedy in Ancient Athens would have been her betrayal of her family, but for those who afford her character more nuance, she is someone whose hand is forced in a society where she cannot function

on her own and is abandoned by someone she gives up her family and her life for. From medieval allegories to paintings, these ‘dangerous women’ of classical literature reflect changing and multifaceted views of femininity, national identity, and spiritual authority. The 19th century’s classical revival was not only artistic but profoundly political, with myth underpinning debates about imperial power, women’s rights, and the nature of Western civilisation through the lens of its founding society. To see how these anxieties shaped the survival of myth itself, it is necessary to begin with the story of preservation and transmission.

The Preservation and Transmission of Greek Myth

The ‘Dark Ages,’ so called for their comparative lack of literary output and historical record, influenced in no small part by the bubonic plague, exhibited what Burstein (1975) described as "no major literary and cultural achievements" compared to antiquity. Paradoxically, it was during this period that the Catholic Church became the primary conservator of classical myth in Europe, maintaining the study of classical language through monastic schools and a burgeoning translation movement. However, while these translations kept myths that may have otherwise been lost to antiquity alive, they were subject to what R.F. Kuang deems the inherent betrayal of translation (Kuang, 2022), inspired by the Renaissance adage “Traduttore, traditore” (translator, traitor). Monastic scribes, while preserving core narratives, often Christianised the myths by treating them as moral allegories rather than a religious truth in their own right (Chiarloni, 2009, p.18). This process ensured survival but fundamentally changed their messaging, recasting them as fantastical, nonsensical narratives. This served to reaffirm Christianity as the ‘correct’ religion by contrasting it with what was framed as primitive paganism, allowing the myths to persist because they no longer posed an ideological threat.

This preservation of texts was also highly selective and deliberate. As Hall (2007) demonstrates, monks prioritised works that could be easily allegorised to fit Christian doctrine – texts like Ovid’s

Metamorphoses survived because their transformative narratives could be read as metaphors for spiritual conversion. Additionally, narratives that targeted and demonised women supported the established gender hierarchy, a narrative that Christian translators capitalised on. In this process, the subversive challenges to authority in Ovid's work, among others, were often omitted, leaving a more vulgar and less moral portrayal of the Hellenic gods, thus creating the "Christianized classical tradition" that Turner (1984) identifies as an important factor in early Christian hegemony.

The 15th-century Italian Renaissance witnessed a significant shift, described by Turner (1984) as a rediscovery of classical texts in their original complexity. While understanding was still founded on Christian scholarship, a revived interest meant more people could translate from source texts, leading to a more reverent and almost Augustan view of antiquity. The political plurality of Renaissance Italy, mirroring the Greek map of city-states, created fertile ground for reinterpretation in its contemporary context and added a more nuanced understanding of Greek cultural anxieties and dynamics reflected through their later Italian revisions. Humanist scholars began reading myths as cultural artefacts in their own right, not just as pre-Christian allegories.

This revival also signified a change in the reception of 'dangerous women' of antiquity. Even Medea, often shown as a villain in literary interpretations, was shown on early black-figure pottery as a healer rather than a 'witch,' a Christianised idea imposed on several classical characters even though the label and its connotations were not a part of their initial classical context (Chiarloni, 2009, 12). There was renewed interest in traditions like those in Pausanias' writings that presented Medea as a foundational hero for the Medes (p.13), complicating her later demonisation in Euripides and establishing her as an aetiological founding figure not unlike cultural and moral paragons like Aeneas. This recovery of alternative traditions allowed for more nuanced readings that would later culminate in the Romantic period.

A repeatedly significant catalyst for this social change was the printing press. Just as it disseminated Martin Luther's works for the Reformation, it facilitated the renaissance of classics by publishing classical literature and analysis in periodicals. As classical texts became widely available in translation, especially to the working class that were traditionally excluded from these texts and their discourse, they ceased to be clerical property and integrated with the wider culture. This democratisation, as Hall (2007) notes, allowed working-class autodidacts to develop radical reinterpretations that challenged elite readings, allowing for more diverse and nuanced analyses. This was a crucial development, enabling the myths' role to shift from upholding the status quo for privileged groups to providing a narrative for marginalised people to challenge it. They serve as reminders that “dangerous women” were both feared and necessary, embodying a paradox that keeps them alive in cultural memory. Yet this preservation is inherently biased, as the very act of deciding which stories to keep was already political. This becomes clearest when we turn to the role of imperialism in appropriating and redefining myth.

Imperialism, the Printing Press, and Classical Revival

The 19th century witnessed an unprecedented revival of interest in Greek mythology that Macintosh (cited in Monrós, 2009, p.78) links directly to British imperial ambitions. This period coincides with the acquisition of the Elgin Marbles by the British and the translation of the Rosetta Stone by the French, which also brought classical and ancient history to the forefront of current affairs and served as symbols for the success of the empire at the time. As Turner (1984) observes, Victorians viewed ancient Greece simultaneously as an idealised utopia and a cautionary tale about civilizational decline - a dual perspective that justified their own imperial project while warning against its potential excesses.

Some of the xenophobic or orientalist mentalities reflected in mythical popularisation are shown through the receptions of 'dangerous women' in this period. Chiarloni (2009, p.13) demonstrates how Medea's portrayal as a treacherous foreigner in Euripides' original play may have reflected Greco-Persian tensions - a reading that gained new resonance in Britain's age of colonial expansion. The Victorian fascination with what Monrós (2009, p.88) calls the "gypsy archetype" and other Orientalist tropes in classical reception reveals how myth became entangled with imperial ideology. This mentality can also be applied to the romanticisation of Cassandra as a more 'tragic' and positive foil for Medea in their respective narratives.

The Grand Tour tradition, which brought British elites face-to-face with classical ruins, further reinforced this connection between classical knowledge and imperial identity. As Turner (1984) notes, many Victorians came to see themselves as the new Romans - heirs to both Greek culture and Roman imperial power. This dual identification allowed them to simultaneously admire Greek democratic ideals while justifying their own autocratic colonial practices.

The impact of this print revolution on mythological reception cannot be overstated. Where classical knowledge had once been the exclusive domain of elites educated in Greek and Latin, now translations like George Chapman's *Iliad* (1598) and later Victorian versions became widely available. As Monrós (2009, p.108) notes, newspaper serialisations of Homer brought classical epic into middle-class homes, creating what we might call a "mass classical culture" for the first time in history. Female scholars and translators played a particularly crucial role in this process. Monrós (2009, p.92) highlights how women like Augusta Webster introduced more nuanced portrayals of mythological women, anticipating later feminist scholarship. The *Trojan Women*, translated in 1780 and frequently restaged, became what Monrós (2009, p.275) calls a "vehicle for feminist critique" through its sympathetic portrayal of war's female victims. These female translators often emphasised different aspects of the texts than their male

counterparts, focusing on domestic scenes and emotional interiority that had been overlooked in more traditional readings.

Mythocritique and Modernity

The late 19th century developed sophisticated tools for mythic analysis that would shape future scholarship. Gilbert Durand's *mythocritique* and *mythoanalyse*, as discussed by Burstein (1975), distinguished between immediate contextual readings and broader ideological examinations - an approach that revealed how myths functioned as what Durand called "modules of history" (pp.61). Durand's work was particularly significant for its treatment of myth as living discourse and a metric of social change rather than a dead artefact. His concept of myth as a "grounding principle of our lives" (pp.61) challenged the growing tendency to regard non-Christian religious texts as pure fiction or entertainment, encouraging people instead to view myths through more analytical lenses. This tension between myth's emotional resonance and intellectual analysis would become central to 20th-century mythological studies.

Lévi-Strauss (1958) took this further, analysing myths as cultural unifiers that revealed deep structures of human thought. However, as Burstein (1975) notes, this structuralist approach risked desacralising myths and stripping them of their religious and cultural significance, reducing them to clinical patterns (p.16).

The Victorian era thus stands at a crossroads between what Louis (2005) identifies as two attitudes toward myth: the Romantic view of myths as living spiritual truths, and the emerging scientific view of them as cultural artefacts to be dissected. Two figures epitomise this process: Cassandra and Medea. Their myths not only embody the dangers of being a woman who resists but also reveal how retellings can expose and subvert patriarchal violence.

Medea's Transformations

This Victorian reinterpretation of Medea reflected several contemporary concerns. Zupancic (2017) links it to debates about divorce and women's rights, noting how sympathetic Medea portrayals emerged alongside growing acceptance of marital separation. The idea that Medea is a complex figure is more popularised in her artistic depictions, no longer unanimously villainous. Medea was depicted particularly by Romantic painters like Delacroix (ironic considering her tragic or villainous associations), but this romanticisation begets a more nuanced view of her character. Medea is both a victim and a warrior in this interpretation, ambiguously shown as defending or preparing to murder her children. She adopts this warrior image through her circumstances and takes on a more 'masculine' role, evoked by the presence of a dagger in the painting, which Chiarloni (2009) posits is an example of gendered imagery as it evokes penetrative masculine belligerence. Medea becomes what Monrós (2009, p.275) terms a "gender transgressor" whose violence mirrors Jason's but is read differently because of her sex. If Medea's crime is the upheaval of her family, Jason does the same by persuading Medea to betray her parents and abandon her homeland – a similarly immoral crime. The stage became a crucial arena for these reinterpretations. Ernest Legouvé's 1854 *Médée*, as Zupancic (2017) analyses, emphasised Medea's psychological torment and positioned her crimes as responses to Jason's betrayal. This humanisation reflected broader Romantic trends that, as Louis (2005) shows, privileged emotional interiority and psychological complexity. The play's popularity suggests Victorian audiences were more receptive to nuanced portrayals of female violence than we might assume. If Cassandra reveals the silencing of women, Medea shows the destructive consequences of a woman who refuses silence altogether.

Cassandra and the Silenced Woman

Cassandra's Victorian popularity reveals even deeper cultural anxieties. Macintosh (cited in Monrós, 2009, p.78) connects her appeal to German Romanticism and the Grand Tour, but her resonance went further. As a prophetess doomed to disbelief, she embodied what Vance (1982, p.4) calls the "marginalised female intellectual" - a figure that spoke directly to Victorian debates about women's

education and public speech. Cassandra serves as a more idealised tragic figure; she does not commit ‘crimes’ of the same nature as Medea, as her only transgression in the myths seems to be her rejection of the god Apollo, an act of religion that would not have been as damning to Victorian Christian audiences. She exists as an elusive, eastern prophetess eventually used as a war prize, but one who uses her voice in an attempt to defend her homeland and her people, albeit unsuccessfully.

The Aeschylean Cassandra particularly captured the Victorian imagination. Her status as what Macintosh (cited in Monrós, 2009, p.78) terms a "war prize" resonated with Britain's imperial culture, while her prophetic visions and subsequent silencing mirrored the experiences of Victorian women intellectuals. As Monrós (2009, p.78) notes, Cassandra's fate "resonates with the turn to modernity," representing both the promise of female insight and the brutal mechanisms of its suppression. The Romantic poets transformed Cassandra into what Louis (2005) terms a "mythic martyr" for modernity – like in the Homeric epics, Cassandra’s loss is one the audience feels but ultimately roots for as the Achaian victors capture most people’s sympathies, and so her sacrifice becomes part of a necessary narrative at the expense of her personal tragedy. Tennyson and Swinburne used her story to critique both religious dogma and patriarchal authority, anticipating 20th-century feminist readings, and showing that more subversive readings of these characters were not merely restricted to women analysing her character at the time. Tennyson's "The Palace of Art" (1832) and Swinburne's "Cassandra" (1866) both present her as a figure of tragic insight, her prophecies representing what Burstein (1975, p.16) calls the "emotional and spiritual losses" accompanying modernity's rationalism.

From Victorian to Modern Readings

The Victorian classical revival set the stage for its later reinterpretations, establishing foundational patterns that continue to shape current cultural memory and intellectual discourse. Victorian reinterpretations of classical material were deeply enmeshed in the era’s social, political, and

philosophical debates (Kilinski, 2013; Louis, 2005). Most significantly, the Victorians' politicised readings of classical texts anticipated today's feminist and postcolonial critiques. As Turner (1984) posits, engagement with antiquity is always influenced by contemporary concerns and biases, a common theme in many historical analyses. Victorian writers like George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning reimagined classical heroines to critique contemporary gender roles, foreshadowing later revisionist interpretations of classical myth. In this sense, myth is a sort of cultural capital; its pervasiveness makes it an accessible and poignant instrument of social commentary. Likewise, Victorian imperialist appropriations of Rome and Greece both added to the popularity of the classics as a form of British nationalism and laid the groundwork for postcolonial theorists like Edward Said to interrogate the ideological uses of classical history, such as the British empire likening itself to that of the Romans in scope and cultural importance.

The Victorian crisis of faith also created a need for new narrative forms, a tension that persists in contemporary literature where myth acts as a "grounding principle" (Durand, cited in Burstein, 1975, p. 61) in a secular world. Even metaphorical applications of myth in predominantly Christian societies can present the primary sociological benefits of religion historically, creating a sense of community and allowing us to attempt to augment our understanding of our world and our purpose. This debt is evident in movements like *Le nouveau Roman* and writers like Jeanette Winterson, who use classical motifs as fluid symbols for modern uncertainties.

In addition to the cultural anxieties reflected in the Victorian era's reinterpretation of myths, there was also an added and unprecedented emphasis on female scholars and translators as they were gradually granted more access to academia and scholarship. Scholars like Augusta Webster and Jane Ellen Harrison established crucial precedents for contemporary feminist classical scholarship (Monrós, 2009). While this access was still heavily restricted by race and class (creating a deficit in intersectional interrogations of

Victorian social hierarchies), their work negotiating a male-dominated field resonates in modern projects, setting the stage for later, more critical reinterpretations.

Ultimately, as Hall (2007) contends, access to the classics has always been political. The Victorian era's democratisation of classical knowledge through accessibility in periodicals and newspapers, as well as widening access to academia, set the stage for today's debates about decolonising curricula and diversifying canons, making the Victorian revival a dynamic force whose repercussions continue to unfold.

Modern Retellings of Classical Myth

The journey of Greek mythology from medieval monasteries to Victorian stages reveals its enduring power as what Durand called a "grounding principle of our lives" (pp.61). The transformations of Medea, Cassandra, and other mythic women particularly illuminate how each era reconstructs the past to address its own anxieties. As we continue revisiting these stories in the 21st century - whether in feminist retellings or postcolonial critiques - we participate in this same tradition of reinterpretation, proving the "tenacity and elasticity" (Kilinski, 2013) that makes classical myth perennially relevant. The Victorian engagement with classical mythology ultimately demonstrates how, as Turner (1984) argues, the past is never truly past. Their reinterpretations of Medea and Cassandra speak directly to our contemporary concerns about gender, power, and voice, reminding us that classical reception is always as much about the present as it is about antiquity. In an age that still struggles with many of the same issues that preoccupied the Victorians - the tensions between tradition and progress, between individual rights and social stability - their classical revivals continue to offer valuable insights and cautionary tales.

The resurgence of classical retellings in literature has heralded the return of the so-called “dangerous women” of antiquity. Like their prevalence in the visual arts in previous periods, their return allows us to explore the political contexts of social and political anxieties. By revisiting figures like Cassandra, Circe, and Briseis, authors such as Christa Wolf, Margaret Atwood, and Pat Barker expose the enduring patriarchal frameworks that shape historical and modern narratives. Their consequent receptions not only shed light on the systemic erasure of women’s voices but also engage with debates on war, autonomy, and gendered violence as they have played a role in shaping our world. In doing so, classical myth retains its status as a potent site for feminist resistance, as it reveals the limitations and benefits of reclaiming stories rooted in misogyny.

Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra* tells the story of the Iliad through the eyes of Cassandra, the prophetess tragically cursed to never be believed. This change in narration is a stark deviation from Homer’s work, where Cassandra plays a relatively minor role in a story positioned as a monument to male heroism. Rabinowitz (2019) notes that Wolf’s background as an East German writer covering a wide breadth of political issues in post-reunification Germany means that she, in a sense, adopts Cassandra’s mantle, sharing the narratives that the public may not be ready to believe and being subject to inherent prejudices and invalidations as a woman. While Cassandra’s story is steeped in myth and fantasy, her story is a reality for so many forgotten or disbelieved women throughout history.

Wolf’s novel resists categorisation, blending myth, autobiography, and political critique to challenge patriarchal structures. She rejects Homer’s “line of male action” (Rabinowitz, p. 77), which glorifies Achilles’ wrath (“the beast”) while reducing women to passive victims or prizes. Instead, Wolf re-centres Troy’s everyday life, exposing the war’s economic roots (trade disputes, piracy) rather than the myth of Helen’s abduction (p. 84). In this element of war commentary on the impacts within everyday life, Wolf conveys that non-combatants also become forced to participate in a conflict as it upsets existing social

structures and disproportionately affects the women in belligerent societies – they may not be called to the battlefield, but they are often reduced to war prizes in real life just as they are in the Iliad.

Cassandra's prophetic power is inseparable from sexual violence: Apollo's curse, sealed by the humiliating act of spitting into her mouth, reduces her to an "object" of male domination (pp. 81–82). As both princess and outcast, she embodies complicity and resistance—silent at Polyxena's sacrifice yet ultimately rebelling against her fate (pp. 82–83). The cave-dwelling Cybele worshippers suggest a pre-patriarchal alternative, but their "impotence" against war reflects Wolf's scepticism toward utopian separatism (p. 83). Cassandra's very ability to speak marks her as a 'dangerous woman,' and the curse that strips her credibility underscores how female voices are historically disempowered.

Cassandra, written amid Cold War nuclear anxieties, parallels Troy's fall with the possibility of mutually assured destruction in nuclear war. Cassandra's return as a symbol implies that her prophecy is a sort of swan song for Troy, as Wolf uses her similarly to comment on the brutality of war and the treatment of women in a time when global peace was growing increasingly precarious. The novel is accompanied by several of Wolf's essays, conveying more explicitly her political analyses with less metaphorical emphasis on Greek myth. Her censored third essay explicitly linked Troy to East-West tensions, while post-reunification, Wolf likened East Germany to Troy, a failed utopia destroyed by internal corruption (Rabinowitz, 2019, 89). Wolf's themes of censorship, ecological crisis, and militarism remain urgent, positioning classical reception as a lens for contemporary anxieties.

As feminist analyses have gained more traction, modern receptions of the Odyssey increasingly explore the reduction of female characters in Homeric epics to aids or obstacles to male heroism. Murnaghan (2019) examines Robert Graves' *Ulysses* (1933), which conflates Penelope and Circe into a single

archetype: "Penelope and Circe seemed as one" (p. 1). This conflation superficially dismantles the "good vs. evil" dichotomy but ultimately strips both characters of agency, reinforcing misogynistic tropes (p. 1).

Feminist poets and novelists have reclaimed Circe as a figure of autonomy. Linda Pastan's *Circe* (1975) declares, "I will always be the other woman," yet asserts her lasting influence: "memory / will perfect me" (Murnaghan, p. 14). Contrasting herself with Dido, who "leap[s] from cliffs / for love"—Pastan's Circe embraces her marginality, ending with the foreboding "the forecast / is hurricane" (p. 15). Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) further subverts the *Odyssey* by portraying Penelope as a manipulative weaver of narratives: "She's up to something, she's weaving / histories... the one you will believe in" (p. 17). Yet, as Murnaghan notes, these revisions remain constrained by the *Odyssey*'s male-centric framework (p. 18). All of these women, considered threats to the male heroes' autonomy or heroism in some capacity, are reduced to narrative devices by association, but they share the curse of having their respective moralities not impacting their treatment in myth. Circe, though a 'villain,' is granted more agency by virtue of her divine status, but is ultimately a negative example compared to Dido (despite being Roman, this trope extends to other areas of classical literature) or Penelope, the pious, loving wives. Even though the latter two characters are conveyed more as 'ideal' women rather than 'dangerous' women, they are not spared from tragic fates and mistreatment. The feminist revival of Circe and Penelope underscores a paradox: classical receptions both challenge and replicate patriarchal narratives. By reworking deeply misogynistic myths, feminist authors highlight how little society has progressed, implicitly asking whether reclaiming these stories liberates women or merely recycles their oppression.

Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) reframes the *Iliad* through the narrative of Briseis, the enslaved queen claimed by Achilles as a war prize. Gilbert (2018) notes that Barker, though not a classicist, accesses these myths for their cultural weight, exposing the collateral damage of male glory. Briseis' narration ("Great Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles... We called him 'the butcher'")

subverts Homeric heroism, reframing war as systemic violence against women rather than a means of attaining *kleos* (glory) as it is so often depicted in classical antiquity. The resurfacing of these characters and these stories shows that no level of complacency protects a woman from misogynistic structures and sentiments, a theme resonant in modern society just as it was in Ancient Greece. Barker's novel mirrors contemporary movements like MeToo, linking ancient sexual violence to the modern commodification of women's bodies. The Iliad's "catalogue of ships" becomes a "catalogue of enslaved women," underscoring their erasure (Gilbert, 2018). Yet, as the reviewer observes, Briseis' voice remains stifled—"Is she truly heard, or just another witness to Achilles' tragedy?"—highlighting the limits of reclaiming silenced histories.

Ostriker (1982) argues that feminist revisions must "steal" language from patriarchal traditions, becoming *voleuses de langue* ("thieves of language") to articulate women's experiences (p. 68). Adrienne Rich calls this the "oppressor's language," insufficient yet necessary for subversion (p. 68). Myths, as both public and intimate, become palimpsests, layered with new meanings (p. 73). As male glory both in ancient times is shown through the seizing of power or of war prizes, and later through the acquisition of artefacts through colonial conquest, women must do the same to be heard. Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and "Medusa" exemplify this, reframing female rage as a response to patriarchal violence (Ostriker, pp. 74, 77). These receptions are corrective, representational, and survival-oriented (p. 89), yet they also reveal the tension between reclaiming myths and perpetuating their oppressive roots.

The modern resurgence of dangerous feminine archetypes underscores classical myth's dual role as a mirror of contemporary gender struggles and a tool for feminist resistance. From Wolf's Cassandra to Barker's Briseis, these receptions expose the systemic erasure of women's voices while confronting limitations of reclaiming patriarchal narratives. They reflect broader cultural anxieties of war, autonomy, and language itself, demonstrating how antiquity's shadows linger in modern feminist discourse. As

Ostriker asserts, feminist mythmaking is not nostalgic but urgent: a means of survival in a world still shaped by ancient violences.

Modern Witchcraft and Paganism: The Resurgence of Classical Archetypes as Safe Spaces for the Ostracised

The renaissance of paganism and alternative spiritualities in recent years has presented a unique stage for the classics in the digital age. Not only are these characters of symbolic importance, but they can now attain a level of religious importance uncommon outside the time period where these classical myths were produced. These classical divine and "dangerous" feminine archetypes from Hecate to Medusa, Circe to the Furies, in modern witchcraft and paganism reflect a broader cultural reclamation of marginalised voices. Contemporary feminist movements have revitalised these ancient figures, transforming them into symbols of resistance to patriarchal oppression. Modern witchcraft, particularly through digital spaces like WitchTok, blends spirituality, consumerism, and activism, creating a haven for ostracised groups, especially women, LGBTQ+ individuals, neurodivergent practitioners, and others excluded from traditional religious structures. However, this revival is not without contradictions; it presents a new struggle with commercialisation, essentialism, and gatekeeping, mirroring broader socio-political tensions. This chapter explores how the resurgence of classical feminine archetypes in witchcraft illuminates contemporary feminist struggles while navigating the paradoxes of capitalism and digital culture.

The modern witchcraft movement, revitalised in the 1970s alongside second-wave feminism (Allen, 2020, p. 272), positions itself as a counterforce to patriarchal religious structures. Historically, the witch was a figure of fear or malice, a woman who existed outside male control, often punished for her autonomy. The

European witch hunts (15th–18th centuries) exemplified this gendered persecution, disproportionately targeting unmarried women, midwives, healers, and those who lived on the fringes of society – no witches were burned, only women. Today, witchcraft has been reclaimed as a spiritual and political act, offering women and marginalised groups a means to resist dominant power structures (both spiritual and increasingly political) by invoking classical figures like Hecate, Circe, and Medusa. Medusa especially has become a symbol for victims of sexual assault reclaiming their power, with many women tattooing her image as a symbol of strength and survival inspired by the Ovidian iteration of her story.

Wicca, popularised by Gerald Gardner in the 1950s, synthesised occultism, feminist thought, and Romantic-era Hellenism (Doyle-White, 2016, p. 13). Gardnerian Wicca drew heavily from ceremonial magic, Freemasonry, and early 20th-century esotericism, but its emphasis on a dual goddess-god structure allowed for a reimagining of divine femininity. While this showed an improvement in spiritual autonomy for women, these spaces were not intersectional and still exhibited significant racism and classism. By the 1970s, feminist Wicca, as articulated by figures like Starhawk (1979), emphasised female leadership and goddess worship, though it often retained bioessentialist views, such as the "maiden-mother-crone" triad (Allen, 2016, pp. 25–26; Vance, 2015). It is also worth noting that these branches of Wicca utilise elements from different Eastern and Celtic religious traditions, with limited reverence for the original cultures many of these practices came. This framework, while empowering for some, risked reinforcing binary gender norms—a tension Judith Butler's (1988, 1990) theories on performative gender complicate by challenging the idea of an innate "feminine essence" (Butler, 1990, pp. 19–21). While the older iterations of witchcraft did not exhibit perfect feminism, they were undoubtedly beacons of progress and proof of the perennial influence of the classics.

The rise of WitchTok exemplifies how digital platforms reshape spiritual practice, combining ancient traditions with modern materialism. Social media fosters global pagan communities, offering

marginalised individuals a "customisable" spiritual experience (Obadia, 2023, p. 550) wherein practitioners can choose different paths and means of study without the constraints and inherent hierarchies of organised religion. Witchcraft content on TikTok ranges from Hellenic polytheism to folk magic, often incorporating classical mythology in ways that resonate with contemporary feminist discourse. For example, Medusa, once a monstrous figure in Greek myth, has been reinterpreted as a symbol of survival and defiance against sexual violence, aligning with MeToo-era feminism. It is also noteworthy that in a period of heightened cultural sensitivity, there is greater attention to minimising cultural appropriation and taking more traditional approaches out of reverence for the original practices, something extending to the Ancient Greeks. Several users on Witchtok, for example, invoke some of these 'dangerous figures' in rituals they learned from the Greek magical papyri and similar texts, often utilising costly and rare spell ingredients to maximise their authenticity.

However, this digital spirituality is also deeply commodified. Crystals, tarot decks, and spell kits are marketed as luxury self-care products, echoing the "pink tax" phenomenon where products aimed at women are priced higher than equivalent goods for men. The rise of "witchy consumerism" (Ezzy, 2006) raises questions about whether modern witchcraft resists capitalism or is co-opted by it. Material culture plays a dual role in contemporary witchcraft: herbs and crystals are seen as agential in magic (Bennett, 2010; Morgan, 2015), yet their mass production raises ecological and ethical concerns (Wilk, 2006).

Urban witches, often disconnected from nature, rely on packaged herbs and mass-produced ritual tools, highlighting contradictions between ecological ideals and consumerist reality (Miller, 2022). Despite this, WitchTok challenges scholarly binaries between spirituality and materialism, demonstrating how modern witchcraft navigates capitalist frameworks while maintaining its subversive edge (Miller, 2022).

Modern witchcraft's appeal extends beyond gender, attracting LGBTQ+, neurodivergent, and BIPOC practitioners who find solace in its non-dogmatic structure. The flexibility of pagan traditions allows for

syncretism—blending African diasporic religions, Norse paganism, or other “open practices” with more traditional or classical witchcraft—creating a more inclusive spiritual landscape than many mainstream religions. However, the movement is not immune to exclusion. Some pagan sects have been co-opted by far-right ideologies, particularly in heathenry and Celtic reconstructionism, where white supremacist groups have appropriated Norse and Germanic symbols (Miller, 2022) – even within these feminist spaces, white supremacist ideologies can permeate.

Online spaces also face gatekeeping, where influencers and traditional elders clash over authenticity. Furthermore, the "divine feminine" narrative has been critiqued for reinforcing conservative gender roles, with TikTok coaches selling expensive "feminine energy" courses that promote heteronormative stereotypes. Algorithmic bias exacerbates these tensions, privileging viral, aestheticised content—such as curated altars and "aesthetic witchcraft" over critical discourse on cultural appropriation or economic accessibility (Warren, 2020). Yet, despite these challenges, digital platforms remain vital "third spaces" for pagans as physical communities decline (Campbell, 2012).

The contemporary reclamation of classical feminine archetypes is less a spiritual fad than a response to a socio-political climate that increasingly mirrors the patriarchal worlds from which these myths emerged. The rollback of women’s rights, epitomised by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, has fueled a revival of figures like Medusa and Medea, transforming them into avatars for struggles over bodily autonomy and systemic injustice.

This regression creates an unsettling resonance with antiquity. Where progress once seemed to move society away from ancient values, it now appears to circle back toward worlds where women had little legal agency and their bodies were politicised. In this context, turning to alternative spiritualities becomes

an innately political act of resistance. As conservative Christianity is weaponised to enforce rigid codes, venerating a pagan goddess signals direct rejection. This dynamic explains the potency of certain archetypes. Medusa, raped and transformed into a monster in Ovid, has become a symbol for survivors reclaiming agency in the face of failing justice systems. Medea, a mother betrayed and disempowered, resonates in an era where forced motherhood without support reframes maternal devotion as entrapment rather than blessing. These revivals also align with a generational shift in religiosity. While Gen Z reports rising spirituality, much of it diverges from Abrahamic traditions, favouring customizable practices like paganism and witchcraft. Such frameworks privilege personal experience over institutional authority and embrace identities—queer, neurodivergent—often excluded from mainstream faiths. Online and physical pagan communities thus offer safe spaces and resistance against far-right ideologies cloaked in Christian morality.

The influence of the classics today is profoundly dialectical. On one hand, antiquity is appropriated to uphold conservative, Eurocentric ideals. On the other hand, the same canon is weaponised to resist them. Once cautionary “dangerous women,” now they anchor a cultural revolution, proving these myths still hold the power to unsettle, inspire, and drive radical change. Taken together, these examples show that myth’s power lies in its very contradictions: used to preserve hierarchies, and equally to dismantle them. This dialectical quality is what ensures their survival—and their continuing political relevance.

Conclusion

Greek mythology’s survival and reinterpretation across millennia reaffirms its perennial cultural influence. From initial monastic preservation to Victorian imperialist interpretations, from feminist retellings to the revival of paganism, these myths are entrenched in persisting debates on power, identity,

and resistance. So-called 'dangerous women' like Medea, Cassandra, and Medusa show how they can be recast as martyrs, icons, or threats to established hierarchy depending on the culture and context of the age. Their dynamism reveals how myth can be a tool for oppression and for liberation. In their persistence, classical myths remind us that history and the past remain malleable and are continually reinterpreted in dialogue with modern struggles.

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