

University of Canberra

Paul Hetherington and Jen Webb

Cretan analogues: Restorying ancient mythology

Biographical notes:

Paul Hetherington is Associate Professor of Writing at the University of Canberra where he convenes the Writing Program and chairs the Writing Research Cluster. He has published seven full-length collections of poetry – including the verse novel, *Blood and old belief* – and two poetry chapbooks, and has won a number of prizes for this work. He edited the final three volumes of the Library's four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend and was founding editor of the Library's quarterly humanities and literary journal, *Voices* (1991–97). More recently with Jen Webb he founded the online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. He has written articles and essays on literary and cultural matters, including poetry, creativity, the use of new technologies and ways of providing access to cultural materials.

Email: paul.hetherington@canberra.edu.au

Jen Webb is Professor of Creative Practice in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, where she teaches and researches creative writing and cultural analysis. The author of *Understanding Representation* (2009, London: Sage) and *Understanding Foucault: a critical introduction* (2012, Sydney: Allen & Unwin), Jen is currently writing a book on research in creative practice (PHP, Cambridge).

Email: jen.webb@canberra.edu.au

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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 Naucrator; 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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