
A Review Of Elizabeth Rose's The Oracle Of Delphi

In her novel *The Oracle of Delphi*, Elizabeth Rose retells the Greek myth of Princess Andromeda and the demi-god Perseus. The novel is based on an ancient Greek myth, which focuses on Andromeda as a beautiful Heroine with a stubborn personality, who can be tamed into a loving housewife while also maintaining the meaning of her name, "Ruler of Men" (Munich 30). Greek antiquity is the vector used by Rose to convey these ideas to readers because it allows her to have characters that are more extreme and alluring, there is a sense of familiarity with the content of the novel and the romance is portrayed in a way that coincides with views of sexuality originating from Homer and Hesiod and then extending to the Lyrical Age of Poetry and ideas of Sigmund Freud (Arthur 14-40). Since Rose stays true to the accepted actions of an ancient Greek myth, she is able to use details and character personalities to better express the main themes she creates.

The female role in Greek society and differences in sexuality have been defined by orators and philosophers beginning with Homer and Hesiod. The Homeric picture of a woman values her for domestic functions as a wife. The ideal marital relationship between man and woman consisted of romance and domestic harmony but society took advantage of women who broke this marital order. Women were blamed for events such as adultery and men were protected (Arthur 14-40).

In the *Oracle of Delphi*, Perseus thinks Andromeda would be an acceptable wife based on her appearance. Although marriage was a result of a source outside of Perseus and Andromeda, "The thought of marriage was not at all unappealing, as Andromeda's beauty had already enthralled him." Perseus recognizes that Andromeda "seemed to keep her life a secret", but she fits the romantic image of what he wants his wife to look like. The "secret" side of Andromeda conveys a possibility that she does not truly follow the Homeric ideas as a wife. Perseus' greatest concern for marrying Andromeda is that "he was not so sure she would ever accept him as her husband" (Rose 51). Perseus and Andromeda are still in their "meeting" stage of the novel, which is typically where the writer of a romance novel will introduce a "hint of the conflict" (Regis 31). This hint of conflict is also a hint of Hesiodic ideas that conflict with the Homeric ideas held by Perseus. Homer's theories suggest that the most significant danger for a married man is the possibility of his wife not fulfilling her duties, which are greatly valued. Since Perseus wants a Homeric marriage, he is more concerned that she will not accept him instead of wondering what the depth of her secret life entails (Arthur). The Homeric ideas fit within the typical ending of a romance novel, one that the happy ending is one of the "formal features that virtually everyone can identify" (Regis 9). Rose also reveals to readers that she specifically chose the Greek myth between Andromeda and Perseus because, unlike most tragic Greek myths, there was a happy ending (Rose 208).

The Hesiodic female image regards a woman as a "beautiful evil" essential to propagating life. Females consist of two sides, one that is wild and another controlled (Hesiod 585-590). This image originated from the competitive nature of the rising middle class where the wife was part of a cooperative effort for the husband to achieve a higher social and economic status. Unlike Homer, the Hesiodic ideas regarded the emergence of female sexuality as a threat to male superiority, which should be monitored and regulated if necessary (Arthur 23-24).

King Acrisius of Argos attempts to regulate the behavior of his daughter and Perseus' mother, Danaë, when the Oracle warns him, "beware of your grandson...someday he will kill you" (Rose 3). Instead of recognizing the divine power of the Oracle's warning as inevitable, King Acrisius tries to take absolute control of his own daughter and prevent her from ever having a child. He treats his daughter as an evil he must control because she will produce a child that will supersede his superiority as king. He spares her life because "the gods frown upon those who shed the blood of kindred." Instead of killing her he keeps her as a prisoner. "She had not died at her father's hand, but would never live again (Rose 4-5). Hesiod is also accredited to the succession myth within Theogony that the female and her progeny are aligned against the male, which creates a cycle of victory and defeat. However, Zeus was able to escape from this perpetuity by learning to assimilate the opposing forces he was faced with and therefore serves as an example of male power regulating female behavior. (Arthur 24) In Rose's novel, Zeus regulates female behavior by impregnating Danaë, which frees her from the harsh suppression of her father (Rose 5).

Hostility is created by Hesiodic ideas of sexuality because of the threat female power has on male domination. Females with a large amount of power, such as Pandora, are thought of as a source of evil and chaos. Pandora's attractiveness serves as a form of evil because she was created as a beautiful being and received as a gift, but then her curiosity leads to evils being unleashed upon the world (Gill). Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, is an example of a powerful female character that is regarded as an evil being that should be killed. The name Gorgon, meaning "the terrible one" suggests the common ideas of such creatures (Thalia Took). Perseus's first mission in The Oracle of Delphi is to slay Medusa in order to save his mother, Danaë, from King Polydectes. Medusa "did have a power that no man could fight. One look into her eyes, be dead or alive, and the warrior would turn instantly to stone." Medusa has a deadly form of power because "she had once been a beautiful human, but now lived on an island with two other Gorgons as nothing more than a monster" (Rose 15). Medusa's power she has over men in the novel demonstrates the extreme of Hesiod ideas. Perseus as the hero slays Medusa but keeps her head in order to reclaim the power she previously kept from him. Perseus kills the evil female figure in order to return back to his wife who fulfills his ideas of a beautiful domesticated wife. (Munich 32).

Andromeda is a more acceptable version of Medusa. She can be formed into an acceptable wife, but there is still an indication of power in her name. Since Andromeda means "Ruler of Men", there is a strong clue, that she will always maintain some Hesiodic feminine value (Munich 30). Andromeda does not allow Perseus to treat her as inferior to him in situations such as when he says, "You are beautiful, Princess. I am almost afraid to touch you for fear you'll break" and she responds with, "I'm not as fragile as you think" (Rose 68). Ancient women lacked political rights; therefore they were unable to attend assemblies or hold office. The way in which women had influence in society was through men (Spawforth). Andromeda understands that she is not going to be able to avoid her fate of being sacrificed to the sea serpent unless she obtains help from Perseus. Andromeda's beauty challenged Perseus and caused him to alter his plans. "His quest to kill the Gorgon and save his mother's life was a goal he would never abandon. But the lovely Andromeda in his arms needed his help, too" (Rose 43). Perseus is also willing to give up his own belongings before Andromeda's. "Perseus liked his horse, and he did not dare tell the old man to take Andromeda's for fear she would never stop complaining" (Rose 83). At the end of the novel Perseus leaves to return to home and save his mother. When Andromeda begs to come with him "he knew if he denied her, he would regret it later. On the other hand, Andromeda would only slow him down, and as history already proved

– she was usually nothing but trouble” (Rose 185).

The structure of the traditional romance novel also has a Hesiodic nature because it ends with a type of regulation of the female. When the heroine joins the hero at the end of a novel of this type, the heroine’s quest is contradicted because the union “extinguishes its own heroine, confining her within a story that ignores the full range of her concerns and abilities” (Regis 9-10). Rose does not entirely follow this pattern because Andromeda’s name will always contain a bit of resilient nature (Munich 30).

The Lyric Age of poetry began during the time period that classical Greece developed into a democratic city-state from 7th to early 4th centuries BC (Gill, Choral Lyric Poetry - Archaic Greece). The ideas of Homer and Hesiod stay consistent during this age, but a division develops between the aristocratic and middle class ideas. Since the main characters of Rose’s novel are a demi-god and princess of the upper class, the romance between them follows the styles of aristocratic poets during the Lyric Age. Aristocratic poets such as Sappho emphasized relationships of love, delicacy, and elegance (Arthur 40). Andromeda’s love for Perseus is described with a similar picturesque quality especially after they first meet, “The vision of the demi-god Perseus lingered upon her thoughts. His long hair glistening in the sunshine, his golden hawk-like eyes focused upon her “ (Rose 45). Ibycus and Anacreon were also prominent poets of this class and they used exaggeration and amplification to share views of love (Arthur 38). Risqué metaphors similar to those used by these poets are also used to describe or suggest the act of love between Perseus and Andromeda as “she rode him to the top of Mt. Olympus as if she were riding a stallion” (Rose 70). Aristocratic poets often used beautiful goddesses and heroines that emphasized passion and control as a playful tension instead of focusing on a larger conflict or struggle (Arthur 38-39). Andromeda’s resilient and independent nature conflicts with her passion for Perseus. Although she is infatuated by Perseus, her Hesiodic side tries to prevent her from succumbing to her emotions. Even after marriage, “she didn’t owe him anything. If he’d come thinking she would throw herself willingly at him, then he didn’t know her well at all. She had kept both her life and heart purposely guarded from him” (Rose 89). The love that Rose constructs between the characters is the opposite of the bourgeois, or middle class, poetry. The middle class poets incorporated ideas of a societal struggle into their writing. Love was viewed as destruction and associated with both violence and passion.

In a romance novel, there is usually some sort of barrier that serves as a reason the couple cannot marry. Since Andromeda and Perseus marry early in the novel “to move us forward on our quest”, the barrier continues to exist after marriage (Regis 32-33) (Rose 90). The barrier exists until Perseus completes his journey to kill Medusa and the sea serpent, then the characters are able to fully commit themselves to each other. Andromeda’s struggle between passion and control is apparent in the novel until Perseus gains her greater trust by saving her from the sea serpent (Rose 172-175).

Sigmund Freud also describes a combination of attraction and terror in his discussion of the taboo of virginity (Freud). As a virgin maiden, Andromeda expresses the male desire and fear of her as well (Munich 107). The taboo occurs because of the bitterness and pain associated with “defloration”. Freud believes that defloration can lead to one of two results; either the woman experiences a kind of “sexual bondage” causing her to be dependent on the male and bound into a lasting relationship, or the male unleashes hostility towards himself from the woman. Because of the fear of unleashing evil and hostility also described by Hesiod, Freud claims that

in some primitive cultures another male other than a woman's husband is assigned the task of taking a woman's virginity so the husband is not faced with danger. Andromeda begins the novel as a virgin who possesses a great amount of force within herself, powerful enough that she has the ability to channel the Oracle. After she sat upon the priestess' chair, "she understood why the priestess who channeled the oracle must be a virgin. It was because the channel of the oracle needed to give themselves, body and soul, to the force in order to bring it forth." The Oracle takes much of her power from her to the point "she is drained of her essence" (Rose 41-43). This event is important for Rose to include because it allows readers to understand the great amount of power the virgin Andromeda holds within herself. Andromeda is healed within a few days and her full resilience is intact. Perseus tells Andromeda he "could consummate this marriage very easily" and the reason for that is because he is a demi-god and his strength is beyond that of a man (Rose 67). His masculine strength and power is even stronger than the Hesiodic evil or chaos within Andromeda. Because his strength can suppress hers to a great enough extent, he is able to consummate the marriage and create a type of "sexual bondage" that draws them together. It is not until Andromeda learns he had played a trick on her to take her virginity that, "her anger still flared at Perseus and the little trick he had played on her last night." This anger doesn't compare to the love she feels for him, and at that point on, the novel is destined to have a happy ending.

Creating the sexual bond between the characters is the point of the romance novel that signifies the peak of attraction. The scene keeps the heroine and hero affected by each other for long enough to "surmount the barrier." After getting passed the barrier, the novel continues to follow the typical romantic structure by getting to the "Point of Ritual Death" where the union between hero and heroine seems impossible. Andromeda is found by her family and will be sacrificed to the sea serpent while Perseus is trying to kill Medusa. The characters eventually reunite, the hero saves the heroine, and they commit to one another and spend their lives happily together (Regis 30-38).

Although the novel has a happy ending, Andromeda's resilience will never entirely be tamed. Rose incorporates elements inspired by Homer, Hesiod, aristocratic Lyric Poets, and Freud within the novel to reinvent a classical Greek myth. The Oracle of Delphi has characters that exemplify these themes in a way that incorporates them into modern day in the form of the romance novel.