



Cultures of violence and female resistance: receptions of ancient Greek myths from the 14th to the 21st century, in Europe and beyond

International conference • ERC AGRELITA
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Call for papers

Among modern and contemporary interpretations of Antiquity, there is a striking proliferation of writings about mythical female figures from ancient Greece. In numerous dramatic adaptations, novels, and comic books—the list is not exhaustive, and these works are often linked to visual representations—authors give voice and interiority to female figures who, in ancient texts and many of their later interpretations, were often subordinated to male heroes, rendered invisible, reduced to supporting roles, or depicted as deserving of the symbolic, physical, psychological, and/or political violence inflicted upon them.

Far from the previously dominant male perspective, these adaptations often imagine how these women themselves experienced their own stories, how they endured this violence and attempted to resist it. Many recent works of fiction are explicitly militant and feminist in the context of increased discussion and awareness of violence against women and the affirmation of revolts. Some examples of reception: Circe, who in Homeric poetry weaves while singing and mastering the science of *phármaka*, becomes the protagonist of Madeline Miller's eponymous novel (2018). Margaret Atwood—an author who became world famous thanks to the success of the series *The Handmaid's Tale*, adapted from her dystopian novel in which women serve society only as reproducers for their masters—rewrites *The Odyssey*, this time from the perspective of Penelope in *The Penelopiad* (2005) and that of her maids, who sang in chorus but remained ignored. More recently, Emily Hauser's *The Golden Apple Trilogy* (2016-2018) and Nathalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019) evoke the Trojan War from the perspective of the Trojan women.

The increasing number of theatrical adaptations featuring Greek female characters, not only in Europe but also in the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, particularly in the postcolonial context, often combines the representation of violence against women with the denunciation of violence perpetrated by colonial, racist, and slave-owning systems, multiple forms of discrimination, and/or authoritarian political regimes. We can mention, among many adaptations, *Malintzin*, *Medea americana*, by Jesús Sotelo Inclán (1957, Mexico), *La pasión según Antígona Pérez* by Luis Rafael Sánchez (1968, Puerto Rico), *Gota*

d'Agua by Paulo Pontes and *Chico Buarque* (1975, Brazil), *Antígona* by José Watanabe (1999, Peru), *Medea*, the adaptation of *Medea* by Satoshi Miyagi (1999, Japan), *Tegonni: An African Antigone* by Femi Osofisan (1999, Niger), *Mojada* by Luis Alfaro (United States, 2013), *Yocasta* by Mariana Percovich (2003, Uruguay), and *Antigone in the Amazon* by Milo Rau (2023).

These modern and contemporary works, written in such diverse cultural contexts, thus find in ancient myths a privileged medium for representing and often denouncing violence against women. Their reception is shaped by the political, social, and cultural contexts of their authors: the appropriation and transformation of texts from the culture of what is most often the colonizer constitute acts of affirmation and emancipation—a phenomenon that *a priori* does not exclude the existence of rewritings which continue to justify the violence of patriarchal traditions. The fact that these receptions extend beyond Europe gives them a transcultural dimension, which warrants further analysis in terms of how women are viewed.

This proliferation of rewritings in the 20th and 21st centuries, in Europe and on other continents, is also a response to ancient texts, and/or to textual and visual receptions of these ancient texts and myths that emerged from the Middle Ages to the 19th century. Many of the receptions of the Middle Ages and subsequent centuries—but not all, as we shall see—exalt the submission of these Greek female figures to male authority, denying or justifying violence against them, starting with sexual violence and rape, so often depicted as scenes of loving union and aestheticized in works of art, and ultimately legitimized by a culture of rape that did not wait for its modern definition to exist.

While the concepts of gender studies and postcolonial studies must always be historicized and contextualized in relation to texts and works of art, the fact remains that strategies for legitimizing violence against women—what we call “cultures of violence”—as well as opposing views on the violence suffered, the absence of consent, the suffering endured, and women’s resistance or attempts at resistance, can already be seen in certain European interpretations of ancient myths from the Middle Ages onwards, especially with the flourishing, from the 14th century onwards, of rewritings and adaptations of the texts of Ovid and medieval Latin mythographers. While cultures of violence certainly dominated for centuries, voices were raised against them. This was the case in France at least since the so-called *Roman de la Rose* controversy, launched by Christine de Pizan at the end of the 14th century in her letters responding to Jean de Meung’s misogynistic discourse in the *Roman de la Rose*. This was followed by the “Querelle des femmes” (Quarrel of Women), a debate on the promotion and emancipation of women that lasted for five centuries in part of Europe, but whose historical reality was long been obscured, as Éliane Viennot studied. In her *Cité des Dames*, Christine de Pizan responds explicitly to the misogynistic discourse of the Latin author Matheolus, which was widely circulated, but sometimes also implicitly to Boccaccio’s very ambiguous view in his *De mulieribus claris*: she imagines and traces the symbolic development of a city of women, which, while claiming and proving the fundamental contribution of women to the history of humanity since Antiquity, must also serve as a refuge for them. The aim is to make visible what we now call “matrimony” and also to reject male violence, starting with the discourse advocating the supposed inferiority of women. Numerous collections on illustrious women have been written over several centuries, very often reworking ancient Greek myths. Jennifer Tamas also recently showed how certain works of classical literature have given women, including some Greek heroines, the power to resist and say “no.”

The questioning of cultures of violence and rape is therefore much older than is often claimed, and the accusations of anachronism or activism sometimes levelled at critical studies of these themes in works from the Middle Ages and later centuries should therefore be dismissed.

What is more, in the course of establishing studies on women in ancient Greece—whose work solidly demonstrates their presence in areas of life previously denied by certain sources and by a whole misogynistic tradition that had been built up around them—the development of reception research has enabled us to renew our understanding of certain female figures in the ancient world. This research is not limited to Antiquity itself: it draws inspiration from it, questions it, and projects new issues onto it. Works ranging from *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers*, edited by John Peradotto and John Patrick Sullivan (1978), to the project *Eurykleia – celles qui avaient un nom* (Sandra Boehringer, Adeline Grand-Clément, Sandra Péré-Noguès, and Violaine Sebillotte Cuchet, 2015), as well as *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (1978) by Hélène Foley and *Women in Greek Myth* (1986) by Mary Lefkowitz, also show that, through various strategies, women responded to male violence, often by challenging dominant discourses. Beyond understanding the ancient world, reception studies that focus on mythical Greek women and sometimes rewrite their stories have also led to a reflection on the relationship that later contexts sought to establish with Antiquity, whether to reinforce or challenge rape culture, as several recent studies have shown (Rosanna Lauriola, 2022; Susan Deacy, José Malheiro Magalhães, and Jean Zacharski Menzies, 2023).

It therefore no longer seems possible to read adaptations of Greek myths relating to violence against women without exploiting and, where necessary, discussing concepts developed in the field of gender studies (for example, but without excluding other concepts, rape culture, agency, the male gaze, situated knowledge, and intersectionality). These concepts allow us to better understand and analyze representations of violence in literary adaptations of ancient myths, to better decipher the frequent strategies of justification and, conversely, denunciations, as well as, often, the staging of female reactions.

It is these rewritings of Greek myths and their depictions of multifaceted violence against women, as well as the resistance or attempts at they sometimes oppose to it, that we would like to examine during this conference. The corpus under consideration is very broad: it includes texts written over a long period, from the 14th to the 21st century, in Europe and beyond, with, where appropriate, the images that illustrate them or the data from dramatic performances. The aim will be to question the perspectives underlying these representations in relation to their contexts of reference. Studying how violence is portrayed in Greek myths will also highlight the similarities and differences, developments, and changes between the systems of thought specific to Greek Antiquity and those of later periods, and to examine the different perceptions of violence/violences and the different attitudes which are attributed to women in the face of such violence, and which give rise to diverse judgments.

How do authors approach Greek myths, and how do adaptations of these myths take a stance, either explicitly or implicitly, within the ideological debates of their time on the place of women in society and on political and social relations of domination and violence? Today, we recognize in these mythical narratives not only physical violence, but also symbolic gender violence, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, imposed by a system of male domination (guilt, norms, language, discourse, etc.): thus, although violence against women is mostly committed by men, Greek myths also feature forms of violence inflicted on women

by women (Athena on Arachne, Juno on Latona, etc.), and these too are part of this patriarchal system, as punishments for disobeying the order imposed by an androcentric society.

From one text, context, and era to another, what acts or situations were considered violent by the authors who revisited these myths? What moral judgments did they make about the characters? Who did they recognize as guilty and on what grounds? What forms of resistance are attributed to women and what comments are made about them, particularly those that sometimes take the form of revenge? What differences can be noted between the points of view of these authors who have reworked Greek myths and those of the authors of their sources they have reworked, whether ancient or later (already receptions of ancient texts)?

We will also examine how representations and issues surrounding violence and power relations have evolved based on the ancient texts that authors have appropriated and adapted. From the 14th to the 17th century in Europe, Ovid was a major source: his *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* inspired countless textual and visual interpretations, with a plurality of perspectives on these acts of violence from the outset, as early as the 15th and 16th centuries. Striking examples can be found in the various stories devoted to Arachne and Philomela, as well as in the rewritings and adaptations of Ovid's *Heroides*. Ovid's works have inspired rewritings and adaptations to this day, with a resurgence of influence in contemporary novels. Other Latin sources have also been exploited, such as Seneca's tragedies. But above all, when the teaching of Greek resumed in Western Europe and Greek literary texts were rediscovered, ancient tragedies became major sources of inspiration and, through their countless adaptations, multiple receptions of Greek myths about women persisted for centuries. The study of the plurality of their perspectives on violence against women still needs to be explored in greater depth.

Finally, how did representations of violence against women evolve over time and space, from the 14th to the 21st century? Greek myths relating to violence against women have inspired numerous adaptations since the 14th century in France and Western Europe, continuing to the present day. This process of appropriation began much later outside Europe, in the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, but it has taken root there with great vitality. What are the geographical and historical contexts, and the political and social factors that gave rise to and fueled this abundant reception outside Europe? While the adaptations initially seem to be linked to the liberation movements from the colonial empires, they continue to denounce other forms of authoritarian power. What new representations and interpretations of violence against women do they convey? What resistance do they lend to women and from what perspectives?

The aim of this conference is therefore to reflect, from a broad diachronic and transcultural perspective, on the ways in which the reception of Greek myths has represented violence against women, either perpetuating it or combating it. It will also examine the drivers and challenges of this process of reception, *i.e.*, reappropriation, critical reading, and transformation. Why, how, and in what circumstances have these Greek myths been mobilized to express the challenges of other socio-historical contexts? To what extent is the concept of "reception" a relevant theoretical tool for analyzing these representations of violence against women and the resistance attributed to them?

Submission Guidelines

Proposals for papers, **in French or English** (title and abstract of **200-300 words**), should be sent, along with a **brief CV**, no later than **January 15, 2026**, to the following addresses:

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After review of the proposals, acceptance will be notified around **mid-February 2026**.

Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered according to the terms and conditions of the University of Caen Normandy.

The conference proceedings will be published in the collection “Recherches sur les réceptions de l’Antiquité” by Brepols (<https://www.brepols.net/series/RRA>).

Proposed articles must be unpublished.

Organization

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For more information, see <https://agrelita.hypotheses.org/>.