

Modern Mythmaking; or, In Defense of the Apology: How Contemporary Authors Reclaim and Empower Mythomorphs in Literary History

By: Roxanne Cianci

In a near-universal fashion, mythological literature incorporates misogynistic values into their tales' plots. In some cases, this can be the core point of the text, with anonymous authors seeking to offer broad justifications for the negative treatment of women in society. In others, this assertion of male dominance is sometimes contained in just a single line, but nonetheless, reflects the culture's greater beliefs. Though several cultures assert no such values through their recorded mythologies, many more corners of the world are left to ponder the contemporary significance and applications of their heritage in an era which instead elevates the status of women in our increasingly globalized world.

As a result of this misogynistic undertone, a responding phenomenon can be recognized across many creative, young-adult works. Several female authors interested in classical mythology have trended towards reimagining, reworking, and reintroducing such stories to contemporary audiences using more recent research and morals. This is evident in Maxine Hong Kingston's "White Tigers," which remakes "The Ballad of Mulan," and Maya Deane's *Wrath Goddess Sing*, a reimagination of Homer's *Iliad*. These authors' efforts center around one goal: to reclaim the characters and plots of these tales from their dated origins and reawaken their importance as seen from unique contemporary perspectives. Additionally, while this phenomenon appears recent and novel to today's audiences, it is an extension of a tradition seen throughout literary history in works like Enheduanna's poetry and Aemilia Lanyer's "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women." In extending this ongoing literary tradition, each of these authors contribute to the myths' heritage and lasting influences by reclaiming negative, stereotyped characters to create positive, reimagined alternatives to the source material's portrayal of women, minorities, and queer themes and characters.

In claiming that contemporary retellings of myths directly contribute to an ongoing construction of mythological worlds and plots, one can easily slip into the vagueness of broad claims and unspecified definitions. To avoid such pitfalls, such as ignoring the distinction between historical works of mythology and more common works of creative fiction, it is important to establish a point of view from which these key terms can be succinctly understood. A useful article for this end is Dell Hymes's "Myth Making," which offers a solution to the massive subject of mythology. In this article, Hymes references Mary Barnard's *The Mythmakers* and adopts the latter's analyses and diction. She is particularly concerned with the term "mythomorph," which refers to "personae (actors) related to a particular theme, [for example,] intoxication. Such personae may be deities and gods, but need not be. [...] It permits one to address personae wherever they occur, myth, tale, ritual or song" (118). The adoption of this term helps to address the variety of texts in which god-like characters and magical themes appear, despite the selections themselves not necessarily belonging to any religious canon. This term is particularly useful when addressing the selected works and their related protagonists.

Beginning with "The Ballad of Mulan," readers can recognize the immediate necessity of mythomorphs to understand myth as a broader concept. Mulan's story stands in a strangely separate position from the average myth given that, like those stories mentioned by Hymes, it is neither a true "myth" nor does it prominently feature a god worshipped by any historical cult. Instead, "The Ballad of Mulan" has some historical context and inspiration, combined with the fictional aspects of the story that elevate and propel it towards a more mythological status.



Furthermore, instead of providing a god to be worshipped, it focuses on the mythomorph of Mulan herself, who has come to represent women's strength through individual strength and willingness to deconstruct the gender binary: "She goes out the door and sees her comrades. / Her comrades are all amazed and perplexed. / Traveling together for twelve years / They didn't know Mulan was a girl" (lines 55-58). Mulan as a mythomorph, through both her original ballad and through the various adaptations and interpretations of her story throughout history, represents various themes surrounding women and their potential.

In "White Tigers," the most significant mythomorph is one inspired by Mulan. Building from the original, Hong Kingston adopts Mulan's personal themes and character traits into the narrator's own talking-story. This allows the author to reveal the broader significance of the character. It is not simply that Mulan achieves freedom from her culture's assumed gender norms; instead, as Hong Kingston begins her story, Mulan teaches her audience that "we could be heroines, swordswomen. Even if she had to rage across all China, a swordswoman got even with anybody who hurt her family" (19). In doing so, Hong Kingston helps propel what is now considered the Mulan "trope" into a new and distinct mythomorphic status, creating an icon who provides a model by which we can learn about feminine strength and the breaking of gendered boundaries. Through these stories, Mulan becomes a mythomorph embodying more complex and meaningful connotations than the character would have achieved through the original text alone.

It is this engagement with mythological texts that constitutes our contemporary contributions to mythology. In the same efforts as Hong Kingston, authors and laypeople alike continue to attempt explanations for phenomena and to inspire communities through colorful—even magical or mythical—creative writing. However, it is worth noting that creative works inspired by mythomorphs and mythological canons are not limited to any one genre nor mutually exclusive to the pro- or antagonistic roles within a text. As such, though her subject matter is not directly related, Eva M. Thury's "The Undead in Contemporary Tales" offers important context for understanding mythomorphs of all kinds. Notably, the text explores characters and themes that mirror Mulan's role as the mortal, ungodlike protagonist. This perspective helps to explain how even initially antagonistic or taboo mythomorphs can be reclaimed and developed into more positive representations of the disenfranchised. Thury exemplifies this in her exploration of changes to the vampiric mythomorph over time. Originally, vampires were often monsters and antagonists, yet Thury notes how they have come to represent a positive theme and symbol in the public consciousness.

In literary history, vampires have often been used to demonstrate and enforce social standards surrounding sexual activity and deviancy, leading contemporary authors to feel a need to reclaim and rediscover individual power through the vampiric mythomorph. Thury's article demonstrates this change through several contemporary works and films, such as *Twilight*, *Vampire Academy*, and *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series. In her conclusion, Thury makes several useful remarks:

Vampires are about strength, but they are also about death, so they represent coming to terms with the death instinct as well as the life force represented by sexuality. Thus the protagonist who comes to terms with the vampire becomes, in Campbell's terms, the "master of both worlds." [...] The protagonist grows into power by accepting the gnawing, rabid strength of the vampire. This force allows her to overcome her socialization and to take on a kind of strength that allows her to fulfill herself. [...] An additional point to be made here is that the world that Antia Blake and the other vampire

heroes inhabit is OUR world, but they are able to cope with it. This is what makes them heroes. (784-85).

The statements made here are useful in context of one another, but there are some necessary concepts to be mentioned to manage their use; notably, the idea of the “master of both worlds” is in reference to Joseph Campbell’s description of the Hero’s Journey, which is a concept often used to discuss the structure of mythological stories and epic heroes. In this instance, Thury is adopting his description of the familiar, good world and the unknown, evil world to refer to vampires as mythological heroes, despite their not being worshipped gods. This is a useful framework in working with Hymes’s definition of the mythomorph, as the same can be applied to all such heroic actors. Mulan, in her most popular adaptations, is not a vampire; however, her mythomorph resembles Thury’s chosen protagonists in that both provide women a means by which they can work outside of the prescribed social constraints of gender and its sexual activity. In acting in both her familiar and unknown worlds—the feminine and masculine, respectively—Mulan is a hero in every sense of the word, under both Hymes’s and Campbell’s definitions.

The next useful aspect of Thury’s conclusion is its emphasis on contemporary mythologies’ tendency to connect with its audience via similarities to our daily lives. Though vampires, werewolves, and Mulan are each closer to the reader’s idea of fictional, historical concepts inapplicable to reality, they directly correlate to socio-political concerns observable in the contemporary world. This is an especially relevant point in discussing Deane’s *Wrath Goddess Sing*. In retelling of one of the more popular myths in history, Homer’s *Iliad*, Deane’s novel requires a unique perspective to stand out from its competition in adapting mythology. As such, what was once a minor detail in the original work becomes the founding principle of Deane’s: “Thetis knew that Achilles would die if he fought in the Trojan War, so she hid him in the palace of a king who was a friend of hers. The king dressed fifteen-year-old Achilles as a girl, gave him a feminine name, and housed him with his daughters” (Homer 47). As seen in the chosen translation, the quoted passage constitutes the entirety of a paragraph. For these two of three total sentences, Homer dwells on the detail that Achilles had a history with cross-dressing; but for Deane, such an underdeveloped detail becomes the central thesis of an entire novel. For Homer, Achilles is disguised by the enforcing will of those trying to protect him; for Deane, Achilles herself is a transgender woman seeking to control her own future by fleeing to Skyros for the sake of her transition.

This, I argue, is the functional purpose of the contemporary adaptation of mythology: much like the fandom which develops its own contributions to the worlds of existing franchises, such as those surrounding *Twilight*, the mythological adaptation allows authors the chance to reconsider ancient stories from the perspectives of marginalized and disenfranchised peoples. This is precisely why the mythological adaptation and the fanfiction are so much more prevalently authored by women and other minorities. In creating these adaptive works, authors tease out new and understated meanings, as audiences often celebrate those that are more relevant to contemporary discussion. Even more often, and as is the case for *Wrath Goddess Sing*, these meanings exist hidden in the original texts, waiting for the author who will do them justice. Deane, approaching *The Iliad* from the initial assumption that Achilles is a transgender woman, grants her main character a degree of autonomy not provided by her original work. Where Thetis and the king demand the masculine Achilles’ disguise, the feminine Achilles chooses to commit to the action herself:

When Achilles first came to Skyros the year before, she had looked utterly different: gaunt from the overland and sea voyages, hollow-cheeked with the starvation she had

used to stave off manhood, and feverish with a terrible, foolish hope that on Skyros everything would change, that on Skyros she would become everything she longed for.

Girls like her were safe on Skyros—so said the herbalist of Phthia. (9)

Here, Achilles has fled her past life purposefully, seeking a change that would grant her control over her own future. Rather than be demanded a prince and a warrior, she would choose the hidden princess's life on Skyros.

Eventually, the novel requires that Achilles acknowledge her origin, and she chooses to leave Skyros with Odysseus. This comes with the difference that Achilles remains a woman throughout the war: "Achilles leapt onto the ship. 'Take me away from here,' she told the Achaians. 'Bring me to Agamemnon. I'm told it's not maidenly, but I've always wanted to fight in a war'" (46). Throughout the novel, she develops into the same warrior and hero as her original counterpart, only this time embodying a similar mythomorph as Mulan. Therefore, the Achilles mythomorph, mirroring the character herself, transitions from Homer's tragic hero to a heroine that symbolizes a feminine, queer, and often suppressed power within many of those same women reading Deane's novel. Like with Hong Kingston's Mulan and Thury's vampires, Deane's contributions are what allow the Achilles mythomorph to realize this potential, rather than stagnate in their original meanings, regardless of whether they began useful to contemporary analysts or required the passage of time to be recognized.

Additionally, Deane uses the literary device noted in Thury's conclusion, connecting the mythomorph and the original story itself to contemporary reality. In the case of Thury's vampires, this is often done by setting the story in our own world, with the minor deviation that such fantastical creatures as vampires exist; however, Deane utilizes it in a different manner. Given that the story is set in ancient Greece, Deane instead uses this device in her attempts to explain why her telling of events differs from Homer's. Namely, the novel's climax sees its antagonist place a curse on the world, causing it to forget the purported truth of Achilles' story which Deane had written:

I promised to erase Achilles from memory, says the Golden Apple, smiling radiantly as she turns her words into a sword. [...] I can cut your story from the minds of men until all that remains is a parody. [...] Within two generations of her death, Achilles will be remembered only as Akhillewos Pyrrhos, the man who burned the city of the Amazons. (437-38)

Here, Deane's story blurs the lines between reality and two assertions made by the story: both that the myth presented in *The Iliad* is true and that her version is the more accurate telling of these allegedly historical events. Similarly, Hong Kingston's Mulan and Thury's vampiric figures seek to rework and reclaim mythological texts in such a way that supports the inclusion and thriving lives of the disenfranchised in and through the ever-developing literary canon.

One potential counterargument exists against this thesis: each of these works appears to be part of the current trends in the genre, and therefore have no true influence over the public perception of the mythological tale in question. This is an understandable perspective, though it falters against historical analysis. When examined, it becomes clear that women have had a traceable influence and place within mythology and religion for thousands of years, which can be seen through Enheduanna's poetry and Aemilia Lanyer's "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women."

Enheduanna's poetry was written in a culture preceding that which produced the *Enuma Elish*, the former being an example of Sumerian mythology that would be adapted by Babylonian literature such as the latter. Being Sumerian royalty, Enheduanna assumed a position of religious

power and began to produce poetry inspired by the various Sumerian gods. Particularly, her poetry focuses on Inanna, a goddess of love, whom Enheduanna placed in a position of heightened power and importance (Enheduanna 1). Regardless of the poem chosen, Enheduanna raises the goddess above all others, such as in “Inanna and the Anunna:” “Who has ever denied you homage, / lady, supreme over the land?” (3). Language echoing this excerpt reappears in several of Enheduanna’s works, such as “Inanna and the City of Uruk,” establishing a sense of respect for the goddess that caused her placement on a level beyond other gods.

Despite the importance of her influence over religious writings, it is necessary to recognize how much of Enheduanna’s reputation stems from her position as royalty. One text to consider this perspective is Alhena Gadotti’s “Portraits of the Feminine in Sumerian Literature,” in which Enheduanna, among other women in positions of religious power, is portrayed as an irregular case. Her being one of the only women to directly be named in Sumerian literature, leading to her lasting presence in history. Multiple of these figures, including Enheduanna, were “[...] the daughters of kings placed in prominent cultic positions” (Gadotti 199). As such, it is likely that their placement in these positions served other purposes than to raise women up as powerful members of society. Gadotti concludes that this was likely done to instruct male students in the ways of the culture’s social operations; meanwhile, women remained in traditional roles centered around raising and teaching others, leading to their low presence in literature as characters and authors (204). In trying to uphold Enheduanna as an icon of feminist power, one must reconcile with the fact that she was made a religious leader for the sake of her educational abilities so that she might serve her community members as a nurturing figure.

Regardless, Enheduanna herself seems to use the position as an opportunity to influence both her own life and the reputation of her favored gods and mythomorphs. As discussed, she favors Inanna above other gods, but in one instance, she also uses her poetry to grant meaning to her personal life and suffering, so as “[...] to appear in the role of the pious and just sufferer” (Gadotti 197). In this way, Enheduanna attempts to reimagine the social constraints of her culture through authorship, especially in her works that hold religious importance. This type of catharsis and bibliotherapy through authorship is another primary function of the mythological adaptation. Similarly to the purpose of science-fiction or fantasy novels, they offer an opportunity for the author to state and capitalize upon their political and social beliefs—in this case, those which would be argued against and silenced by a patriarchal society—in a manner that avoids direct criticism of or obvious association with their potentially revolutionary ideas.

Regardless of her struggles, it could be argued that Enheduanna seems to have had a negligible impact on the future of Sumerian mythology. Though the *Enuma Elish* does not specifically focus on Inanna’s Babylonian counterpart, Ishtar, it does portray a female deity and progenitor goddess as a source of evil, rather than one of respect or utmost power. This figure, Tiamat, is eventually brought so low that Marduk, her killer and the subsequent king of the gods, uses her gender as proof he will not lose: “Tiamat, for all her weapons, is only a woman” (*Enuma Elish* 155). Despite this, the story allows her reputation to return to its initial, respected form, a mercy granted to the Babylonian goddess that is not seen in most other religions or mythological stories. Following her death, Marduk establishes temples where, among other creatures, humans “[...] remember the mother goddess” (158). One source of this respect may come from the importance Enheduanna placed on female deities, making her contributions to culture substantial. Furthermore, Enheduanna herself is still upheld by the contemporary literary tradition as a recognized and important figure in the history of human language and culture. From this perspective, she serves as one of the earliest examples of a female author engaging in

mythological literature as a means of changing their society and the social perception of female characters, mythomorphs, and their struggles alike.

Therefore, Enheduanna's placement in powerful religious positions reveals a necessary element of the beginnings of cultural shifts. In certain instances, working within an existing system can not only produce notable results, but it can also actively empower women as authors, granting them a legacy and influence in battles against misogyny and oppression. This is further reflected by Lanyer's efforts with "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women," in which she attempts to do the same for the Christian mythology surrounding the creation of humanity and their fall from grace. In Genesis, the most blame for this fall is placed upon Eve, rather than equally distributed among both her and Adam:

The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" [...] To the woman, he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (*HarperCollins Study Bible*, Gen. 3.12-13; 16)

The cultures this creation story influenced, for most of history, utilized these details as fuel for oppressive social systems. It is only more recently, in the aftermath of authors and pieces such as Lanyer and "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women," that there has been a shift towards more feminist interpretations of this Biblical detail and of the Eve mythomorph herself.

Despite their then-radical ideas, pieces of apologetic literature, such as Lanyer's, are often considered controversial for their tendency to cede values that audiences now believe should not be compromised. For example, much of Lanyer's larger text, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, consists of her attempts to earn favor with a male audience such that the piece could be published altogether. This sentiment is evident within "Eve's Apology," as Lanyer makes several references to the supposed weakness of women: "That undiscerning ignorance perceived / No guild or craft that was by him intended / [...] / What weakness offered, strength might have refused" (lines 25-26; 35). This language places women squarely back in the vulnerable position from which Lanyer otherwise sought to deliver them.

While this perspective is easy for contemporary audiences to highlight due to the counterproductive nature of apology literature, equally as important are the benefits derived from Lanyer's writing and the expertise implemented into its rhetoric. Brenda J. Powell discusses this technique in "'Witnesse thy wife (O 'Pilate') speakes for all': Aemilia Lanyer's Strategic Self-Positioning." Here, Powell emphasizes the many layers of characters and storytelling required for Lanyer to have succeeded in her goal of publication. Namely, Powell claims, she must engage in a literary form of ventriloquy to speak her true mind and opinion (10). Through this technique, Powell describes how Lanyer attempts to present Eve as a defensible figure, rather than as the source of the original Christian sin:

...once Lanyer has ascribed to Pilate's wife the motive of concern for her husband's well-being, it is then a simple matter to laminate that same attitude of spousal love onto Eve as she offers Adam the fruit. The dramatic situation from the Passion narrative thus amazingly enables Lanyer to shelter *Eve* under the previously constituted rubric of wifely devotion and generosity. (11)

In her work, Lanyer puppeteers a literary doll which, in turn, does so for its own. Of course, each link in this chain is the author's own thought, but the method allows her to protect both her own reputation and that of her creations within a shield of existing social constraints. Doing so, she

reinvents and rewrites mythology in a manner reminiscent of Enheduanna's, Hong Kingston's, and Deane's own contributions to the social perception of their respective mythomorphs.

Furthermore, Lanyer's work demonstrates the influence that this type of mythological adaptation can have over an original story. In the case of her essay, Lanyer isolates and edits the Eve mythomorph from its use in misogyny to a figure more supportive of women. For an extended period in Christian history, the Eve mythomorph simply represented the treachery of women and their ability to deceive and destroy the good works produced by men; however, following Lanyer's conclusions that she was not solely responsible for Original Sin, contemporary theologians interpreting the Genesis creation stories are more willing to accept Eve and Adam as having equal roles in the fall of humanity. Lanyer's work, in the context of its own era, would have received a similar reception as Hong Kingston's and Deane's texts face today: detractors assert that they are egregious works that grossly misinterpret the original author's intentions. Despite this, Enheduanna's and Lanyer's contributions to the global perception of mythology prove that, over time, women's contributions can be taken as eventual fact. Though this process may take several hundred years, the effect is repeatedly traceable across history.

While it can be easy to disregard such interpretations of mythology as a wanton disregard for the cultural significance of the work and the integrity of the societies that produced them, these works are more often inspired by a profound respect for and interest in the source material. In many cases, they are driven by countless hours of research and a deep understanding of the original context, followed by a desire to do justice for the affected women and minorities, as well as for the work itself. Ultimately, to combat what was often just mere sentences of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia across history, authors today find themselves presented with a need to dedicate entire essays, anthologies, and novels towards more progressive causes. As such, by creating adaptations from unique perspectives, authors like Hong Kingston and Deane help to reimagine the importance of mythology to our daily lives, bringing their once-believed magic back into the hearts of many contemporary readers in a manner that both inspires and empowers positive social change.

Roxanne Cianci '24 graduated with a BA in English and is from Greenville, PA.

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