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Glorious Men and Bathing Women in Rita Dove's "Nestor's Bathtub"

In "Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythology," Alicia Ostriker states the following:

> Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and predefined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. Historic and quasi-historic figures . . . are in this sense mythic, as are folktales, legends and Scripture. (212-213)

Myth, Ostriker notes, "belongs to 'high' culture and is handed 'down' through the ages by religious, literary and educational authority" (213). At the same time, there is, according to her, an identifiable tradition of women poets who deconstruct old myths or stories, which often exclude them, and construct new ones, where they are included (212). In what Ostriker calls "revisionist mythmaking," women also "deviate from or explicitly challenge the meanings attributed to mythic figures and tales." Stories are changed, she argues "by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy or as the pillars sustaining phallocentric 'high' culture" (215).

Rita Dove's poem "Nestor's Bathtub" from *Museum* (1983), is a work of "revisionist mythology," where the poet engages in the exploration and reinterpretation of a Greek legend. Having read the poem for the first time and in an effort to locate the ruins of Nestor's Palace in the Peloponnese, I consulted a brochure issued by the Greek National Tourist Organization (G.N.T.O.),[1] the relevant text in which, presented, to my surprise, some similarities to Dove's poem. Interested in whether it could have been the poet's source of inspiration,[2] I examined a second brochure about the same geographical area.[3] The emphasis on the bathtub was clearer

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[1] *Greece: The Peloponnese.* (Athens: G.N.T.O. 1989) 14.

[2] Dove mentions the use of a tourist guidebook and maps in Sicily in her poem "Her Island" (*Mother Love*, 67, 75).

[3] *Greece: Patras Western Peloponnese*. (Athens: G.N.T.O. 1988) 3.

there, but no prevailing similarities could be claimed. My assumption that the poem might have had its origins in the first pamphlet however, was strengthened after my tracing yet one more poem,[4] from *Museum* there. But whether the African American poet had consulted this, or perhaps had come across a similar text in another publication, it was obvious to me that she was aware of the common version of the legend around the ruined Mycenean palace, and especially its famous bathtub. The suggestion of such knowledge however, makes the poem's differences from the text of the brochure, rather than its similarities to it, most intriguing.

With an intention to find what lies underneath[5] the legend around Nestor and "his" bathtub, Dove examines it from a new viewpoint,[6] raising questions, making suggestions and filling its gaps with details that the patriarchal mythmaking tends to ignore. While rewriting parts of it, she exposes the known version's deficiencies and appropriates them to further support her alternative version. However, her innovative approach only partly involves "the challenge to and the correction of gender stereotypes embodied in the myth" (Ostriker 216). In fact it is based upon the temporary reinforcement of these stereotypes. This interesting revision of the story of the bathtub as it appears in Dove's poem I plan to examine here.

I begin with a brief presentation of the brochure's text along with the poem, in order to establish their similarities. The description of the site referred to as "Nestor's palace" in the pamphlet "Greece: The Peloponnese" as well as the relevant historical account given there are written to attract tourists to a certain location of archaeological interest.[7] This kind of writing

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[4] It is the poem "The Ants of Argos" (cf. *Greece: The Peloponnese,* 28).

[5] In an interview, referring to her experience from her time in Europe, which gave rise to her collection *Museum*, Rita Dove stated: "I could look at history, at the world, in a different way because I had another mind set. I found historical events fascinating for looking underneath–not for what we always see or what's always said about a historical event, but for the things that can't be related in a dry, historical sense" (Rubin and Ingersoll 230).

[6] Ekaterini Georgoudaki argues that in many of her poems Dove presents the "female side" of the story, "which has been suppressed and excluded by traditional history that usually glorifies male achievements" (207).

[7] "South of Hora, 4km from Englianos, lies the ruined palace of wise Nestor, who took part in the Trojan War and whose city was the second largest in the Mycenaean world. Built in the 13th century BC, the palace was destroyed by fire a century later. Excavations have revealed the remains of a luxurious, two-storey central building and two other auxiliary buildings. The buildings were divided into formal apartments, storage areas of wine and oil, toolsheds and workshops. The central apartments--the throne-room with its stuccoed-clay ceremonial hearth and the queen's quarters--were richly decorated with frescoes. In the palace archaeologists discovered thousands of clay pots, a bathroom with terracotta bathtub and 1,250 clay tablets with inscriptions in Linear B, which have since been deciphered. Several beehive tombs have been excavated in the area surrounding

is common in tourist brochures, but also in other publications that generally address visitors. The language is lyrical, the account relatively detailed–including information on biography, geography and architecture–yet concise. But the pamphlet's text still appears sterile and partial in contrast to the poem, the charged vocabulary and dramatic tone of which create a tension among the images of an absent king, a bathing queen, a fire and a ruined palace. Here the focus is primarily on the relic bathtub as well as on the fire that destroyed the ancient building.

However, with several common elements recognizable, it seems as if the content of the poem follows, to a certain extent, that of the tourist brochure. Dove chooses a classic setting and succeeds in expressing the atmosphere of the palace and its surroundings as they are described in the brochure. The variety of rooms and diverse excavation findings are listed there in a paratactic way, allowing an indirect emphasis on the luxury of the building's interiors. In the poem too, the palace is evidently spacious and luxurious. Apart from the bathroom, also the hearth, the numerous storehouses, the pots containing oil, the second floor, the rich decorations and the clay pots appear in both texts.[8] Interestingly, the surrounding landscape is mentioned exactly in the end of each text, with a remarkable reference in both cases to the olive trees in the countryside. Indicating repetition and abundance, the brochure's expression "row upon row of olive trees" is found as "jug upon jug of fragrant water" in the poem, where it contributes in the presentation of the comforts of the palace. Also the peculiar presence of an exact number of "drinking cups," (2,853), in the poem seems to be a modified version of the "1,250 clay tablets" mentioned in the brochure. In both texts, the plentitude of goods and ornaments suggests the excessive living of the royal residents. In the poem the findings support a direct reconstruction of ancient life.[9] Even the catastrophe, that is only stated in the tourist pamphlet, is enacted here. Dove imagines the dramatic event of the fire as she encounters its traces in the now ruined building. Although it evades the flames along with other stone and clay articles, the bathtub becomes the poem's celebratory object,[10] around which the poet builds a new story.

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the palace. From Hora to Pylos the countryside is laid out with row upon row of olive trees, those benevolent trees protected by Athena" (*Greece: The Peloponnese*, 14).

[8] The pamphlet's "queen's quarters" and "throne room" merge in the poem into "the lady's throne."

[9] Also in the second brochure the clay bathtub invites an imagined reconstruction of a bathing scene.

[10] The surviving bathtub bears witness to the elegance of the palace as well as to its destruction by fire.

An element that is marginal in the text of the pamphlet and which Dove foregrounds is the existence of the king's wife. That there is no direct reference to her in the brochure's text is, I believe, less intentional and more of a symptom of her absence from the mythological scene in general. There are two versions regarding who the wife of the king of Pylos was, both vague in nature. Robert E. Bell, writer of *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary,* mentions Anaxibia as the first wife and mother of Nestor's children. But he also notes a newer version, namely that Euridice was the children's mother, a version which he dismisses (36). However, Euridice and not Anaxibia is mentioned elsewhere in the same volume as the mother of Pesidice, Nestor's daughter (344). If this second reference is just an inconsistency, Euridice could have been the king's second wife, whom he married after he returned from Troy and after the death of his first wife (36-37). In any case, information around Anaxibia is given either in relation to Nestor, or their son, Antilohos, or in relation to the Trojan war, to a degree that her identification becomes quite impossible. The woman has neither a personal story nor a recognizable identity and she certainly lacks a character with specific traits. It is only through Nestor's biography that she can be identified as the wife in the poem, since it must have been her rather than Euridice that he left to go to the war; Anaxibia is referred to as young–much younger than her husband–and is supposed to either have died while he was in Troy, or shortly after his return (36-37). The woman that Dove casts as the queen is far from a specific person then; she could actually be any woman. The poet shows interest in the presence of this unknown queen and invoking the responsibilities of her glorious husband she pictures her bathing in the bathtub. Placing her then in the center of her version she exposes the legend's failure to account for the long absences of the king.

Dove appears to initially accept the given version of the legend, as presented in the two brochures I consulted.[11] In both, Nestor is assumed to be the legitimate owner of the palace with everything in and around it, and consequently of the bathtub. The poem reflects this assumption in its title, where the poet adopts the same rhetoric and thus documents the legend's masculinist view. The title's genitive construction evokes an already well-established image, that in the second brochure is summarized as follows: "The legendary Nestor suddenly becomes a living person as we see the clay bathtub with the clay jug still as he might have left it after a bath" (*Patras Western Peloponnese,* 3).

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[11] The one of these refers to the archaeological site as "the ruined palace of wise Nestor" (*The Peloponnese,* 14), while the other states: "The wise old King of Pylos . . . dwelt in this Palace" (*Patras Western Peloponnese,* 3).

While Dove's title indicates that the bathtub is Nestor's, the irony with which she perceives the king's ownership of the tub becomes explicit in the first stanza. This begins with a statement that openly questions the legend's authority. "As usual," claims Dove, "the legend got it all / wrong." The break between the first two lines is dramatic and the tone intensively ironic: the argument begins casually but changes during its course, a change declared most emphatically in "wrong." The poet proceeds with the creation of a different story that challenges the existing one. "Nestor's *wife* was the one / to crouch under / jug upon jug of fragrant water poured / until the small room steamed" (italics mine). "Nestor's" bathtub was in fact his wife's she argues; not the king himself, but his queen, was its frequent occupant. And inclined to develop her alternative interpretation, she poses a disturbing question: where was Nestor, she asks, while his wife enjoyed her bath in the company of a lover?

By wondering about Nestor's whereabouts, when "Legend, as usual doesn't / say" Dove addresses the contradictions the legend's popular version is based on. This portrays an important king, a wise advisor of the Greeks during the war in Troy, while it simultaneously suggests that the same man is also found relaxing at home. Since the bathtub belongs to him, Nestor is expected to be bathing in it. His presentation as the user of the tub however, is not in accordance with his portrayal as a warrior. It is a contradictory depiction, which tends to displace him by capturing him stripped of the symbols of his powerful role, his clothes and arms. Because, how can the nude figure of a man promote his image of a respectful military consultant, a king-owner of the throne, the palace and the whole city? The legend then threatens also to undercut the credibility of Nestor's image and to damage his fame, encouraging us to imagine private moments in this public person's life and replacing him with a man naked, unarmed, vulnerable.

Dove clears the ground for the promotion of her female persona by seemingly accepting the part of the legend where Nestor is glorified. This facilitates the removal of the famous man from the bathroom area so that it remains at the disposal of his forgotten wife. The poet adopts temporarily the conventions of the myths of patriarchy, and strategically puts the king in places presumably more suitable to his distinctive position, not to favor and elevate him, but rather to exclude him considering the use of the bathtub, and consequently allow the queen a chance to be noticed. Dove invokes Nestor's participation in "the Trojan wars," which after all gained him his recognition, and speculates that even when at home it is more likely that he frequents the main rooms, "on his throne before the hearth, / counting the jars of oil / in storeroom 34." A busy administrator of his wealth, the king most probably leaves the queen alone and the bathtub empty.

Even if the clay tub does not really belong to her, that the woman is indeed the one who uses it in the poem, has significant dimensions. Ekaterini Georgoudaki argues that the poem contrasts "the power and responsibilities of the Greek King's public office with his wife's limited life" (207). However, it seems to me that, having taken the trouble to make the invisible queen visible, Dove's aim could hardly be to place her in a marginal position–to merely let her cover the empty space in the tub–or even to insist on her subjugation in order to express a protest. Georgoudaki notes that finding a lover is the best alternative the wife has "to overcome the boredom of domesticity and her loneliness" while Nestor is away. She continues by claiming that "the images of her crouching under jugs of water and scraping her lover's dirt reflect her subservient role and unheroic existence" (207-208). But I do not find that the queen is portrayed as a victim. On the contrary, the imagery here opens alternate spaces of feminine empowerment. The woman enjoys in luxury the intimacy with a lover, bathing under jugs of warm "fragrant water," scraping his body's dirt with a "bronze scalpel," perhaps even combing his hair with "ivory combs" and drinking from "tall-stemmed / drinking cups."

By stressing the wife's "action" during the king's absence, the poet aspires to introduce an empowered woman whose life is not necessarily uninteresting. As the allegedly marginal, private space of the bathroom becomes noteworthy in an archaeological context, the life of the woman whom she imagines to occupy it becomes intriguing. Dove provides her with a chance to abandon the role of the faithful and submissive wife, who performs her household duties in the narrow space allowed her, and to use this space to commit adultery. The queen evades her expected subjugation to her husband or her status as a decorative object in a palace owned by him, and passionately creates with her scalpel her own piece of art, sculpting into being a lover for her pleasure. Moreover, rather than attending to the king's needs, she becomes herself the center of regard and attention. Instead of being a dutiful domesticated wife, always ready to serve a remote husband, she appears eager to offer her services–and herself–in the "voluptuous" tub/gravy dish to an available lover. In this light it is obvious that the domesticity of this woman bears an ambivalent tone. The dirt the bathing queen cleans is on a lover's back and the "gravy dish" she uses is to crouch in. The bathtub then becomes the stage of declaration of her reaction. Interestingly, this nameless queen is able with her infidelity to challenge and ridicule her husband's wisdom and his authority.

Moreover, her confinement is redefined as the neglected wife finds a way to enjoy herself. Bathing is a very personal experience that takes place in the most private part of the house, and usually behind a closed door. However, the seclusion in a "small room" is

followed by the revelation of a nude body. Here nudity plays a significant role since the female body is revealed in the presence of a man who is not the husband. Bathing is neither a chore nor a wife's duty. It is a pleasurable experience, an occasion to take care of one's body and relax and it may be soothing and liberating. From this perspective, enclosure fails to signify restriction and subordination. Granted secrecy, the woman explores an alternative way of self-assertion.

Finally, the bathtub's survival after the fire's destruction inspires a reconsideration of the importance of the private spaces of the palace as well as of the woman's private life. It renders an historical dimension to the act of bathing and along with it to the bathing woman. Dove accentuates the significance of the queen by foregrounding her in acts of pleasure and sensual joy against the king's duties that exclude her involvement. Used by her when he is preoccupied with his property or away fighting wars documented in history, the bathtub survives the flames that consume the palace, remaining in place through the ages. By pointing at the relic the poet highlights Nestor's ignorance and the vanity of his achievements, as the imminent fire that was to destroy almost everything, leaving it untouched. The ancient bathtub's existence as archaeological evidence, although appropriated in the legend to solidify the presence of Nestor, bears, according to the poet, testimony to the queen's escapades. This is a "tiny and voluptuous" tub that grants hers rather than his historical presence. In the poem, it indeed survives even the destruction of her throne, which succumbs to waves of burning oil that erase the traces of whatever limited political authority she might have had. Although it cannot endow its user with any of the prestige gained through a throne, its position in the ruins is unique. Imagined crouching in it the queen is given the opportunity to demonstrate her rejection of her celebrated husband's role and to claim her own personal story.

Rita Dove explores the margins for a reinterpretation of the legend around Nestor's bathtub and negotiates its modification by proposing that the existence of the king's wife is taken into account. With a focus on the bathtub and its suggested use by the queen, Dove's version is a challenge to patriarchal mythmaking that imposes on women secondary and often purely decorative roles. The poet exposes flaws in the construction of the legend, dismisses the image of the bathing king and substitutes it with that of a bathing woman. She traces the presence and reaffirms the position of this queen, whom the legends of patriarchy ignore, by insisting that the clay tub in the ruined palace was hers. In Dove's poem the bathtub fails to serve Nestor, while its limited space functions in an empowering way for his wife and hosts her infidelity. As the tub ceases to belong exclusively to the king, the queen's figure comes in sight distinct and disobedient.

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