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Morales, H. (2020). Antigone
Rising: The Subversive
Power of the Ancient Myths

Reviewed by Abbie Jukes



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If, when opening Helen Morales' *Antigone Rising* (2020), you were expecting a book solely on Sophocles' *Antigone*, then you may be pleasantly surprised.¹ *Antigone Rising* is not a book dedicated to an exploration of Sophocles' famous *Antigone*.² Instead, Morales, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, from her perspective as both mother and professional, writes about how myth has been used to reinforce social control, or unlock it. Classics meets the contemporary in the most thunderous way: this is not the usual 'why the classics are essential' tome. Gender identity, the #metoo movement, body image, and race politics all meet the classics in Morales' exciting account.³ Critically, knowledge of the myths discussed is not a pre-requisite of reading the book, as they are explained throughout (and she suggests further reading for those who may wish to become better acquainted with myth); in this way, Morales genuinely makes myth accessible to all.

So why is Antigone still the titular heroine? It is not Antigone's tragic story that Morales is particularly interested in. Rather, she focusses on how Antigone herself creates future characters who embody her spirit: 'I want to dwell on the courage and endurance of Antigone's character. She risks everything for a cause that she believes in and refuses to be cowed either by powerful politicians or what anyone else thinks.' (Morales 2020: xii). That spirit lives on, Morales suggests, in the likes of Iesha Evans who, at a Black Lives Matter protest in Baton Rouge, was photographed in flimsy summer attire facing down police in riot gear; in Greta Thunberg, a teenage environmental change protestor; and in Malala Yousafzia, who was shot by the Taliban for protesting her right to an education.

Despite Antigone's heroic reputation today, and, Morales observes, whilst contemporary audiences are firmly on Antigone's side, classical audiences would not have been so sympathetic. Medical texts from the time, such as *On the Diseases of Virgins*⁴, characterised unmarried girls of Antigone's age as mad or unruly. Intriguingly, Morales illustrates how figures like Greta Thunberg have been classified in similar ways. Commenting on how Thunberg's behaviour has been criticised and her Asperger's syndrome dwelt upon, Morales hereby draws a surprising line between Antigone and Thunberg, over two millennia apart. Despite this disablist criticism, Thunberg has transformed it into

¹It is important to note that this review does not engage with scholarship, due to how recent the publication is: none has yet been published at the time of writing this review.

²For feminist readings of the *Antigone* story, see the fairly recent *Feminist Readings of Antigone* (2010). In many ways, however, Morales' book could be called 'feminist', but not dedicated to a feminist reading of Antigone, per se.

³A chapter list for *Antigone Rising* is included at the end of this review.

⁴Morales states that there is not a specific reference for this text, but it was possibly written after Sophocles' *Antigone*. Even if written after Sophocles' play, Morales maintains that it still provides a valuable insight into the attitudes towards girl's behaviour at the time. Morales cites (Flemming and Hanson 1998: 241-252); please see for further information about this source.

something positive, stating that her Asperger's has allowed her to see things 'outside of the box.' (Morales 2020: xiv). This approach might also be applied to *Antigone*: Morales, whilst agreeing with the ancients that *Antigone*'s 'madness' gives her a political edge, notes that it functions as *Antigone*'s fuel for her single-mindedness. Therefore, 'through this lens, ancient myths don't just enlarge human stories; modern figures and events can also invite us to see myths in new ways.' (Morales 2020: xiv). Connecting through time, then, myth and modernity work in tandem: modernity can allow us to view fresh perspectives of myth, whilst myth also enables us to see modernity, too, from new angles.

The question of who myth 'belongs to' lingers, however. Differentiating a myth from other types of story is precisely its characteristic of repeatedly being told over the centuries, becoming of special significance for culture. Whilst ancient myths may typically be viewed as belonging to an elite—for instance, people who have benefited from a classical education—Morales seeks robustly to challenge this notion. However, far from shying away from the problematic ideological and political history of myth, Morales instead highlights the darker issues which continue to haunt today's culture.

Antigone Rising's first chapter, 'Killing Amazons,' opens starkly: 'This book starts where misogyny ends, with men killing women' (Morales 2020: 1). After reviewing these canonical ancient Greek myths about men killing women, and in particular those of the famous hero, Hercules, Morales, in a highly unsettling and troubling account, links the killings that occur in ancient myth to the present time, recalling the Isla Vista killings in which many students were murdered and injured by a gunman. Whilst there were both male and female victims, Morales writes that it was the killer's views about women that led him to murder. Just before the murder, he sent a detailed manifesto, from 'online "pick-up" sites' (Morales 2020: 5) to a total of 140 people. Acknowledging that although the massacre was the result of one individual, Morales reasons that it was also caused by centuries' telling the same stories about men and women, desire and control. Thousands of years of belief, she suggests, originating from ancient culture, have propagated the belief that violence against women is an essential component for heroism.

In an era of prominent feminists, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and social media campaigns such as #YesAllWomen and #MeToo, it should be the case that we have a 'heightened awareness about how misogyny leads to women being killed.' (Morales 2020: 11). Yet, sadly, this is not the case. Misogyny abounds. Morales goes on to share a deeply personal account of how her daughter Athena was exposed to misogyny in her high school, and how the perpetrators were left unpunished. Morales ends the chapter with a wish that, through tracing patterns and links between ancient and modern beliefs, it will be easier to understand how misogyny operates.

Continuing with the theme of struggles against misogyny, Morales then moves on in a new chapter to consider how, in the ancient comedy, *Lysistrata* persuades women who belong to opposing city-states to come together and hold a sex strike. Whilst not all modern day strikes that bear similarities to *Lysistrata*'s strike may be as successful, a 2016 strike in Poland yielded results: a reversal of the government's plans to impose a complete ban on abortion.

Furthermore, in the chapter 'Dieting with Hippocrates,' we are presented with the familiar issues of body image and dieting culture. Whilst many of us are well acquainted with diets and media headlines that demand we lose weight, it may be surprising to some to learn that the origins of debates about the ideal body might be traced back to antiquity, the discourse dating back to 'famous Greek artist Zeuxis, who lived during the fifth century BCE.' (Morales 2020: 39). Statues of Venus have also influenced the notion of the ideal body. In 1916, a creepy practice of measuring student's bodies to compare if they were a real touchstone to Venus' statue, which was impossible to achieve, occurred in Wellesley College, Massachusetts.

However, diet culture is not the only way to control women's bodies. In 'The Women Controllers,' Morales explores how females must exercise caution in how they dress. And a major instigator in enforcing these rules? School dress codes. Giving an example of how her daughter, Athena, was forced

to comply with dress codes that stated extraordinarily that girls ‘could not have visible bra straps or exposed cleavage or wear short skirts because it was *distracting to the male teachers*’ (Morales 2020: 47), Morales ridicules such rules and demonstrates how they belong to a long tradition of policing women’s bodies. In both Ancient Greece and Rome, regulators of women’s dress, *guinaikonomoi* (literally, women controllers), had the responsibility of ensuring that women both dressed and behaved appropriately in public spaces. While, in most modern countries, there may no longer be government officials enforcing dress codes as they were in antiquity, Morales reasons that numerous widespread cultural discourses and practices still have the same function today: to control women and make them feel ashamed of their body.

Yet, myths have a way of being reappropriated in order to combat the misogynistic power that has previously been wielded through them. In a discussion of the ancient goddess Diana/Artemis, protector of women and girls, Morales leaps forward over two thousand years to 2013, when another Diana emerges in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Instead of a bow and arrow, this new Diana sported a handgun, shot two bus drivers after a history of sexual attacks from transport workers in the area, predominantly on women who were travelling home late at night after working in the city’s factories (*maquilas*), and was never caught. Signing a letter, ‘Diana, Hunter of Bus Drivers’, she decided to announce the action she had taken, because no one else was protecting women. Rather than perceiving women as silent and weak, she wrote, in reality we are not: we are brave. Deciding to take action against the bus drivers, who for these women that regularly travelled on the route, Morales outlines, bus driver equals rapist, meant that women could finally take back control. Morales concludes, however, that women do not want to take revenge in this way. Unable to rely on the police and courts for justice, they are left with little choice: therefore, deciding to become a Diana becomes a necessity, but an extreme last resort, for women to protect themselves.

Classical myth’s troubling role in racial ideology, as well as its potential to subvert that history, are also addressed in the book. Morales admits that whilst ‘we’ own mythology, the ‘we’ hasn’t necessarily been as expansive as it should be (Morales 2020: 101). Focussing on the myth of Aphrodite as an ‘icon of female allure’ (Morales 2020: 100), and her Roman counterpart Venus, Morales demonstrates how this history has had different meanings for black and white women. White women such as Lady Gaga and Kylie Minogue have positively represented themselves as the goddess of love and desire, but Venus’s legacy for black women has been more troubling. Morales recalls the example of Sarah Baartman—who was likely a slave— put on public display in the nineteenth century as the ‘Venus Hottentot.’ Even in death, Baartman’s body was subjected to public scrutiny. The racism subtending certain strands of myth persists. Racism such as this, underpinned by ancient mythology so long, means it is difficult to break free of its chains, with the issue continuing to this very day. Morales highlights how white people feel very strongly about mythological characters being portrayed as white and not black; ‘there is a desire to see themselves [white people] reflected in them.’ (Morales 2020: 104.) When black actors were cast by the BBC in 2018 to play the roles of Zeus and his three warriors: Achilles, Patroclus and Aeneas in *Troy, Fall of a City* in a television version of Homer’s *Iliad*, there was public outcry. Although not directly related to classical antiquity, a similar reaction occurred when Halle Berry was cast to play Ariel (2018) in a live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*, rather than a white actress.

Providing an answer as to how we move away from the racial ideology traditionally associated with myth, Morales writes: ‘It takes a cultural phenomenon to rewrite a cultural script.’ (Morales 2020: 104). And just exactly who is this cultural phenomenon? The answer: Beyoncé. Announcing her pregnancy through a series of photographs in 2017, Beyoncé cast herself as Venus. Crucially, Morales notes, Beyoncé makes Venus share her throne with African deities, elevating them to equal importance. However, this is not the only instance in which Beyoncé changed the cultural encounter with myth. When Beyoncé and Jay-Z took over the Louvre for their music video APESHIT, which Morales names as a protest, they make a point of criticising the exclusion of black culture from the Louvre. Museums,

a common way in which many people experience myth through their representation in various cultural and artistic objects, are not always straightforward in the way in which they choose to display and frame myth. Morales points out that not only do Beyoncé and Jay-Z successfully illustrate the exclusion of black culture, but they also make a point of taking up public space, something which black people in America are condemned for doing.

Furthermore, this is not the only aspect of Beyoncé's music video which subverts the racial underpinning of myths. Rather, Morales highlights how Beyoncé's black body dancing against white marble challenges a history of whiteness, beauty and antiquity. Here Morales reframes the issue of our consumption of classical statuary. While modern technological advances have demonstrated that ancient statues were painted in many bright colours, the belief that classical statuary should be purely white persists. Morales even honestly admits that when she saw one of the reconstructed statues in its full coloured glory, she was shocked. Beyoncé's challenge to the assumption that white is (classically) beautiful is clear.

Including more voices that have previously been largely excluded in discussions around myth, the chapter 'Transmythology', examines Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy*, a retelling of Ovid's account of Iphis and Ianthe. Pointing out that this is the only story of lesbian desire to survive from classical antiquity, Morales highlights how in the ancient tale, Iphis' father wished for a boy, but Iphis was born female. Her mother, Telethusa prayed to the god Isis, and Isis advised that Iphis be raised with her true identity concealed. Once Iphis was a teenager, her father Ligdus arranged for his 'son' to be married to Ianthe, a local girl. Yet, ancient Roman society did not allow women to marry women. Iphis' mother once again prayed to Isis, and Iphis was transformed into a male. This story, Morales states, seems to leave no place for lesbian desire. Opposed to this, Smith's re-telling finds it a home, and more: leaving behind the 'dodgier elements of the Latin poem' (Morales 2020: 138), it does not focus on the changing of sex, but on the blurring of gender boundaries. Adaptations like Smith's, Morales concludes, are essential; they allow LGBTQIA+ people to see themselves represented in myths that did not previously encompass them.

Overall, then, Morales' book *Antigone Rising* is a compelling success. Ending the book where it begins—with the *Antigone*—Morales reflects that whilst Antigone's story largely ends in tragedy, and her lack of sisterhood is a problem,⁵ her spirit lives on, inspiring others. The appeal of Antigone's story, and other myths, as demonstrated by this review, is precisely their ability to be (re)read and (re)told in different ways. Morales' project does exactly that: showing how the subversive power of myths can make them accessible to all, and how viewing them in a new light can allow them to evolve away from their troubling ideological histories. So who does myth belong to? Answer: it belongs to all of us.

⁵For more on Antigone and sisterhood, see Bonnie Honig's *Antigone, Interrupted* (2013), where Honig explores sorority in greater depth, and refutes the claim that Antigone 'lacks sisterhood.'

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