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SAGA: WRITING CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY USING ANCIENT TEXTS

by Heather A. Brown

Sarah, Athena, Europa.
Pandora, Deborah, Ruth.

Our stories passed
on from mother
to daughter; passed
in a mix of spices,
the drumming
of dough, the pluck
of weeds; through
the twistings
of thread and yarn.

Today, what mother
teaches? What daughter
learns?

Who will tell our stories now? ¹

Each woman in my family works with thread. Except for me. My life weaves words rather than yarn.
The words were always there, hidden in my belly, trapped in a cage of pain. They gave voice only in the stillness of the deep oak forests or in daydream. My stories stared out from my eyes, swallowing the world, being nurtured in silence.

Silence was also the world of books. I devoured them. They were more filling than any meal: the Bible stories my grandmother would preach, the hard science fiction my father read, my two big books of fairy tales, Scheherazade's dread-filled nights, and the modern fairy tale of the witch who flew to the moon on her vacuum, so as not to miss the

¹ All poems in this paper are my own original work, most of which are still in progress. "Saga," December, 1994
Witches’ Ball. The more I read, the hungrier I became. I hunted for stories, myths, and legends.

My constant companions in middle school were two big books on Norse and Greek mythology. I can still recall the exact layout of their covers. I read them so often, I wore the ink from the paper. The words branded themselves on my mind.

Myths, for many, are the grand adventure stories of the past. Filled with heroes, battles, and awe-full gods, they never fail to entertain. Entertainment, however, is not their only function. They teach us the *mores* of our Western culture. We hear in the myth echoes of our own society, its glories and its failures. We also learn behavior patterns.

Many myths of the ancient world portrayed woman in a lesser role or as the hapless victim. Certainly not all myths show women in this way, but a majority of them do. Some collections of mythology were kinder to women’s place in the world than were others.

I was lucky enough to be exposed to those books of myth which showed women from more positive viewpoints. I was also lucky enough to be a fan of science fiction and fantasy, mediums in which the female is often shown as strong and heroic. To me, the works of Sherri Tepper, Tanith Lee, and Anne McCaffrey were the myths of the present/future, while the works of Ovid were the myths of the past. Each was compelling. Each offered me lessons about being a woman.

My love of myth never died. I abandoned it for a while—in order to become a scientist. But the only science I really wanted was the outdoors, the song of the trees, the scream of the winds. In college, I was called to the field of religion, into a strange mix of the ancient goddess faiths and the faiths of modern-day women.

The seeds of the goddess faiths are found in mythology. From the stories of Inanna in Sumer to Selu in the southwest United States, all myths contain paradigms of what it means to be female. Some of these stories portrayed women who were brave and resourceful. The women in the stories were heroes, standing up for the rights and values of themselves and their peoples. They were unashamed of their bodies and proud to be women.

Some of that pride has been lost. Women have been taught that their bodily functions should be hidden from society. Menstruation is talked about quietly in circles of women. Women’s political pride has also declined. Women no longer control the land, as they did in the matrilineal societies of the southeastern United States. Women, in
some cases, have even lost their rights to be the spiritual leaders and guides of their communities.

In order to regain the pride and the bravery we once possessed as women, we must look to the old myths for the stories of women we need to emulate. We can find in the story of Ruth an example of tremendous loyalty; Jael was a great warrior; Inanna rejoiced in her woman’s sexuality. All these old stories come down to us, offering to fill us with the ancient knowledge of proud womanhood.

Religion and philosophy were also mates: a woman in the philosophy department discovered my passion for ancient texts and called me to work with her in interpreting the role, place, and nature of women in those ancient texts. I read Plato, Aeschylus, Hesiod, Homer, Sappho, and the Old and New Testaments. My pores opened, letting in the stories. I embraced the tales I found there, the loves, hates, and struggles of these women, my foremothers. In a sense, I became them, lived their stories in my mind. They became me; my life acted as a mirror of their own actions.

The women of mythology are not so different from the women of today. We have, at the core, the same concerns and fears. We want love, shelter, no war. We all face the possibility of being raped. Women in all time periods have been murdered by their husbands, lost their children to illness, and wondered if there would be food for dinner. I look back into the myths and see myself. Strip away my technological advantages, and I could be another Oenone. My stories could be her stories.

Although I found my own life in their stories, I was still pregnant with silence. My mouth filled only with empty air. Then I discovered poetry and learned how to write it.

During the course of my becoming as a poet, I learned that some scholars named a field “women’s” poetry. It was characterized by specific criteria. I read voraciously, learning all I could on the topic. Then I incorporated it into my poetry.

Here I present a synthesis of my learning. I will examine these questions: Why is there a need for women’s poetry? What are the characteristics which denote women’s poetry? Why use myths and ancient texts to compose contemporary women’s poetry? Interspersed among these examinations will be my own poetry, poetry which exhibits the characteristics of women’s poetry and tells the stories of the women of mythology...as they would tell them or as my life stories relate to theirs.
When discussing any sort of issue that revolves around gender, the first barrier which must be crossed is gender itself. People ask why there should be special categories called "women's." They ask, "Are we not equal? Why do women need their own special places?"

Women have been, for many years, second-class citizens. Their stories were ignored or maligned. To right this loss is the reason we need such things as women's history and women's poetry. Instead of being a barrier, the female gender becomes a route to self-exploration and a path into the public realm. Their stories are told. They are heard. Poetry is one medium which has allowed women's voices to be heard as women's voices, without ignoring them or demanding that they be herded under the "generic" voice of the male.

Women poets are, foremost, poets and not poetesses. The term "poetess" is a thinly-veiled insult suggesting that a woman does not live up to male standards of excellence. "Poetess" is something other, something lesser, than "poet." Sylvia Plath was proud to have been called "not just another poetess." (Ostriker, "Nerves," 309)

Some women poets, although not all of them, write a type of poetry which can be categorized as women's poetry. A general definition of women's poetry is poetry which examines women's lives in detail and then utilizes that examination in poetic empowerment. Poetry tells of life experiences; sometimes those experiences lead to a call for social change, a form of human empowerment.

Women's poetry exists because gender is a primary facet of life. From birth, we are labeled according to our genitalia. Our gender assignments often determine major components of our life courses, experiences, and circumstances. Gender, because of its power over life, can be destructive or empowering:

In patriarchy, gender denotes a structure of political power masquerading as a system of natural difference. The invisible fulcrum of the myth of the primal horde, gender builds on a highly variable and interpretable biological given, the anatomical difference between the sexes. Thus made the linchpin of patriarchy, gender is the way that consciousness of self, and so one's sense of empowerment, is most immediately experienced." (Dimen, 38)

Women who write women's poetry choose to make gender empowering. Sometimes their poems tell of the glories of being a woman: the power of birth, the joys of love-
making, or the canning of a beautiful batch of peaches. The horrible can also become empowering to the woman poet. She can take her rape, tell her story, and turn it into a call for social justice, a tremendous act of bravery and empowerment. Women poets take their lives, root in the rot of negative experiences, and glory in success. Then they channel their creative impulses into poetry, speaking of the women living inside them, speaking to the women who read their words, calling to the rest of humanity to understand women's experiences:

Through the telling of my story, I reach out to other women. Through their hearing, which both affirms my story and makes it possible, they reach out to me. I am able to move, gradually, from defensiveness to openness, from fear of questioning, to a deep and radical questioning of the premises from which I have lived my life. I experience relief; my anger has been heard, and I am not alone. But I am also frightened; I am undermining my own foundations. The walls come tumbling down.” (Plaskow, 199)

If these are the goals of women’s poetry, what characteristics can define the nature of a “woman’s poem?” Alicia Ostriker, a prominent writer in the field, claims that women’s poetry deals with four specific topics: “These are the quest for autonomous self-definition; the intimate treatment of the body; the release of anger; and what I call, for want of a better name, the contact imperative” (“Nerves,” 312). Women poets, in search of empowerment, write about who they are as humans, their bodies, anger and rage, and interconnectedness.

Women’s self-definition includes, among other things, the process of diving into life experiences, sifting through them, and discovering what it means to be a woman and a human being. It involves deep introspection into the nature of the woman and her ultimate responsibility in caring for herself. Poetry, in itself, is a natural forum for self-definition. It calls for the strong images and precise language needed to suck marrow from bone, cull defining experiences from useless chaff.

There had never been shadow
until the ground split
and a man and his chariot
rushed onto the field like something
spilling from the bowels of the earth.
Flesh burned from my bones
   as he took me into
the underworld and the flowers
in my hair flamed like torches
   in the gloom. I thought
everything lost, no more
dances or maidenhood. I thought
I would die in the arms of the king.
But a hunger ached in my belly,
each pomegranate seed
   I ate filled me, and I
knew that this was
the first moment I had
ever lived. My life opened
to the dark like a moonflower.
   I became queen.

The preceding poem, “Persephone,” was written in early November of 1994. I was going through a period in my life when I felt dead. My life was empty, ritualized, methodical. I longed for birth, growth, or something other than the sleepwalking life in which I was existing. In my grief, I recalled the myth of the rape of Persephone. She had been ripped from all she loved by Hades, the god of the underworld. Persephone, although she became queen of the dead, did not stay in the darkness. She rose again into the sunlight. Through my poem, I came to define myself as the dark underworld goddess, trapped in a dark, dead place, ripped away from everything I needed and loved. Like her, I could rise again.

Every time a woman walks down the street, the stares and whistles which follow her remind her that her body is of great importance in her existence. It is for this reason that the body and bodily images play a major role in women’s poetry: “...whether or not they deal directly with the self, or with sexuality as such, contemporary women poets employ anatomical imagery both more frequently and far more intimately than male poets.” (Ostriker, Stealing, 92)

I find this to be true in my own poetry. Dealing with the body came more easily to me than did the struggle for self-definition. In fact, my very first poem of the semester
was called "Skin." It was a poetic discussion of the experiences of my life which have been etched into my flesh.

The sexuality of the body has frequented my poems. "Blodeuedd" blossomed late one December night during a dream in which I walked through a garden of tremendous beauty with a male companion. We stopped at one particularly breathtaking orchid which my male companion plucked and offered to me. I nestled my nose into its folds, almost performing cunnilingus. When I sat down to write the poem after the dream, I was struck by the innocence of the encounter as well as by the blatant sexual potential of that innocence.

Does your flesh still speak
of the flowers from which
you came?

Hair of golden thread
drifting down
to caress skin

fashioned from trillium
petals; tea rose lips
budding for kisses; eyes,
moist and round like lupines;
tulip nipples; a bleeding heart;
a lotus for a navel,
and below, a hidden
orchid, its petals
ready to open.

Although this poem has its genesis in a dream, my own life experiences play a huge part in the images. In a sense, I was not only addressing Blodeudd; I was also addressing myself and my sexuality.
Anger is another driving force in the creation of women’s poetry. The quick spur of rage fuels many poems which can be classified as women’s poetry:

For many readers, and for many writers, the overwhelming sensation to be gotten from contemporary women’s poetry is the smell of camouflage burning, the crackle of anger, free at last, the whirl and rush of flamelike rage that has so often swept the soul, and as often been damped down [again], so that we never thought there could be words for it.” (Ostriker, “Patterns,” 485)

Hydra-like, women’s anger creates poems which focus on diverse topics: from race struggles in South Africa to rape. In my own case, it has birthed many poems, including this one in which I examine my relationship with my grandmother. My grandmother is a hard and angry woman whose life has been filled with tremendous amounts of hard work and little celebration. She is a devout Catholic. One particular statue, which she either owned or which was in her local church, has remained vivid in my memory all my life.

Heart of Thorns

I hid in the cave which was my grandmother’s bedroom. My fingers coveted her treasures: her dark rosary beads, a dried palm frond, the crucifix, and her Virgin image, Mary with a heart of thorns. Her eyes wept blood tears. Her hands lifted to God to pray for us sinners.

I watched Mary pray for me and tried to prick my fingers with her thorns.
Those thorns were gentler
than my grandmother's
palm leaf razor voice.

All my life, I have been exposed to angry, hurtful people, including my grandmother. Eventually I started to seek out lesser hurts. My memory of this event, the seeking of pain to avoid a greater pain, made me aware of how children are at the mercy of the world.

My poem entitled “Astyanax” was written after I learned of the callous murder of a young boy in my home town on Thanksgiving Day. For over a year, the women of the town had been screaming at the local Social Services to remove the boy from his abusive home and place him in a nurturing environment. Their pleas were ignored, and the boy was shot to death by his older brother.

The case file was epic;
page after page filled
with threats of violence,
hatred, abuse. His entire
life had been spent under
siege, seven years lived
in fear. The enemy hid
in the wooden flesh
of father and brother.
They tore his flesh apart,
killed him with the .22.

He died below the steps;
the town-mothers collected
his shattered body, clutched
it to their breasts; mourning
Andromaches, they raised
an outcry against the two
murderers and were not heard.
After I learned of the boy’s murder, I became extremely distraught. I went on strike for three days, refusing to attend classes or do work until I had worked out my grief. My grief was not for that little boy. Yes, I felt horrible, but in a sense I was that little boy. My existence became interconnected with his, an example of the fourth characteristic of women’s poetry.

Myth is a near–perfect tool for women’s poetry. Examples of the characteristics of women’s poetry can be found in mythologies from around the world. Daphne pleading for freedom from Apollo’s embraces is an example of a woman crying out to be herself at the most extreme cost. The wonderous vulva of Inanna is an example of myth glorying in the female body. Anger abounds. One prime example is Medea. Women’s ties to interconnectedness are shown over and over again through the use of the woman’s art of weaving.

Over the course of the semester, I discovered, as the reader has discovered, that many of my poems used mythical allusions or personas. Part of being a poet is using what you know, and I know myth.

I do not, however, always strictly follow the traditional mythical stories. I mold their words like clay and shape them into a vessel which can contain my stories. I follow in the tradition of many great poets, men and women, who used myth for their own purposes: “Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined 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.” (Ostriker, Stealing, 212).

But why use myth at all? Many of my peers find myths to be “boring,” as I found out in poetry class one day. Myths and legends are, sadly, often seen as children’s territory.

This is their loss. Myths provide us access into the past, into the formative structures of our civilization and humanity: “Fairy tales, myths, and stories provide understandings which sharpen our sight.” (Estes, 6) The past can then be brought into the present, made fresh and new and relevant to our daily lives.

Take, for example, a poem I wrote called “Andromeda.” The Andromeda of myth was chained to a rock as a sacrifice to a sea monster, after her mother bragged that her daughter was more beautiful than any goddess. In my poem, Andromeda becomes a symbol of me. At times I feel trapped, frustrated, angry, and hopeless. I like to imagine that Andromeda, chained to her rock, would have liked to break free.
There are days when I feel
the hard cliff jabbing
into the small of my back,
the chains slicing my wrists,
my eyes begging the sky
to send a man with winged
shoes to free me from death.

There are days when I want
the monster called life to eat
me, let me attack it from inside,
rip its stomach with my rage,
burst out of it, and fly screaming
to the sun, stealing Medusa's head
from Perseus, out to conquer worlds.

In the story of Andromeda, I found a woman who was much like the person I am at times. She was trapped in chains, unable to break free of her bonds, to break free of her social standing. She had to wait for her hero to rush to save her life. I, however, know her story and can use what I know to avoid her chains.

Reclaiming and rewriting myth not only allows us to understand our lives in relation to the lessons of the past; it also helps us to understand life in all its hideousness, and then take that hideousness and use it for our own advantage. Women’s myths provide fertile ground for exploring awfulness. Very few myths written about women are filled with wonderful stories. A majority of them involve rape, social disgrace, torture, and murder—all still appropriate topics for today’s poetry.

Io was raped and turned into a cow. Cyane wept herself into a pool. Tiamet was cut apart, and her mangled parts were used to build the world. Skadi, in “repayment” of her father’s murder, was coerced to marry a man she did not desire. Over and over again, awfulness is the tone of women’s lives in myth. Awfulness is still the tone of many women’s lives today. This quote, which ties women and the Goddess together, which ties past myths to the stories of today’s women, elaborates that awfulness:
The Goddess [does not] “live” solely in elite separatist retreats, dancing naked in the piney wood under a white and well-fed moon. The Goddess at this moment is starving to death in refugee camps, with a skeletal child clutched to her dry nipples. . . . The Goddess is on welfare, raising her children in a ghetto next to a freeway interchange that fills their blood cells and neurons with lead. The Goddess is an eight-year-old girl being used for the special sexual thrills of visiting businessmen in a Brazilian brothel. The Goddess is patrolling with a rifle . . . trying to save a revolution in Nicaragua. The Goddess is Winnie Mandela in South Africa, saying “Don’t push me.” I.e. the Goddess IS the world - the Goddess is in the world. And nobody can escape the world.
(Sjoo and Mor in Caputi, 430)

Another reason to utilize mythology is that it does strike deep into the ancient psyche of the human being. Myths are the first stories. In them are hints of the basic life struggles which our ancestors encountered. We still go through those life struggles today. Those struggles form the very center of our minds and our lives. By learning myths, we tap into our deepest past and heritage, our psyches: “she wants to get at something very deep in herself; some set of feelings so intimate and strong that she is ashamed.” (Ostriker, Writing, 132) The poet can use myth to get deep down into her life and know that she is not alone in her experiences.

Medusa is a much-maligned divine figure. The latter half of her story is well known: she was a gorgon who turned men into stone with her gaze. Perseus came along, cut off her head, and then headed out to rescue fair women from certain disaster. The first part of her story is not as well known.

Medusa was a woman of uncommon beauty. Poseidon saw her and lusted to possess her. He raped her in the temple of Athena or Aphrodite, depending upon which version of the myth you know. She was turned into a gorgon as a punishment for intercourse in a temple.

Medusa can be seen as a model of the many women who were victimized because of their appearance. First she was violated because of her looks. Then she was reviled by all men because a curse made her hideous and deadly. Who ever cared for her inner emotions?
Conclusion

Women poets tell women’s stories. They speak of anger, desire for self, sexuality, and their connections with the entire world. Myth provides a near perfect vehicle for the goals of women’s poetry. Many of our experiences of today can be found in the myths of the past, if one looks hard enough.

In my introductory poem, I ask the question “Who will tell our stories now?” The answer is that we will continue to tell the stories, albeit in new ways. The old lessons will not die. They will find new birth in the writings of women poets. Eventually, they will find birth in all women:

I wish for my mother, for Marlene, and for other women whose stories have yet to be told, that they may find these words in themselves. (Behar, 310)
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