

WOMEN AND WITCHES: THE ROLE OF CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE



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HOW DOES THE RESURGENCE OF CLASSICAL DIVINE AND 'DANGEROUS' FEMININE ARCHETYPES IN ART AND CULTURE ILLUMINATE CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST MOVEMENTS AND BROADER SOCIO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS?

INTRODUCTION

- Myths remain influential through modern retellings, adaptations, and online paganism.
- "Dangerous women" both challenge and reinforce gender and class hierarchies.
- Their portrayals reflect shifting ideas of femininity, identity, and power.



OBJECTIVE

- examine the relationship between the popularity of classics and specific classical archetypes (classed as 'dangerous women' for their subversion of social norms)
- whether this is a useful and effective lens of social analysis, with specific emphasis on gender hierarchies and how they evolve.

METHODOLOGY

Primary Sources:

- artworks (primarily from the 1800s)
- retellings of classical texts
- social media pages centred around hellenic polytheism, witchcraft, and spirituality

Secondary Sources:

- scholarship on related areas of history as well as the above topics
- research emphasis on contemporary cultural anxieties within the time periods explored



CLASSICAL RECEPTION

- a more recent and prominent area of classical research
- specific field of study targeting the cultural impacts of classics in different (usually more modern) time periods and contexts

RECURRING CHARACTERS AND THEMES

- characters like Medea, Cassandra, and Circe, who as 'witches' or 'dangerous women' have been reinterpreted across centuries in different ways
- these mortal and semi-divine characters have acted as moral examples in a way I believe reflects the culture they are being reinterpreted within

ANALYSIS

THE CLASSICAL AND EARLY MODERN PERIODS

- many of these 'dangerous women' are created as negative moral exempla in literature
- many of them have more positive imaginings in older visual art, showing how they are appropriated for specific moral messaging
- many of these texts were translated and kept alive by Christian monastic scholars, who altered characterisations to fit more Christian ideas and narratives
- the Renaissance's renewed interest in classics saw a more nuanced perception of these 'dangerous women,' truer to their original portrayals

THE VICTORIAN ERA – MID 20TH CENTURY

- the classics became more heavily centred in academia for European aristocrats in this period
- European imperial conquest and the British seizure of artefacts turned an interest in classics to a nationalistic and imperialistic theme
- the mid 20th century saw an increase in literature influenced by the world wars and the cold war, evoking classical martial themes in writings like Christa Wolf's *Cassandra*
- the mid 20th century also saw a rise in feminist movements coinciding with an interest in witchcraft, nature, and alternative spirituality

THE MODERN ERA: RETELLINGS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- myths are redefined again as a form of resistance
- revisionist or feminist retellings of myth exceedingly popular
- the rise of alternative spiritualities has also opened doors for a revival of paganism, as a form of resisting the return of more traditional Christian hierarchy
- classics are still associated heavily with education in a period where education and humanities based subjects are given less attention
- the need for feminist retellings of misogynistic stories signals that these symbols are still relevant for women today



CONCLUSION

- antiquity is appropriated to uphold conservative, Eurocentric ideals. On the other hand, the same canon is weaponised to resist them.
- classical texts have often been culturally important (often taught in schools) and have evolved from status symbols to core tenets of education
- our relationship to the classics and their themes can directly depict our cultural anxieties, just as mythology can be used to better understand a culture and its values

