Rice-DeFosse on Auraix-Jonchière, ed. (2017)


Mary Rice-DeFosse, Bates College

In this volume, which originated in a series organized by the program “Mythes, Cultures, Sociétés” of the Centre de recherches sur les Littératures et la Sociopoétique (CELIS), the central premise is that the voices of mythical feminine figures from classical Antiquity, the Bible, and the Middle Ages, when taken up by writers and other artists of later periods, especially the late nineteenth through early twenty-first centuries, serve a metatextual function. The voices of mythical figures permit a reflection on the poetic, not in terms of poetry as a genre or form, but as an expressive act found in literature, dance, painting, and even monumental sculpture.

A brief overview introduces a series of essays on key figures: Eve, Lilith, Cassandra, Sirens and Mermaids, the Nereids, Melusine, and Salome, to name some of the most important. The volume comes from a vein of feminist theory that some scholars might find troubling if they assume that the category of “mythes féminins” reinscribes conventional gender binaries or an essentialist notion of gender. In anticipation of this reaction, the editors assert that “nous ne suggérons pas que l’essence poétique du verbe ou la réflexion métapoétique sur l’œuvre seraient d’abord et essentiellement constitutives du féminin” (8). Instead of an essence, “la voix du féminin” comes to stand for the expression of a whole range of difference or otherness.

The volume is extraordinarily well structured, moving through several themes, but also alternating between broad treatments and close textual readings. Lise Wajeman traces the figure of Eve over time, beginning with the Bible and proceeding to later representations of the first woman created by authors as varied as John Milton, Mark Twain, and Victor Hugo; Wajeman establishes the multiple ways in which Eve’s voice as well as her silence have been deployed in a number of texts. Auraix-Jonchière’s own essay on Lilith, the para-biblical other Eve, develops the volume’s central premise, that feminine voices, or more properly voices “of the feminine” allow poets to express an alterity so often culturally suppressed, an erasure that frequently occurs in more referential or prosaic writing. Because Lilith refuses to conform and instead articulates the forbidden, she represents the subversion of social and linguistic conventions in writing marked by aporia.

A number of readings focus on hybrid figures: the Sirens and other mermaids as well as the Celtic or Breton fairies Morgane and Melusine amplify the feminine figure as a cipher for all kinds of alterity. Focusing on a series of mostly minor poets, Maria Benedetta Collini presents the importance of the hybrid woman-bird or woman-fish as a sign of the significance of hybridity in the Symbolist esthetic. The Sirens incorporate song and silence, or the Decadent pairing of beauty and death. Catherine d’Humières traces the heritage of Homer’s Sirens in the works of twentieth and twenty-first century writers like Charles Henneberg, Manuel Mujica Láinez, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, and H. G. Wells. Joanna Pavleski-Malingre demonstrates how Gérard de Nerval’s reinvention of Melusine inspired writers like André Breton and A.S. Byatt in whose works she becomes a symbol of poetic and social regeneration. Marco Modenesi shows that in Charles Le Goffic’s Morgue la sirène the mermaid opens the text to a world beyond the rational. Still, not all writers and artists use feminine figures in a strategy referred to in this volume, in a homonymic play on words, as “la voix du féminin” (7), or an aesthetic strategy deployed to challenge convention. As Collini remarks, some reworkings of myth in the poems of the late nineteenth century rely on “thèmes de l’amour, de la femme, voire de l’essence même de la féminité, mais en retombant dans bien des cas dans le poncif” (82). The volume successfully elucidates the balance between cliché and originality.

Some of the essays focus on a single writer’s use of myth. Luigi di Bernadini considers André Gide’s 1933 Perséphone within the context of the writer’s œuvre, pairing Perséphone with the 1891 Traité du Narcisse. While the intertextual connection is not entirely convincing, it is clear that both works use myth as an allegory for the creative process, and that Perséphone represents an important moment in Gide’s development as an author. Véronique Léonard-Roques’s masterful essay on Jean Laude’s Le Dict de Cassandre (1982) is a compelling analysis of this lyric monologue. In it, Laude reimagines Homer’s Cassandra, whose prophecies are never believed, as a trope for a marginality that subverts categories of the animal, the human, and the divine. Cassandra interrogates the limits of space and time as well as the possibilities and limits for poetry itself to “speak” the unspeakable.

Three essays connect literary texts to other arts. Sylviane Coyault studies Marie NDiaye’s story La Naugragnée, about a mermaid narrator/character and a painter as a retelling of the painter William Turner’s life and works. Alain Montandon compares medieval images of Salome with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works by writers, artists, composers,
choreographers, and dancers. Stéphanie Urdician explores the links between the Nereids of Argentine writers Noemí Ulla and Amanda Patarca and the monumental representation of the same myth, Lola Mora’s Fountain of the Nereids in Buenos Aires.

In a final essay, which appears in the guise of an epilogue, Hélène Vial retraces the metapoetic elements of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. She finds in voices of feminine figures from a classical source the same reflections on the writing process seen in the essays dedicated to much later works. The volume also includes a general bibliography, scholarly biographies of the contributors, and abstracts of each essay in French and in English.

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