

## University of Canberra

### Paul Hetherington and Jen Webb

#### Cretan analogues: Restorying ancient mythology

##### Biographical notes:

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### **Naucrate takes her time**

1.

She is always moving.  
The days, years, tick past  
to a familiar beat.  
But she works at a different pace.  
Not for her the now, and now  
of calendar and clock  
as time shrinks and bends.  
She shrinks too, or wanes—  
waiting,  
she is always about to change.

2.

It's so long. A thousand years  
of nothing. Then just once  
she heard her name—  
it recalled her to the part she played  
in that ancient tale.  
She sleeps each day, and spends the nights on watch.  
Little has ever changed.

3.

This is her job: to calm the tides,  
to keep the moon at peace.  
She does it well. At times  
her body aches for the child  
she could not keep  
but she has read the books, knows all the tales  
where she does not appear. Her storied absence  
makes it right to keep away.

4.

Naucrate, priestess of the moon.  
If once she loved a man  
she has no memory of it now.  
Mornings she's ankle-deep among the waves.  
Her nights are given to the moon.  
That's her task:  
to comb tangles out of time.

Another thousand years.  
The stories shift.

5.

Airbrushed, was she bitter?  
Perhaps. She doesn't dwell on it.  
Until she hears her name again—  
a passing comment, footnote  
in another text. Better to be overlooked,  
she thinks, than get some idle nod:  
she's Naucrate; she is  
no one's footnote; she is not  
someone else's myth.

6.

Smooth the water, sweep the air.  
Become the winter moon.  
No regrets.  
Her body moves with tides, she cannot die.

7.

A thousand years, again a thousand years.  
Some creep past, some leapfrog  
centuries. And there  
it comes again—her name,  
another mention in her husband's tale.  
Water off a duck's back.  
She slips herself into the sea, like a letter  
into the mail. She lies face up,  
staring through the brine.  
Above her the meniscus  
of small memories catches at her skin—  
the infant in her womb  
the baby at her breast. The child  
she saw falling from the sky.  
The child she could not see.

8.

Every day, still, she feels the too-late  
of her frantic swim.  
Below his broken body

scooping blood, catching him—again,  
again—and bringing him to land.  
Placing him in his father's hands.

9.

Time's less steady now.  
She's beginning  
to feel that she has found her way.  
She watches us, and reads  
our artifice, knows our hopeless art.  
She's moving beyond loss;  
beginning to believe  
it might be time  
to go.

## Ariadne and the ocean

1.

The spectral trees were backlit  
by the yellow stone of the moon  
as she rested arms on his shoulders,  
half in light, half out;  
part stranger, part intimate –  
holder of the night's weight,  
speaker of the oracle's secrets,  
her sentences  
a red, unwinding thread.  
'Ariadne, this ocean ...', but he stopped,  
her subtle language  
needing no answer.  
'First, I will save you', she said,  
'then you will leave'.  
He knew, despite his wish  
for a storied future,  
that here he was 'in fullness'—  
but the difference between  
his Greek and her Cretan dialect  
meant something was lost from his phrase.  
'The Minotaur', she said 'will mark you,  
every history refer  
your destiny to my skill.  
You are the labyrinth's creature  
and your being's narrative  
an aftermath—  
you, founder of a future city.  
There's triumph', she said,  
'but also failure  
to stand clear of longing'.  
Her body was muscular, her hands  
exceeded his own in power.  
She was obscure in the night's fall  
yet he sought her  
and they were scarved across each other.  
The light skimming the beach  
was oil on tawny skin.

2.

She changed him.  
He was water running on sand;  
the ocean consumed him. He was light  
hurrying towards the moon.  
He was sea-urchin,  
salty crustacean and looping weed.  
She was starlight.  
The breath of the night  
hovered between their lips,  
their straddle of hands  
knew each other tentatively.  
She stood against him and said  
'This may be called by other names  
but, tell me, can you sense  
the earth exhaling us?  
Does loss overcome  
because we have known too much  
of immoderate craving?  
Now, at this edge of being  
I feel for the fugitive and tender.  
This will not be spoken of easily –  
even by you, maker of a people.'

3.

She led him into the palace  
and her torch  
showed furniture and tapestries,  
tiles in blue and green  
and two women in a bath  
caressing each other.  
Ariadne hurried him.  
A corridor narrowed.  
'Here', pressing into his hands  
a ball of thread.  
'Follow your instinct.'  
Soon lost in the labyrinth,  
turning circles,  
finding thread already tracing  
passageways he walked,  
he was a child in rushes  
pushing a toy trireme,  
tipping over, feeling water  
wrap him, believing death was welcome,

being dragged back.  
Recollection crowded him.  
A girl bared her breasts  
at the back of a hayshed.  
He was in uniform,  
learning to be a soldier,  
spearing a belly of straw.  
He trekked on a mountain;  
thirst sucked his torso.  
Ariadne was with him  
unwinding the thread,  
unsheathing his leaf-shaped sword.  
He smelt the soporific  
breath of a meadow  
and she held him upright, saying  
'The Minotaur knows you—  
put the sword in his mouth.'  
When the Minotaur appeared,  
slender, with a dancer's gait,  
his bull's head nodding as if in trance,  
his beauty overwhelmed.  
Yet something guided his thrust.  
He meandered his way back  
but could not forget  
the Minotaur's hands clasping his body  
as blood dropped from his eyes  
or his own soft bellow, 'Forgive me'.

4.

'I see the future', she said  
'and you have always been there,  
arriving with your young warriors,  
eager to make triumph.  
Let your sword fall  
and attend to this ocean  
that's older than gods  
and knows what warfare never knows.  
You'll create  
an exemplar and wonder—  
Athens; the civility you'll build—  
but the grace of Minoan women  
will never again be taken up,  
just as my body, suppler than yours,  
will elude you tomorrow;  
just as you'll be forgetful and ill

with a repeating sickness of need.  
Feel this tossed air on your arms  
that only Cretans know;  
ask whether it brings solace  
to your disquiet.'

5.

'I have given you  
what I had no right to give—  
unless intimacy trumps a kingdom—  
and what we brought each other  
is now in tatters,  
quizzing feeling, knowing in our bellies  
possession  
even as sensation pushes us apart.  
After this drowsy tide  
you will have me only  
in recollection's dismaying gauze  
that throws the past across the present  
until there's no clear seeing.  
Your black-sailed grief will chase you.'

6.

He left her sleeping on Naxos.  
Gulls bothered the shoreline;  
waves rushed and splattered the hull.  
He tasted the scent of her clothes,  
the stain of sweat on her arms  
he'd trailed with fingers. She'd held  
his being in the lock of her body.  
'I've been taught by water', she'd said  
'and made in meditation.  
If you stayed  
you might learn to grow old.'

## Minotaur

1.

Clot-tongued, my speaking was slur.  
Mother nursed me. Words  
stuck in the tangle-spittle.  
Horns butt'd, pricked.  
But my body was grace. I,  
with tangl'd tongue could entwine-  
lose in dance. I roamed  
in Daed'lus game. He said,  
'Hide-'n-seek.' Gates  
clanged-caught—  
'Not tame.'  
'Eat', they said. 'Fill-up blood.'  
But to dance—I kept the turning  
season. She taught me—  
Pas'phae, Pha'dra, Ar'adne.  
Each was the other. Love.  
I lost their diff'rence.  
They came, stayed away.

2.

Ar'adne teased, skipped on sand,  
hot as blood prickle.  
Sea gulped at feet  
where cedars reached out  
splay-hand roots.  
The world blood-colour—  
ol'ander rose-bitt'r,  
hibis-cus blush. We scrambl'd  
in gorges. I held—  
back on rock, panting eyes—  
and she pushed:  
'Don't dare'.  
The mount'n stood up  
blear-shade.  
That was 'once upon time'  
before Daed'lus.  
Mother sat me:  
'You're old.'

3.

Thought was slow,  
then to do.  
But no gap  
on lab'rinth green  
that Daed'lus made  
for my dance.  
All me in feet and tumble,  
swiv'l jump, arm-grace,  
head-high.  
Ar'adne, I  
gorging rhythm.  
Pha'dra, I  
gorging rhythm.  
They me, I them,  
lifted.

4.

Dread-sense  
as if Ar'adne made  
a dance-death—  
'Your sis would never.'  
Laugh-look.  
'Theseus is strong.'  
I nuzzl'd her breast  
and she stepped.  
Back in lab'rinth night,  
chink of grill.  
A murmur  
of coming-to-meet.  
I hid, saw as Ar'adne—  
handsome and quick,  
sure-shifting,  
his quick-switching sword  
like a partner  
dressed  
in soft gath'r glitt'r.

### **Pasiphae dies**

A queen deserves a tomb. But that is not for her—  
she skipped the long farewell, the practiced grief.  
She only has a gradual letting go, her name  
set loose across the sea;  
a slow forgetting.

She waits now in this stone-walled room. The quiet snow  
lies subtly on the beach, is cushioned round the walls.  
Her women touch her face, their fingers chill,  
their eyes are full.

Here her king lay, here her brood was born;  
And that bullheaded child, her lover's son.

Her blood is chill: this snow has set the world on mute;  
outside the stippled air is white – she finds it  
lovely but those handmaids crowd her bed,  
they test her flesh.  
She will not die on cue.

Only the tales remain, those fishhook sneers,  
the sotto voce slurs of her, and bulls; well,  
they're dead now, the gossips, gone ahead.

She mumbles to her women, plucks her skin.  
*But I believed it too; my hands upon my bulge, the bump  
of baby horns! The fury of his birth.* They can't make out

her words: one lays a warm cloth on her brow,  
one strokes her hands. She bore that man a son.  
She closed her heart again, bound her breasts.  
The child was sent away and he, her lover,  
took his chisels, carved himself a jail.  
So many years ago.

Her flesh is stone. The drugged wine is in reach.  
Her women talk in sighs. It comes to this.

Below her weave the caves: those threads  
that interleave the ground. Below the sea of snow  
the maze that waits, and all its walls are saying *you will die*.  
The monster waits there in the dark;  
even small assurances are gone.

A queen deserves a tomb; so too her child.  
But he is gone; her traitor daughter too.  
This little life of loss; her breasts are bound with iron;  
that sea of snow will wash her to her end.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

Michel Foucault observes (1984: 7) that human beings are not born, but are made, subjects; and mythology is one of the modes through which this is achieved. Mythology has the capacity to deliver form within the chaos of everyday life (Miller 2000: 64), to structure our thinking through metaphor (Behler 2000: 82) and to fit us for our cultural contexts (Foucault 1998: 239). This poem is a contribution from a larger project that investigates mythology through restorying a key myth: that of Icarus, Daedalus and the royal family of Crete.

### *Research contribution*

A key innovation is our contemporary application of an ancient form of narrative formation. Our method reenacts the original formation of the tales, which was through the appropriation of a range of stories and tropes, and the intervention on these, by many writers, poetic voices and forms. We retrieve fragments from ancient texts and, after reflection and analysis, perform an ‘arms-length’ collaboration, independently writing elegies for the same characters, and then setting them against each other to explore how voice, prosody and intellectual/political concerns conspire to create fresh understandings of a familiar set of tales.

### *Research significance*

The concept that drives this work has already attracted international interest, with both poets achieving publication of critical and creative work on the theme. A key significance is the confident interweaving of critical and creative writings, which effectively constructs a prismatic effect, testing the issues from a number of points of view.

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