
To this day, American filmmakers and writers are infatuated with classical myth and its heroes. The multifarious modes of retelling classical myth, which demonstrate that each age has produced its own rewritings and its own constructions of classical antiquity, have turned into an important research field in American studies. However, the rewriting and revisioning of classical myth by female American fiction writers has not been thoroughly explored by literary and cultural scholars. While it is true that a few modernist and postmodernist woman writers, e.g. H. D., Toni Morrison, and Rita Dove, have received some attention with respect to their “work on myth” (Blumenberg), the nineteenth century is still an underexplored field. It is this research gap that Michaela Keck addresses in her pioneering book-length study. Discussing the innovative work on myth by American women writers between 1800 and 1900, such as C. M. Sedgwick, L. M. Child, E. Stoddard, E. S. Phelps and L. M. Alcott, Keck’s investigation yields fresh and rich results. Her book is based on her postdoctoral Habilitationsschrift and examines the innovative aesthetic, visual, and philosophical interests of nineteenth-century women novelists by presenting fiction that offers insights into American social, cultural, and gender history. It goes without saying that there remains much to be done on women’s work on myth and aesthetics in nineteenth-century fiction, but Keck’s study opens a wide field that invites further research on sentimental and historical American novels and the “re-visioning” (Adrienne Rich) and transformation of classical myth.

The study is subdivided into eight chapters and ends with an extended bibliography and a list of figures. Chapter 1, “Introduction,” questions several assumptions regarding classical myth, namely its “authoritative and male-dominated tradition that functions predominantly as a cultural tool that perpetuates hegemony, oppression, and inequality” (11). In contrast, Keck is interested in the potential of myth to subvert or confirm dominant cultural ideologies and in the ways nineteenth-century female writers made use of this potential. Distancing herself from psychoanalytical readings of women’s fiction, Keck’s book “focuses on and highlights women authors’ innovative and—at times cautious, at times daring—feminist re-narrations of myth within the specific context of nineteenth-century American society and culture” (12). Providing a kaleidoscopic overview of some of the most resonating mythological reconfigurations, the study “seeks to expand our current understanding of the specific conjuncture of myth theory and feminist thought in the context of nineteenth-century women’s fiction, as well as American and transatlantic literary and visual culture” (13). It is the combination of the women writers’ interest in the myriad versions of mythical stories and their visual traditions that makes this study topical. After all, it is the pictorial element, the images of myth which pervade ‘high’ art, i.e., painting and sculpture, as well as more popular forms such as tableaux vivants, illustrations in periodicals, and everyday objects, such as jewelry, home decorations, porcelain, etc., that characterize the cultural contexts out of which nineteenth-century women’s work on myth grew. The second part of the Introduction reviews existing research on women’s re-imaginings of classical myth and also draws attention to the fact that “the engagement with classical myth seems to be a predominantly, but not exclusively, white undertaking until the second half of the nineteenth century, when African American women authors and feminists such as Frances E. W. Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, or Pauline
E. Hopkins entered the literary marketplace” (15). Repeatedly criticizing the new historicist approach due to its lack of aesthetic interests and its failure to examine rhetorical, stylistic and formal complexity, Keck underlines her own interest in “the narrative and pictorial aesthetic experiments of writers such as Sedgwick, Child, Stoddard, Phelps, and Alcott, like Louis, Barker, and Putzi” and considers “their use of classical myth to be a method of cultural critique and alternative social visions” (22).

Chapter 2, “Myth, Pathos Formulae, and Women’s Revisionist Mythmaking,” is an extended theory chapter which introduces and connects two major anthropological myth theories, that of philosopher Hans Blumenberg and that of cultural scholar Aby Warburg. Blumenberg’s theory of mythical stories is important because it underlines the subversive potential of classical myth. According to Blumenberg, myth functions “to depotentiate the terror of what humankind sees as uncanny and threatening” (27). He considers intellectual labor of any work on myth as based on abstraction and logos (and not on irrational and subconscious forces). Warburg developed his concept of Pathosformeln, i.e. of iconographical and emotive expressions that testify to the struggle of the polarities of affects, in connection with art and visual culture. His pathos formulae and theory of the polarity of the symbol “make accessible firstly, the inherited, collectively-remembered pictorial elements that are central to these novels; and, secondly, the contemporary (visual) culture and cross-cultural influences that shape and transform myth and its novel figurations, their functions, and meanings” (23). Neither scholar considers myth as the opposite of rationality and logos; they see myth “as a means of overcoming irrationality in a process of logos” (23). The fact that both Blumenberg and Warburg probe into collective cultural implications and help to overcome the common equation of women/myth/irrationality vs. men/logos/rationality makes their theories attractive for Keck’s investigation into women’s revisionist myth making.

After offering an excellent review of Blumenberg’s and Warburg’s myth theories, Chapter 2 elaborates upon this backdrop how novels, together with their formal-aesthetic-stylistic experiments, can be studied within their cultural contexts: “classical myth […] offers nineteenth-century women writers a medium through which they can convey aesthetic as well as socio-political concerns, therefore intertwining the thematic and the formal-aesthetic levels” (48). The affectively charged patterns of the pathos formulae used by women writers “continue to stir the sensual, emotional, and intellectual knowledge derived from nineteenth-century American society’s collective cultural memory” (49); this makes their fiction “accessible to a large audience regardless of their differing degrees or even complete lack of classical erudition and education” (48). Keck contends that nineteenth-century women’s re-narrations of ancient myth “tends towards inviting the unknown and uncanny for the combined purposes of pain relief, socio-cultural critique, moral exhortation, and even punishment” (51). These women perform as Nietzschean Nabi-leaders (prophets) by releasing emotions and sensibilities that dominant nineteenth-century American socio-cultural practices sought to control and by “conjuring up otherwise curbed aspects of the uncanny and unfamiliar in order to voice socio-cultural critique” (52). Keck’s emphasis on the conjunction of word and image in her exploration of women’s revisioning of classical myth is doubtlessly one of the strengths of her study; another asset is her treatment of the question ‘what exactly did classical myth offer women writers? Since classical myth was highly esteemed in nineteenth-century America, it lent women writers greater visibility and let them participate in a major discourse, which empowered them to express them-
selves and lent their own writing, with its critiques and alternative visions of nineteenth-century America, prominence, authority, and significance:

As a way of tackling their socio-cultural and psychological grievances, ancient myth allows them to consult as well as rely on its authoritative—because apparently detached—exterior point of view, while it also legitimizes their different and nonconformist perspectives, their larger-than-life heroines, and, ultimately, their resistance to and rebellion against a restrictive society. (58)

The five analysis chapters that follow underscore the affective and pictorial realms of women’s rewritings of classical myth and focus on the emotive and visual immediacy of their erudite, as well as highly accessible, texts which occupy “an intriguing intermediate space between the nineteenth-century categories of high and low culture” and are rich “in images of cultural memory and alternative social visions” (59). Chapter 3, “Dionysian Frenzies in Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s A New England Tale,” examines the interplay of the Dionysian and Apollonian forces underlying Sedgwick’s 1822 debut novel. Sedgwick revives the figure of a classical maenad in the character of “crazy Bet,” who is responsible for erratic eruptions of Dionysian frenzies and ambiguously marks anarchical disorder as well as life-sustaining resistance. Sedgwick’s anticipations of Nietzsche’s notion of the Dionysian depict the social and Calvinistic restraints that inhibit the female protagonists while simultaneously illustrating the growth of a healthy and independent New England democratic society.

Chapter 4, “The Trials of Psyche: Ancient Mysteries in Lydia Maria Child’s Philothea,” offers an in-depth reading of Child’s 1836 novel. It presents a transcultural and transnational project that attempts to establish a female genealogy of women’s empowerment and education through both positive and exhortative self-images. To achieve this, Child renarrates the Psyche myth, focusing on the figure of Athena by foregrounding women’s experience and intellect as well as matriarchal elements in the ancient mysteries. Her Philothea is Child’s earthly Psyche who has a positive self-image and whose representation resists the rich and varied visual traditions of the Psyche myth. Chapter 5, “Jason and the Sphinx: Elizabeth Stoddard’s Discrepant New England Mythologies,” deals with the multilayered, fragmented re-writing of the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece in Stoddard’s novel Two Men (1865). Omitting Euripides’ famous figure of Medea and the infanticide, Stoddard divides the character of Medea across several women figures presenting otherness and monstrosity in terms of class, race, and gender. Stoddard’s repelling or ravishing foreign female protagonists are read as caught up in their struggle for self-possession. While the two female protagonists Sarah and Philippa retain vestiges of the old social order, especially the practice of hero worship, they differ from the interracial Charlotte, who is symbolized by the African calla lily. This difference points to the complicity of women in the exclusion of African Americans from their socio-political ascent. Stoddard develops a “floral grotesque”—as Keck calls it—for her Medeas: an aesthetics that subverts the popular saccharine pathos of Victorian flower language through satire and unprecedented sexual agency.

Chapter 6, “Isiac Womanhood in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s The Story of Avis,” examines Phelps’s re-writing of the myth of Isis and Osiris in The Story of Avis (1877). Womanhood and women’s potential are fathomed through an exploration of women’s relationship with non-human nature and its processes of transformation, including nurturing as well as destructive forces. Combining Neoplatonic and Egyptosophic thought and iconography, it is through Avis/
Isis Sphinx-like generative and compassionate powers that Ostrander/Osiris is resurrected. By keeping the memory of the goddess alive, Phelps links Avis with the cause of African American emancipation and interrupts the male-centered mythology. Chapter 7, “Galatea’s Sufferings in Louisa May Alcott’s *A Modern Mephistopheles*,” outlines Alcott’s innovative re-narration of the Pygmalion myth. *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) discusses women’s victimization in patriarchal societies and the pathological and violent aspects in Pygmalion’s creative-educational act as well as Galatea’s suffering, thus providing a critique of nineteenth-century American devaluation and oppression of women. Finally, Chapter 8, “With Pathos and Logos,” serves as a conclusion which succinctly summarizes the rich results the study has yielded. It highlights once again the aesthetic-formal experiments and the many-faceted and unorthodox engagement of these women writers with social issues of their time and their deep concern with gender inequality and women’s intellectual potential. At the center of their complex re-visioning of ancient myth is the creation and dissemination of corrective visions of ‘woman’ and her ‘nature’ in patriarchal society, of alternative moral orders, social codes, and a woman-centered justice. But Keck also detects more somber tones in connection with women’s liberation, abolition, and general social progress at the threshold of modernity. For instance, Stoddard’s and Alcott’s novels attest to the fact that writers’ perspectives of African Americans often remain hampered by their own racial biases: “while they wish for the solidarity among women of all races and classes, more often than not this solidarity remains lacking, if not outright utopian as, e.g., Elizabeth Stoddard reveals in *Two Men*” (330).

Keck’s erudite book is an essential contribution to American Studies, adding much-needed research to existing investigations into nineteenth-century fiction, constructions of antiquity, and gender studies. While one would have loved to read more on the revisioning of classical myth by African American women writers, and while Keck’s criticism of the new historicist approach seems, at times, scathing (especially since Keck herself underlines the importance of the cultural context for her analysis of nineteenth-century texts and their visual iconographies), her combined analysis of inherited narrative and visual iconographical expressions in women’s fictional re-visions of ancient myth deserves praise. The fact that her book encompasses much visual material and a plethora of very informative footnotes deserves mentioning as well.

Gabriele Rippl (Bern)