

## ANCIENT MYTHS IN THE MIRROR OF THE 21ST CENTURY: STRATEGIES OF INTERPRETATION AND ARTISTIC FUNCTIONS

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**Abstract:** The article explores the reinterpretation of ancient Greek myth in twenty-first-century literature. It is shown that myth functions not only as cultural heritage but also as a dynamic code of modernity. Key strategies and artistic functions are identified, including identity formation, engagement with trauma, aesthetic play, and philosophical reflection. The study concludes that through continual renewal, myth remains highly relevant within the contemporary literary process.

**Keywords:** ancient myth, reinterpretation, cultural codes

### INTRODUCTION

The ancient myth has remained one of the fundamental pillars of European culture for millennia, shaping archetypes, symbols, and metaphors that continue to resonate in literature and philosophy. Despite its distant past, myth is not a static cultural phenomenon: each epoch rediscovers it, reinterpreting it in accordance with its own values, challenges, and aesthetic strategies (Detienne 1986, 3-5; Burkert 1992, 76).

Twenty-first-century literature demonstrates a renewed interest in the classical heritage. Writers approach myths not as fixed narratives of the past but as living texts open to interpretation and dialogue. From feminist rewritings of well-known stories (e.g., Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*) (Barker 2018, 3-15; Haynes 2019,

5-20) to postmodern ironic remixes and philosophical reinterpretations (Hutcheon 1988), ancient myth becomes a site for exploring new forms of identity, articulating trauma, and redefining cultural codes.

The aim of this article is to investigate the strategies of reinterpreting Greek myths in twenty-first-century literature and to demonstrate the artistic functions they perform in contemporary texts. The theoretical framework combines classical approaches (Jung 1959, 8-10; Eliade 1963) with poststructuralist concepts of intertextuality. The analysis focuses on the works of Madeline Miller, Margaret Atwood, Natalie Haynes, Pat Barker, and Colm Tóibín, which exemplify the diversity of myth's reinterpretations.

#### THE “CANONGATE MYTH SERIES” AS A STIMULUS FOR THE REVIVAL OF MYTH

The interest in ancient myths in twenty-first-century literature proved so significant that a large-scale publishing project dedicated to their renewal and rewriting was launched in the United Kingdom. This was the *Canongate Myth Series*, initiated by the Scottish publishing house *Canongate Books* under the leadership of its director Jamie Byng. The idea emerged in the late 1990s, with the first publications appearing simultaneously on 21 October 2005.

The project aimed to breathe new life into ancient myths, to demonstrate their relevance for the contemporary reader, and to provide writers from different countries and traditions with the opportunity to offer their own interpretations of “*outdated*” narratives. Unlike academic anthologies, the project was conceived as an international series of novellas, in which each author selected a myth and retold it in a free literary form.

The initial lineup already included Margaret Atwood (*The Penelopiad*), Jeanette Winterson (*Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*), and Karen Armstrong (*A Short History of Myth*). In the following years, the project expanded with contributions by Ali Smith (*Girl Meets Boy*), Su Tong (*Binu and the Great Wall of China*), Salley Vickers (*Where Three Roads Meet*),

as well as internationally renowned authors such as Philip Pullman, A. S. Byatt, and others.

A distinctive feature of the series was its ability to bring together authors from diverse cultural backgrounds, offering a “translation” of ancient narratives into the language of modernity (Atwood 2005, 4-10; Winterson 2005, 9). At the same time, the project clearly reflected feminist and postmodern tendencies: myths were retold from the perspectives of female characters, transformed into ironic remixes, or infused with philosophical depth connected to twenty-first-century concerns (Hutcheon 1988).

The impact of the project proved to be substantial. The *Canongate Myth Series* not only resonated widely in Anglophone literature but also became a model for other publishing initiatives, demonstrating that myth can serve simultaneously as cultural heritage and as a contemporary medium for engaging with urgent issues. It stimulated the emergence of new reinterpretations of myth in prose, drama, and poetry, and reinforced international interest in the genre of mythological rewriting.

Thus, the *Canongate Myth Series* can be regarded as a key cultural platform of the early twenty-first century, laying the groundwork for the further development of feminist, political, and philosophical reinterpretations of ancient myth.

## STRATEGIES OF REINTERPRETING MYTH

Contemporary twenty-first-century literature demonstrates a wide range of approaches to ancient myth. Authors do not limit themselves to reproducing traditional plots but employ diverse strategies of reinterpretation that transform myth into a relevant artistic and cultural instrument.

### **1. Feminist rewriting**

One of the most prominent approaches is feminist reinterpretation, in which the “silent” or marginalised characters of myths are given their

own voice. Thus, Margaret Atwood in *The Penelopiad* retells the *Odyssey* from Penelope's perspective, transforming her from a passive wife into an active subject of narration (Atwood 2005, 5-18). Similarly, Natalie Haynes in *A Thousand Ships* and Pat Barker in *The Silence of the Girls* give voice to the women of the Trojan War – captives, wives, and slaves whose stories had previously remained at the margins of the epic (Haynes 2019, 9-14; Barker 2018, 22-25). This strategy highlights the hidden gender asymmetries of the classical tradition and redefines myth as a space of struggle for identity.

## **2. Psychoanalytic and existential readings**

In the twenty-first century, myths often serve as metaphors for an individual's inner crisis. In Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*, the focus shifts from epic warfare to the intimate experiences of the protagonists, turning the story of Achilles and Patroclus into a tragedy of love, loss, and the search for meaning (Miller 2011, 12-30). In *Circe*, the same author portrays the heroine's exile as a path of self-discovery (Miller 2018, 25-42). Such interpretations bring myth closer to contemporary psychoanalytic and existential concerns: loneliness, trauma, and the search for identity.

## **3. Political and ethical reinterpretations**

This strategy reconsiders myth as a cultural mechanism of power. Authors expose the politics of violence, hierarchy, and domination inscribed in classical narratives. For instance, Colm Tóibín in *House of Names* retells the myth of the House of Atreus, transforming divine fate into human cruelty and ethical responsibility (Tóibín 2017, 32-66). Through such reinterpretations, myth becomes a space for reflecting on authority, freedom, and moral choice.

## **4. Playful and ironic reinterpretation**

The postmodern tradition opened the way for ironic engagement with myth, turning it into an object of cultural remix. In Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, as well as in numerous contemporary plays and

poetic texts, myth functions as material for parody, cultural commentary, or metatext. Here, myth is no longer a sacred narrative but a flexible structure that can be deconstructed, fused with popular culture, and situated within contemporary realities (Hutcheon 1988).

Thus, four main strategies of engaging with ancient myth in twenty-first-century literature can be identified: feminist rewriting, psychoanalytic and existential readings, political critique, and ironic remix. Each not only revitalises ancient plots but also transforms myth into a tool for addressing pressing issues of modernity – from gender and identity to politics and cultural memory.

#### THE ARTISTIC FUNCTIONS OF MYTH IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LITERATURE

The revival of ancient myth in contemporary literature is associated not only with aesthetic interest but also with its multifaceted artistic functions. In the twenty-first century, myth ceases to be a relic of the past and instead operates as a dynamic cultural code. It enables authors not only to draw on universal archetypes but also to critically address questions of identity, trauma, memory, power, and freedom.

Based on an analysis of contemporary texts and scholarly literature, this article proposes a typology of the artistic functions of myth that encompasses four key dimensions:

1. myth as an instrument of identity (including gendered and cultural identity);
2. myth as a form of working through trauma in narrative (war, violence, loss);
3. myth as an aesthetic practice (intertextual remixes, postmodern strategies);
4. myth as philosophical reflection (on fate, responsibility, and the limits of human existence).

### **1. Instrument of identity**

Contemporary authors use myth to reinterpret identity in its multiple dimensions – gendered, cultural, and social. Feminist reinterpretations such as *The Penelopiad* (Atwood 2005) or *A Thousand Ships* (Haynes 2019) allow female characters, traditionally deprived of voice, to reassert their place in history. This is particularly evident in the figure of Helen of Troy, who in modern scholarship and fiction is no longer treated as the sole “cause of war” but as a complex figure balancing beauty, victimhood, and political manipulation (Blondell 2013, 45-70; Hughes 2005, 120-145). Through this figure, twenty-first-century literature raises questions of female subjectivity and the cost of beauty in patriarchal culture.

### **2. Therapeutic function**

Myth also serves as a means of engaging with traumatic experience – war, violence, and loss. In *The Silence of the Girls* (Barker 2018), the Trojan captives become both witnesses and victims of war, whose voices allow the traumatic experience of the past to be reinterpreted through the lens of contemporary memory. Similarly, the myth of Heracles is read not only as a tale of superhuman strength but also as a narrative of guilt and suffering: modern receptions emphasise his madness and tragic dimension (Stafford 2012, 90-111; Blanshard and Stafford 2020, 120-126). This perspective brings ancient myth closer to the categories of psychoanalysis and post-traumatic therapy.

### **3. Aesthetic function**

Ancient myth continues to function as a rich source of intertextual allusions, remixes, and cultural codes. The postmodern tradition (Hutcheon 1988, 73-79) transformed myth into a space of artistic play, where classical images could be fused with contemporary realities. Thus, in Jeanette Winterson’s novella *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* (Winterson 2005, 15-40), the legend of Atlas and Heracles becomes a metaphor for human burden and responsibility,

linking the ancient narrative to existential philosophy and the ethics of the twenty-first century.

#### **4. Philosophical function**

Finally, myth in contemporary literature retains its role as a medium for philosophical reflection on the limits of human existence. In *Circe* (Miller 2018, 42-87), the story of the exiled goddess becomes a meditation on freedom, solitude, and choice. In reinterpretations of Helen of Troy, myth unfolds as a paradox: a symbol of eternal beauty that simultaneously embodies destruction and helplessness in the face of fate (Blondell 2023, 60-71). Likewise, Atlas in Winterson's *Weight* acquires philosophical depth, transforming into a metaphor not only of cosmic but also of personal burden carried by the individual in the modern world. It is precisely in this constant renewal – in myth's ability to become a mirror for each new epoch – that its contemporary significance lies.

The artistic functions of myth in twenty-first-century literature can therefore be summarised in four key dimensions: myth as an instrument of identity, as a form of working-through trauma in narrative, as aesthetic play, and as philosophical reflection. The examples of Helen, Heracles, and Atlas illustrate how ancient narratives can be actualised in the context of gender, psychology, and philosophy, becoming universal metaphors of human experience.

#### **CONCLUSION**

An analysis of twenty-first-century literary texts shows that ancient myths remain an integral part of the cultural landscape. They not only preserve the memory of the classical heritage but also operate as a dynamic cultural code that enables critical engagement with the present. Contemporary literature uses myth as a language for addressing gender, identity, trauma, politics, and the ultimate questions of human existence.

Paradoxically, it is the very antiquity of myth that guarantees its openness to continual renewal: narratives crafted millennia ago acquire new horizons of interpretation and become metaphors for the twenty-first century. Myth functions as a “*mirror of the epoch*”, in which the past enters into dialogue with the present.

Authors return to myth because it condenses universal stories of love, war, violence, and the search for meaning. New interpretations restore the voices of those excluded from the ancient narrative – women, slaves, outsiders. Reading such texts is valuable not only for understanding cultural tradition but also for cultivating a critical perspective on contemporary society: myth becomes a medium for reflecting on power, memory, and identity. The analysis leads to four concluding observations:

1. **The right to speak and to tell the “truth” of the story.** Mythic figures – especially those historically marginalised – are granted voice, often in ironic or sarcastic registers that articulate previously taboo themes (embodiment, desire, agency). In Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, for example, Penelope and related female figures comment on the canon from within, while Helen’s figure is reframed through the optics of desire and power (Atwood 2005).
2. **Reassembling archetypes.** Stable archetypes cease to be monolithic and gain new hues; gods and heroes are “rehumanized”, rendered ambivalent, and endowed with psychologically complex motivations.
3. **An ethical shift: from didacticism to recognition.** In place of ornate moralising, an ethics of proximity and empathy emerges: readers perceive not ideal emblems but recognisable vulnerabilities and choices.
4. **From flatness to depth.** Formerly one-dimensional symbols become multilayered, “three-dimensional” figures with inner conflict, contradictions, and responsibility; this depth sustains both readerly interest and the contemporary relevance of myth.
5. **Myth as an inexhaustible resource.** Ancient Greek myths



remain an inexhaustible reservoir of narratives and images to which literature continually returns. The steady publication of new reinterpretations testifies to the enduring appeal of classical heritage. In 2025, for example, P. Rogerson's *Aphrodite* and B. Fitzgerald's *A Beautiful Evil* offered fresh perspectives on well-known figures of Greek mythology. Such works are welcomed by contemporary readers with enthusiasm and have been praised by critics, demonstrating that myth continues to serve as a productive and vibrant mode of cultural reimagining.

Thus, this study has achieved its aim of examining the strategies of reinterpreting ancient Greek myth in twenty-first-century literature and demonstrating the artistic functions myth performs in the contemporary text. The analysis has shown that the return to myth is not merely a matter of reminiscence or cultural memory but an active process of creative renewal. It is precisely in new interpretations that myth reveals its significance and becomes an integral part of twenty-first-century culture. It is no coincidence that scholars and literary critics repeatedly return to myth – not only in its classical form but also in its modern reinterpretations, which open up a wealth of new meanings. As it undergoes transformation, the mythological narrative remains a vital part of the literary process and an essential instrument for the critical reflection of culture and human experience.

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