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I am not sure that I feel like singing, thanks very much for asking!

Interview with Natalie Haynes

Abstract In her writings on ancient myth, the British author Natalie Haynes moves women to the centre of attention. Her two latest books, *A Thousand Ships* and *Pandora's Jar*—a fiction novel and a non-fiction one—approach this topic from two different perspectives. This interview takes stock of Haynes' motives and methodology as well as of the challenges she faces in the process of writing.

Keywords Women in Ancient Myth, Classical Reception, Classics in Popular Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Like most good ideas, the idea for an interview with Natalie Haynes came about in a pub: While we were talking about *A Thousand Ships* (a book that fascinated us from the very first sentence),[1] our supervisor, Christine Walde, offered to connect us with the author. We are very happy that our casual conversation actually resulted in this interview, which Natalie Haynes kindly agreed to do via Zoom three days before Christmas 2020.

What we liked best about reading *A Thousand Ships* are the multiple threads of Natalie Haynes' work coming together in this novel: She read Classics at Christ's College, Cambridge, wrote her PhD about women in Greek tragedy and has worked in the field of Classics ever since. At the same time, she has considerably broadened her professional scope, working not only as a classicist but also as a comedian, journalist, and writer. She has hosted her own radio shows, for instance the one entitled 'OedipusEnders',[2] where she draws parallels between modern soap operas and Greek tragedy. In her latest BBC Radio 4 podcast 'Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics'[3] she introduces ancient figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Helen, or Penelope to a wider public. She has written articles for The Guardian, The Times and The Observer (among others) and published six books to this day.

Natalie Haynes' first book was a children's book, *The Great Escape,*[4] published in 2007. It tells the story of a tomcat's escape from an animal testing laboratory and is, curiously enough, the only one of her books that has been translated into German.[5] In 2010 she published *The Ancient Guide to Modern Life,*[6] a non-fiction book that finds fascinating parallels between modern and ancient culture, for example in the fields of politics, language and arts. Her first novel, *The Amber Fury* (2014),[7] is a contemporary retelling of Aeschylus' *Orestia,* set in Edinburgh and London. In *The Children of Jocasta,*[8] published in 2018, she chooses another approach by narrating the epic cycle of Thebes from the perspective of Jocasta and Ismene.

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[1] Cf. Haynes (2019).

[2] https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00ryf1g (accessed: 14. 03. 2021).

[3] https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b077x8pc (accessed: 14. 03. 2021).

[4] Cf. Haynes (2007).

[5] Further works have been translated into Italian, Spanish and Dutch.

[6] Cf. Haynes (2010).

[7] Cf. Haynes (2014).

A Thousand Ships, published in 2019 and shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2020, is Natalie Haynes' latest fiction novel. It retells the Trojan War from a female perspective. Andromache, Hecabe, Cassandra, Clytemnestra, and Penelope are among the main characters in this version of the Trojan War. The narrative opens with a direct quote from Homer's *Iliad* ("Sing, Muse"). It is not the poet, however, who takes centre stage in the first chapter, but the Muse Calliope herself: Displeased with the poet's tone, Calliope decides to teach him a lesson in manners. By reversing the traditional narrative perspective in the very first chapter, Natalie Haynes sets the tone for the entire novel. The individual chapters recount the fate of women severely affected by the Trojan War: Readers witness Creusa trying to find her way out of the burning city, Laodamia grieving her dead husband Protesilaus, and Penthesilea entering the battlefield after she accidentally killed her sister, now looking for an honourable way to die.

Pandora's Jar,[9] published in 2020, is Natalie Haynes' latest work and deals with the reception of women in Greek myths from ancient to modern times. In several case studies, Natalie Haynes demonstrates the reduction of complexity that female figures in particular have undergone in modern retellings: Pandora becomes the source of all evil, Helen the outbreak of the Trojan War, and Medusa's story is reduced to her being a terrifying monster. "Hugely lively, fun, yet serious",[10] according to The Guardian review, *Pandora's Jar* draws attention to women in Greek myth who, over time, have been reduced to little more than one negative trait.

In these works, Natalie Haynes approaches Greek women in different ways: Helen, for example, is not given a full chapter in *A Thousand Ships* (Calliope refuses to bestow an individual chapter on her: She gets on her nerves). Instead, Helen is addressed in *Pandora's Jar*: Attention is paid to the various versions of her myth in antiquity and her reception, e.g. in Star Trek as Elaan of Troyius.

Clytemnestra, on the other hand, is present in both works. Natalie Haynes investigates her motives in different ways: While in *Pandora's Jar* she mainly focuses on the various literary traditions, she deals with the material much more freely in *A Thousand Ships,* e.g. letting Clytemnestra enter into conversation with Cassandra. If Clytemnestra has a counterpart in the myths surrounding the Trojan War, it is Penelope, who also gets her own chapter in *Pandora's Jar.* In *A Thousand Ships* we only get to know the heroine's perspective and feelings through numerous letters addressed to her husband Odysseus. This Ovidian gesture highlights her wide range of emotions from seriously concerned to furiously angry, as she waits for her husband to come home.

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[8] Cf. Haynes (2018).

[9] Cf. Haynes (2020).

[10] Higgins (2020).

This multiperspectivity in portraying the women of the Trojan War is particularly fascinating to us and will therefore take up a large part of the following interview.

thersites: *Your oeuvre is extremely rich: Among other things, you work as a broadcaster, a writer and a comedian. In our introduction, we failed to find an appropriate job description for your wide field of activities in Classics. What label would you use to classify your work?*

Natalie Haynes: I never use labels to classify my work but when people ask for introductions, I usually go with 'writer' and 'broadcaster'. I do not feel like a comedian anymore because when I do a talk, which has got jokes in it, it is just a lot easier than the job they are doing. So, I go with 'writer and broadcaster' and sometimes 'writer, broadcaster and classicist' but usually the Classics is taken as a given now.

thr: *We find it intriguing that you wrote your dissertation about women killing their children in Greek tragedy and came out working as a broadcaster and comedian. What happened along the way?*

NH: Yes, what could possibly go wrong? I was already a comedian when I wrote that dissertation. I started doing stand-up as an undergraduate in my first year at Cambridge, which has a long history of producing comedians. It has The Footlights, a comedy society which produced for example the bunch of the Pythons, Hugh Laurie, Stephen Fry, or Emma Thompson; and it has been doing so for decades. So, Cambridge is a very good place to become a comedian in lots of ways.

The two things—Classics and comedy—have always co-existed for me. I have been a comedian and a Classicist for a really long time even if comedy, at the start, was only my hobby and then, for a while, Classics was only my hobby, and now the two merged into one place. But it is still true that my writings, my fiction and my non-fiction writings, are much sadder. They access a much more melancholic side of me than my comedy does although that often has quite dark, quite melancholic elements, too. Obviously, its goal is laughter, so there is a slightly different vibe for it.

thr: *In your works you introduce partly unknown Classical figures to a wider public—Why do you think this is important and how can Classics as an academic discipline benefit or perhaps learn from this?*

NH: Well, in the UK, which is obviously the place where I produce the bulk of my work, the majority of Classics teaching is in the private-school sector. Roughly, seven percent of the students go to a private, fee-paying school and 93 percent of them go to a state school. The teaching of Latin and Greek is not exclusively but not far-off exclusively taught in private schools. Greek in particular is pretty well only taught in private schools—there are a few incredible outlying schools, but they are so small in number I probably visited all of them. So, for the most part in this country Classics is limited, or at least the language of Classics is limited, at school-age for people who pay for their education, and that is a very small percentage of them.

If Classics as an academic discipline wants to continue existing, it simply is not enough to shrug our shoulders and say: "Oh, that is really disappointing." Also, it is not enough to do outreach at university level for sixth-formers and say: "Please come and study here." Because: We are asking a 19-year-old to pay 9,000 pounds a year in fees and then their living-costs on top of that. We are asking to take on a lot of trust and I do not see that this is particularly sustainable long-term. Every student, I think, who applies to university to read Classics is doing something marvelously heroic: They are taking a subject which is demonstrably not vocational, which does not have an obvious career path. They are studying something because they want to and that is remarkable. Sort of the least we can do, I think, is go out and get them. Go out and say to them: "Hey, there is this awesome thing over here that you might really like. So, here it is."

In a normal year, I visit a lot of schools—state schools as well as private schools. And since my radio show 'Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics' became a podcast earlier this year, it has already been downloaded or listened to more than a million times. There is absolutely no way I could be making programs on television that would have anything like that audience—unless I was doing Saturday Night on BBC or a soap opera. I just would not hit those kind of numbers. That is what Radio 4 has given me. And so, I suppose, it just seems to me the least I can do. I was so lucky I got to study Classics at school. I was so lucky to get to study Latin and Greek and I am really conscious of that; and I do not want Classics to die out. I do not want it to be the preserve of rich people who could afford to pay for it. Classics is all our history. It was always all our history and it really matters to me.

thr: *Your performances and writings also address people without prior knowledge in the field of Classics. What are the challenges of presenting Classics in popular culture and what other formats meet these challenges well?*

NH: Especially with my books, I have to write for an audience of non-Classicists because Classicists are such a niche. They already know this stuff, so they do not need this anyway. It is nice if they like it, but they definitely do not need it. I am always trying to write the radio shows and the books for people who do not already have Classics. Often when I am writing, the novels in particular, it feels like walking a tightrope of saying: How do I not bore and annoy the people who already know this while at the same time bringing in the people who do not already know this?

A very nice woman who works as a scientist recently asked me this: “Why do you write books?” The answer is: I do not have a reason. I just wanted to tell a story. I am not an academic, I am an artist. I create work and sometimes my reasons for doing things within that work are very academic. For example, I want to include one side of the story because I saw it on a vase painting or because I read it in Apollodorus’ *Bibliotheca*. But sometimes the reason is because it is beautiful, and it makes my heart sing; and that is not an answer you can give to academics very often without them going: “What? Sorry! I do not think that is right.” But if you are making a work and you want people to love it, you have to feel that way about it. If I do not love it, you are not going to and that is very much what I am aiming for.

And as for other formats: I think theatre works really well. Obviously, this year has been a little bit challenging. But Jermyn Street Theatre, for example, did a production called ‘15 Heroines’, where they got fifteen women playwrights to write fifteen versions of Ovid’s *Heroines* and fifteen women to perform them. I wrote Hypsipyle for that and she was performed by Olivia Williams, who was obviously a completely brilliant actor. And when I was watching the rehearsal-process I was thinking: These are going to be so great for drama students. If you are trying to find a great monologue as a student applying for a place at drama school, then there are not so many monologues by women for women that the world does not need another fifteen. I was thinking, how great that students will be able to take these and perform them. Because some of these women are very young, some of them are played quite young and some of them are played very much older. And that is perfect. You could be anywhere between fifteen and eighty and perform one of these and that is how it should be.

thr: *Now we would like to focus on your writings: What inspired you to approach the topic of women in myth in a fictional* (A Thousand Ships), *but also in a non-fictional* (Pandora's Jar) *context? And what are the challenges you faced in both areas?*

NH: Oh well, *Ships* is my Athena of my creative process. She appeared fully-formed from my fore-head, in so far as I was walking home from work and I thought it would be really cool to do the whole Trojan War from women perspective. I practically ran home and I was frantically googling, thinking someone must have done this: The war from all its women. And then, the more the minutes went by, I realized: They have not. It is mine.

Then it was an incredibly complicated process because I wanted the timelines to run forwards and backwards: What happens to the women of Troy? What happens to the Greek women waiting for their husbands? So, I thought the story should begin at the end of the war. It should begin with the fall of the city. It should begin with the horse because everybody knows the horse. Generally, people do not have all the Classics at their disposal, but everybody knows about the Trojan horse because it is one of these phrases, like Achilles' heel, which has entered language. That meant the opening chapter could be basically an action movie of Creusa trying to get out of the city. And I thought, when I was writing it, this is actually very brutal; because I know and all Classicists reading this know that she does not make it, but—perfect illustration for your earlier question—no one else is going to know.

The downside to writing fiction and particularly to writing *Ships* is that it is emotionally ruinous. It was such a difficult process to keep all those women alive in my head for all that time. It was just extremely difficult because, of course, every single one of them is going through something horrific—the goddesses not so much. But those chapters were a joy to write, they were incredibly painless and lovely, and they always come between two really traumatic human chapters. It was very painful carrying those women around and by the time I finished it, I could not do it anymore. I was too tired, too sad. So, I wanted to do a book which did not have quite such a destructive effect on my psyche. But I did not particularly want to be writing *not* about the Greeks, so *Pandora* was the solution to a problem more than anything else: I know people are interested in Greek myth. I know they are interested in women in Greek myth and I know I could tell the story of some women—ten as it turns out. I thought this will enable me to do the fun-part of writing.

Writing non-fiction means looking at the characters from the outside, writing fiction means I have to imagine them from the inside and imagining people who have gone through what the women of Troy have gone through. So, *Pandora* was my emotional holiday between novels.

thr: *We find it striking that the most famous woman of the Trojan War—Helen—is not given a full chapter to tell her story. How did you select the female protagonists?*

NH: Oh, it was incredibly easy, I started out thinking I would use all of them and then I realized they are way too many. I made a list of all the women and it was a perfectly manageable number. Then, of course, what happens is that some fit into each other's lives too closely and you do not need two chapters. You can just do one, which is what happened to the Trojan women. Originally, I had assumed I would tell the Trojan women's story in rotations; and that works when they are separate. But when they were together, it did not work and therefore I wrote them as a sort of chorus. That was one of the few things that were not in my original plan for *Ships* and it became a sort of spine of the book.

And what happened is that I wrote the first Penelope chapter and I had so much fun doing it that I decided that there is no way I am giving up this voice. I thought that I can tell Odysseus' whole story from Penelope's perspective and so it kind of structured itself, which does not happen very often.

On top of that there was the tonal issue: The chapters with goddesses are generally quite funny, the chapters with Trojan women are quite sad and the chapters with Greek women can go in both ways. The task was fitting them together in a way which kept you reading while simultaneously allowing the tone to oscillate.

Concerning Helen, I wanted to do the story from the *Odyssey* when Telemachus gets to Sparta. There is this extraordinary sequence where Helen drugs Menelaus to stop him from crying and we get the impression that she does so every night. I thought that I could not explain to a modern audience that Helen basically gives Menelaus drugs every night so that he does not cry and annoy her. And so, in the end I thought that it is better to just leave it out. I was expecting to do a Hermione chapter as well and an Electra chapter, but it never quite fitted. These things happen.

thr: *We noticed that* A Thousand Ships *is not told from an all-female perspective: The scene of Penthesilea's death is told from the perspective of Achilles.*[11] *Given the scarce appearance of Penthesilea in the surviving literary texts, this surprised us. Why did you choose the male perspective in this particular case?*

NH: It is because I wanted to do a little hat tip to Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Fall of Troy.* He explicitly heroizes Penthesilea and at the moment she dies we are told that Achilles feels the same grief that he felt when Patroclus died. This is extraordinary: She has such an impact on him because she is a warrior, and this is never discussed. I guess, I just really wanted to stress this connection between them. It is not just a moment. It devastates him. There are scenes of vase paintings of Penthesilea being carried from the battlefield by Achilles. As far as I know, there is no other example of a Greek carrying his fallen enemy—just her. She subverts all the rules.

There also is a horrible poem by Robert Graves about Penthesilea, where she is robbed of all her agency. She is just a naked corpse and Achilles basically looks down on her and masturbates on her corpse. I was so angry about that. It is so grimy, taking away all her heroic qualities and just making her a naked pretty lady, which apparently is all we are interested in. And so, I thought this warrior bond should be between them.

thr: *Calliope is the first character to speak in* A Thousand Ships. *What impact did epic and other ancient genres have on your conception of the text?*

NH: The whole book is infused with it. Sometimes it is in a really specific way and sometimes it is just like an infusion. Concerning Calliope, for example, the first line of the *Iliad* always irritated me: She is the first person mentioned in the *Iliad,* but she does not even get named. I always thought that "Sing, Muse" is quite peremptory. So, I knew this book is going to begin with a Muse saying "I am not sure that I feel like singing, thanks very much for asking." I obviously do not name the poet who is trying to get her to help him. For Classicists it is meant to be Homer and for non-Classicists I do not think that it matters; he is just a poet. Because Calliope does not get named, he does not get named. It is a way of reframing the Homeric text.

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[11] Cf. Haynes (2019), esp. pp. 52–56.

Of course, Euripides runs through the book like a stick of rock. Euripides runs through all my work because he is so brilliant in writing women. He sees women from the inside out and that is an incredibly unusual phenomenon in ancient writing. And the same is true of Ovid: I know he is problematic in lots of ways, but the *Heroides* is a revolutionary text for a Roman man-poet. So, there is loads of Ovid lurking in this book, his way of writing from Penelope's perspective, for example, or the Laodamia and the Oenone chapter. And there is, of course, loads of Homer in the book. The whole story of the *Odyssey* is told in the Penelope letters. It is in a constant dialogue with those texts, some more obscure than others.

thr: *The Guardian calls* A Thousand Ships *"Absorbing and fiercely feminist".*[12] *Is the retelling of myth from a female perspective in itself a feminist project? And if so, why?*

NH: This always makes me think of a great line from Rebecca West, the early-20th-century feminist writer: She said that she was not quite sure what feminism was. It is what people called her whenever she expressed views which differentiated her from a doormat. I feel a little bit the same at times: Of course, I am a feminist; and I am writing in the 21st century, so the book is a 21st-century feminist retelling. It cannot really fail to be. But I do not see it myself as being a particularly feminist idea to hear the voices of women. That seems to me like being a person. But it is, of course, because so many writers and artists historically have not prioritized the voices of women. The act of simply beginning to correct that imbalance is seen as something intensely political—and I suppose it is. I have come to the conclusion that, if you are a feminist, it tends to fill your work in the same way that all those Greek sources infused it. It does not occur to me *not* to think that women are the same thing as people. I do not really understand how that is still a revolutionary way of thinking, but it turns out to be. So, I vaguely feel that it is the rest of the world's fault that it is a feminist novel and not mine.

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[12] Higgins (2019).

thr: *So far, we looked back on your past work. But what is next?*

NH: The Medusa novel comes next; or at least it will come when I got her structured. At the moment, I am still turning around this massif of material, knowing that if I can just move one thing it will fall into place, but it has not. This is really fun and really frustrating at the same time. So, Medusa is next and then the novel of Medea. Then I hope there will be *Pandora's Jar II.* I think, those will be the next three books. I am not a hundred percent sure that they will be in that order, but certainly Medusa will be next.

thr: *Thanks a lot, Natalie, for answering our questions and giving us the chance to gain these insights into your great work!*

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