

“IN BITTER SAFETY I AWAKE”:  
THE CLASSICS AS TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

By

KATHRINE CHRISTY

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Dr. Shanyn Fiske

And approved by

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Dr. Shanyn Fiske

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Dr. Holly Blackford

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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by KATHRINE CHRISTY

Thesis Director:

Dr. Shanyyn Fiske

Multiple colleges in recent years have experienced an outbreak of student protest against teaching ancient Greek and Roman texts. The objections frame the texts as too traumatic for students to experience. In this thesis I explore how Classicists and others in the wider culture are responding to such objections, as well as what such objections suggest about how our culture confronts (or does not confront) the traumatic experience of reading a text. Drawing on Sebastian Junger’s *Tribe*, as well as Harold Bloom’s *Map of Misreading*, I argue that the popular oversimplification of the trauma offered by Homer or Ovid is in fact an attempt to access the emotional experience offered by such texts, and that such texts can in fact fulfill a function of providing meaning through the traumatic experience of reading that they offer, and that the intense responses to such texts prove their continuing relevance and their necessity. I argue also that such texts can be immensely helpful in the processing of real-world trauma.

### **Introduction: Trauma Colonization**

At Columbia University, in 2015, the teaching of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the school's Literature Humanities course met with significant opposition from certain students. The students in this class had been instructed to read Ovid's stories of Daphne and Persephone, both of which feature intimations of sexual violence. At a school forum, a student, "as a survivor of sexual assault," objected to the text, at which point she "described being triggered while reading such detailed accounts of rape throughout the work." The student said that she "did not feel safe" in the class. After this incident, a Columbia student group, the Multicultural Affairs Advisory Board, promptly took up the cause of vilifying classical texts generally. The group claimed that "these texts, wrought with histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression, can be difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of color, or a student from a low-income background." The students of this group accused the "texts of the Western canon" of containing "triggering and offensive material" (Johnson, et al).

This incident at Columbia has hardly been the only instance of students taking issue with Classical texts. A 2017 article from *Inside Higher Ed* details the protests of students at Reed College against the teaching of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, an ancient Roman novel, in the school's Hum 110 course. This course is intended to "lay the foundations for students' future studies in the Humanities." But laying such foundations is becoming increasingly difficult to do, with various student groups objecting increasingly to the study of classical texts. The students at Reed, specifically a group called "Reedies Against Racism," objected to *The Golden Ass* on the grounds that the

readings in Hum 110 are “too Eurocentric,” and the course structure “largely ignores how these works may have been used over time to perpetuate violence against people of color.” Groups of students thereafter went on to disrupt continually the Hum 110 class with “silent protests.” One will note that the Reedies Against Racism were not enrolled in the class, and the students who actually were found their presence disruptive and bothersome (Flaherty, “Occupation of Hum 110”). This is a clear illustration of the attempt to colonize trauma, an attempt by the Reedies to speak over and appropriate the experience of the students in Hum 110.

One will note that all of these objections are extremely vague, insisting that every text of the “Western canon” is “triggering and offensive,” going on to insist that “students of color” and those from “low-income backgrounds” are presumably feeling offended by classical texts at any given moment. Significantly, no specific students take responsibility for these sentiments, and still less responsibility for coming up with a workable solution to what they see as a problem. The incidents at Reed and Columbia are therefore instructive. The students in the Columbia incident exemplify a fixation on sanitizing the college classroom, of making such an environment “safe,” without making much effort to define the concept of safe or unsafe as it pertains to the classroom. The suggestion that one should feel safe from discussing uncomfortable ideas in a college classroom is itself a curious one. These vague objections rob individuals from marginalized groups of a chance to engage with any of these texts themselves. More importantly, these efforts prevent both the students themselves and others from experiencing or processing their trauma, instead seeking to insulate themselves from difficult emotional experiences.

This paper concerns itself with why, exactly, this is happening. What seems to be at work in these incidents is, paradoxically, the desire to be traumatized, specifically to be traumatized through the experience of reading Ovid or Homer. The effort to sanitize is itself a craving for being harmed by the text. What becomes clear after examining such incidents as the ones at Reed and Columbia is that there is a desire to be traumatized by these texts, and that these students, as well as others engaging in the modern reception of these texts, are engaging in acts of misreading. I will here be drawing on Harold Bloom's theory of misreading, and I argue that the misreading efforts on display in places like Reed and Columbia are simultaneously efforts at inducing the psychological response of trauma. These students are effectively engaging in an act of trauma colonization.

The term "trauma colonization" is one I have felt the necessity of developing. When I say that these students are engaging in acts of colonizing trauma, I mean to say that these students are co-opting the concept of being traumatized. The students approached these texts with assumptions that certain groups of people would find them offensive, and these students insisted they were speaking on behalf of these people. It becomes clear, when thinking in terms of these efforts as acts of colonization, that these students rather wanted actively to be themselves traumatized, and they felt they needed to do so by co-opting other voices. These students have effectively colonized--that is to say, claimed as their own--the theoretically traumatizing experiences of others with these texts. To my knowledge, these incidents at Columbia and Reed have not yet been spoken of in such terms, but it is important that we think of them as such. When we do begin to think in such terms, we can determine more productive means of dealing with the trauma

of reading the classics. We can then have individuals willing to engage with the traumatic act of reading these texts for themselves, in a manner which will enable the development of their own meaningful experience of trauma, rather than resorting to the co-opting and colonization of other experiences.

This notion will be illuminated by my use of Sebastian Junger's *Tribe*, in which Junger makes an argument for the desire of people to have trauma that gives their lives shape and meaning, with a particular focus on the trauma of combat veterans. I am here applying Junger's ideas to the reading of classics in the classroom, as a means of offering a controlled environment in which students can experience the trauma of these texts, as an act which will provide these students with vital self-knowledge and a deeper understanding of the importance of trauma. It is clear, as exemplified by the incidents that I have discussed, that these students want that understanding, but the means by which they have tried to gain it have been wanting. The only productive way forward is to bring this desire to consciousness, and proceed accordingly. I am using Junger particularly as a means not only of understanding what is happening with these students and their responses to these texts, but as a means of demonstrating why the continued presence of the classics is so vital, and why they are in fact needed more than ever, and that they can fulfill the need for the traumatic so clearly demonstrated at Columbia and Reed.

Junger's argument revolves around this desire for the traumatic, and the exploration of what happens when we lack this experience and understanding, and that the lack of this often leads to serious issues with both society at large and the individual psyche. In his introduction, Junger explains what his text is about: "It's about why--for

many people--war feels better than peace...Humans don't mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what they mind is not feeling necessary" (xxi). It is the very feeling of being unnecessary which Junger describes that seems to have motivated these students to colonize the trauma of others, of rape victims or people of color or people from "low-income backgrounds." If one frames these incidents in terms of Junger's thesis, one comes to the conclusion that the lack of openness to negative emotional experience is the problem from which these students are primarily suffering, and they clearly demonstrate a need for such experience. The solution, then, becomes a willingness to "lean into" the trauma which Ovid and Homer offer, an openness to the discomfort and even pain that is often involved with reading texts so committed to depicting the human condition. Josie Billington, in *Is Literature Healthy?*, writes that, "the chief frustration and sadness of my own teaching life was that the discipline to which I belonged had, in part and at worst, lost a sense that literature might speak to humans' deepest needs" (3). The responses of students like the ones at Reed and Columbia speak to this loss, and the understanding of the valuable experience of trauma that these texts offer will indeed restore this sense that literature fulfills fundamental human needs.

### **The Problem: A Desire and Unwillingness to Be Traumatized by the Text**

Harold Bloom, in *A Map of Misreading*, argues that “reading...is a belated and all-but-impossible act, and if strong is always a misreading” (3). Bloom does not suggest that misreading is a wholly negative phenomenon--in fact, the act of misreading is the entry point into engagement with the text. This act of “strong reading” is amply demonstrated by the contemporary reception of Homer’s *Odyssey*, particularly in how it has been handled by its latest translator, Penn Classics Professor Emily Wilson. In a 2017 *New Yorker* article, Wilson frames Homer’s text almost exclusively in terms of how, in her view, the text does violence to its female characters, which by implication is framed as violence to the women reading it. Wilson expresses doubts about what she sees as the desire of readers that Penelope “fit the ideal of the empowered woman.” She goes on to cast aspersions on the idea of the *homophrosyne*, or “like-mindedness” of Odysseus and Penelope, a much-celebrated element of the text that is often understood to represent an equality between Penelope and her husband, writing that

“It is not usually mentioned that he [Odysseus] brings it [*homophrosyne*] up only when talking to an impressionable teenage girl, Nausicaa, whom he avoids telling that he’s married, and whom he has a strong ulterior motive for buttering up, since his life depends on her help. (We should know by now that powerful older men do not always tell young women the truth.)”

Wilson goes on to insist that those who praise Penelope’s wit and cunning are engaging in a “sentimentalized” reading of the character, “ignoring certain facts about her social



position.” Bloom writes of the struggle of the poet with the poets that have come before them, an Oedipal struggle of the son against the father, a struggle with which Wilson is dealing on no less than two fronts: with Homer himself as the originator of the text, and with the translators that have preceded her, as indicated by her attitudes about earlier translations. Bloom says that “to live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father” (19). Wilson’s commentary on her efforts to translate Homer, and especially her commentary on previous translations, illustrate this effort to “rewrite the father,” in Bloom’s words. Wilson is certainly trying to rewrite the “fathers,” that is the previous all- male translators of Homer’s epic, with her own efforts, and she simultaneously wrestles with Homer himself.

Wilson’s reading of the text is one in which “Odysseus has many choices, many identities,” while Penelope has only one: “she can wait for Odysseus, or she can marry someone else.” “Her keen mind is not liberating,” Wilson insists, “it keeps her stuck,” as Wilson sees it, in sharp contrast to the freedom which Odysseus seems to enjoy. Wilson goes on to argue that the scene of Penelope and Odysseus’s unwitting reunion is rather a scene of patriarchal horror, “the horror of being a woman who experiences her attachment to her husband as the destruction of herself.” Wilson claims to be disturbed by Homer’s use of metaphor in this scene, a metaphor involving likening Penelope’s tears to snow melting in the spring, framing this as Homer depicting the loss of female identity as a natural and necessary process (“A Translator’s Reckoning With the Women of the *Odyssey*”). Bloom speaks of the “poetic influence” as “necessarily misprision,” and there can be no more illuminating example than the effort at translation. Bloom writes of the

“taking or doing amiss of one’s burden,” the burden which is here the effort to translate, to wrestle with both the preceding transactions and the original poet’s intent. ”It is to be expected,” Bloom goes on, “that such a process of malformation and misinterpretation will, at the very least, produce deviations in style between strong poets” (20). We can observe such a phenomenon at work in Wilson’s efforts to supply what she sees as this new interpretation of the text as a patriarchal horror story, that which she assumes has been missed by her translating forefathers, that which she intimates has been missed even by the original text itself. Wilson’s reading is in effect the act of misreading of which Bloom writes, one which may represent, at least to Wilson herself, the only novel or innovative way of approaching a text so often translated.

It is clear from this article that Wilson is framing Homer’s text as a sort of patriarchal trauma inflicted both on its female characters as well as herself and other women who engage with the text. Her frequent references to real-world woman-specific traumas (a woman losing identity in a marriage; a young woman being exploited by an older man), indicate the desire to engage with these texts from a place of traumatic experience, a desire which can be met only through framing the text as problematic and even sinister. Wilson opts to frame the incidents of Nausicaa and Penelope reuniting with Odysseus in a particularly negative light, dismissing other possible readings of these events in order to experience the text as traumatic. This effort mirrors the desire illustrated by the students at Columbia to see the *Metamorphoses* as a text doing violence to its audience, particularly its female audience.

Wilson goes on to position her translation as one that more accurately portrays the suffering of Penelope. Wilson, by her own admission, is making an effort to intensify Penelope's trauma, as a means of producing an in-road into the text for those seeking the a traumatic core in Homer. Wilson's rendering of Penelope is, as all translations are, influenced by circumstance, and the primary circumstance with which Wilson seems concerned is that of patriarchal trauma, and by framing the text in such a way, she treats the text as a means of speaking to and processing such a trauma. Of Penelope's pain, and her efforts to translate it, Wilson writes:

“In translating this passage, I wanted to bring out both the beauty and the precision of the imagery, and the horror--a common, relatable horror...I wanted the reader of my English to feel as I do in reading the Greek: for Penelope, and with her pain, rather than prettifying or trivializing her grief” (“A Translator's Reckoning”).

This insistence on Wilson's part that her translation departs radically from others in this respect, invoking the idea that other translations have sanitized this scene, makes it worthwhile to examine Wilson's translation of the scene in the context of previous translations. One can place Wilson's translation beside that of Robert Fagles and Robert Fitzgerald. In Fagles' translation, Penelope's

“tears flowed and soaked her cheeks/ as the heavy snow melts down from the high mountain ridges...and the snow, melting, swells the rivers to overflow their banks--so she dissolved in tears, streaming down her lovely cheeks...” (Lines 236-241).

Fitzgerald renders these lines as

“the skin/ of her pale face grew moist the way pure snow/ softens and glistens on the mountains...and, as the snow melts, mountain streams run full: so her white cheeks were wetted by these tears...” (240-6).

All three of the translations maintain the imagery of Penelope’s tears as melting snow, and Fagles echoes Wilson’s imagery of Penelope “dissolving.” Curiously, it seems to be Fitzgerald who resists “prettying” the imagery of Penelope’s grief, describing her as merely “pale” and having “white cheeks,” rather than the terms like “lovely” used in both Fagles and Wilson’s translations. The Greek uses the phrase *kala pareion*, indicating that the original text is in fact “prettifying” Penelope’s suffering by making note of her “beautiful cheeks.” Wilson’s translation differs only in how she introduces the image, with Penelope’s “face melting” (206). Wilson notes, in her article, that she sees the phrase *teketo kala pereia* as meaning “her cheeks themselves dissolved,” and this phrase seems to be the one of which the innovation of her text hinges. Yet even this imagery is featured in Fagles translation, wherein he also uses the language of dissolution to translate Penelope’s weeping.

That Wilson chooses to frame her translation as one which differs significantly in terms of how this scene is rendered speaks less to a difference in translation and more to a difference in understanding of the audience. Unlike Fitzgerald and Fagles, Wilson seems to write this article, and reflect on her own translation efforts, with a potential audience like the students from Reed and Columbia in mind. Wilson seems concerned that, if indeed Classics are being ignored or considered irrelevant now, it is because of previous efforts to sanitize the text. Wilson depicts herself as a translator willing to

capture the “disturbing” nature of the text, with an understanding on her part of the need for readers to be traumatized, to be disturbed, by their experience with reading Homer. The difference between Fagles’ translation and Wilson’s is not necessarily one of translation, but one of who, exactly, these translators are trying to draw to the text. Wilson herself seems, on some level, to understand what Junger writes of in *Tribe*, the desire for the traumatic and difficult, and she seems willing to deliver to that need. Homer’s text itself seems to have understood Junger’s thesis a millenia or so before Junger put pen to paper: that humans need the sense of meaning and purpose provided by the traumatic experience, even if it can be achieved only vicariously through the experience of a traumatic text. In this sense, perhaps Wilson’s article is rather continuing this notion than detracting from it. Wilson’s translation efforts, at least in her estimation, seem to seek an intensification of the trauma at the text’s core, particularly for Penelope, that which will reach and speak to those seeking out that difficulty. There is an idea at work in Wilson’s article that those who want to access the trauma of Homer’s epic may find previous translations wanting in that respect, a problem Wilson addresses by framing the text explicitly as a traumatic one, and allowing this idea to guide her rendering.

The *New Yorker* article was not the last time in which Wilson framed the text in such traumatic terms. In a 2018 article for *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Wilson was interviewed by fellow Penn Classicist Peter Struck, and both lament the text’s lack of political correctness, a framing which contrasts sharply with Wilson’s efforts in her *New Yorker* article, with the *Gazette* article framing the traumatic nature of the text as problematic rather than productive. Struck notes the attitude his students have toward

Homer: the sense he gets from his students is “that we, studying these old materials that sometimes get locked onto by conservative social elements, we must need some sort of help to see these things in a more “woke” way” (“An *Odyssey* for Our Time”). It is notable that Struck chooses to focus on the students’ perception that classical texts are “locked onto by conservative social elements,” as this speaks to the desire illustrated by the Reed and Columbia students to associate these texts with trauma. These students often perceive conservative strains of thought as an attack, as a violence done to them, and Struck’s comments indicate that this feeling has been transferred onto older texts, which are assumed to be favored by those who prefer older social orders. Struck and Wilson seem to be framing the classics as uniquely traumatic with the same awareness of students’ desires to be “attacked” by these works, to make an assumption of offense or threat. However, such an approach risks being far less productive than the approach used by Wilson’s *New Yorker* article , which is framed as Wilson trying to confront what she sees as the unsavory elements of the text head-on. The *Gazette* interview rather has the professors framed as “needing help,” framing them in the context of an odd sense of helplessness which only their students can resolve, and by implication, the texts themselves as needing help being more “progressive,” so as to avoid making the students uncomfortable in any way. There is here a suggestion of the effort to avoid the trauma of the text by attempting to apply a modern political context which is unlikely to help students in seeing the text clearly. Such framing also buries the students’ need for the trauma of the text, when the more productive response, and one far more helpful for the students in question, would be to embrace the trauma of the text, as Wilson hints she tries

to do in her *New Yorker* article. In this context, Wilson's article in the *New Yorker* about her translation efforts seems almost to be a response to the perceptions of Struck's students, an effort to respond to this trauma-desire with a text that, in Wilson's estimation, more accurately and faithfully renders the traumatic core of the original text.

Bloom's idea of the misreading, with my framing of such as a means of accessing a text, as a means of meeting the desire for a traumatic experience, is common with responses to Homer's *Odyssey*. Such efforts often hinge on misreadings of Penelope specifically, and they are not limited to Wilson's perspective on the text. In a 2007 article in which Margaret Atwood was interviewed about her book *The Penelopiad*, a retelling of the *Odyssey* from Penelope's perspective, the author of the article, Sarah Hemming, praised Atwood for "rescuing" Penelope, dismissed as a feminist nightmare by Hemming, because she spends the entirety of the epic "weeping and weaving" ("Don't Let Her Be Misunderstood"). That Hemming chooses specifically to focus on Penelope's pain is significant, and indicates a desire for access to the specifically female trauma of Homer's text. This effort to read the text as a patriarchal trauma is especially significant given the article's discussion of Atwood's book, and the element on which Atwood fixates: the slaughter of the the female servants by Odysseus and Telemachus. Like Wilson, Hemming and Atwood are seeking out the trauma of the text, are attempting in some way to process and understand that trauma. Hemming's effort seems like an oversimplification, with its disregard of Penelope's intelligence and fortitude, focusing instead on her emotional life. This is a significant indicator of trauma-seeking, as Homer spends much time outlining Penelope's intellectual efforts: Fagles' translation, in Book 2,

has Penelope cleverly exploiting expectations of women, dubbed “the matchless queen of cunning” by the suitor Antinous. She is “building each man’s hopes/ dangling promises, dropping hints to each/ but all the while with something else in mind...” Her weaving trick is described as “her latest masterpiece of guile” (97-101). She is “quick to exploit the gifts Athena gave her/ a skilled hand for elegant work, a fine mind/ and subtle wiles too...” The suitors have “never heard the like” of Penelope, and “no one could equal her for intrigue.” She wins “great renown for herself” through her schemes (128-139). That Hemming makes no mention of these efforts on Penelope’s part illustrates her focus on the trauma which Penelope experiences in the text. Hemming seems to display some aggravation over Penelope’s “weeping” and frames her as a “doormat,” which illustrates an effort at misreading in order to elicit from herself the strong emotional reaction to the text constitutive of the effort to seek out trauma. Atwood’s book is framed in this article in the same manner in which media outlets have framed Wilson’s translation of the *Odyssey*--as a necessary intervention with an inherently traumatic text perceived as having its trauma too long avoided. Hemming is deliberately seeking a traumatic element in the text as a point of entry. There is a consistent effort at work to read Penelope as a helpless victim and an utterly passive character, in an effort to contextualize real-world trauma that is specific to women. This article, as with the interview between Wilson and Struck, is demonstrating the need to be traumatized by Homer’s epic, but it seems unaware of this need, rather framing the text as something from which one needs to detach because of its traumatic nature, rather than the confrontation of trauma for which Wilson says she aims in her own article. Hemming’s efforts to portray Penelope as a



passive victim draws on the concept of the misreading, which might be more productive if consciously engaged with rather than treating the text with what sometimes seems like outright contempt. Hemming's efforts are similar to those of the students at Reed and Columbia, particularly the latter, in which no questions are asked about what might be gained from the pain inflicted on the reader by a text like the *Metamorphoses*, or Homer's epic, simultaneously desiring its assault while thinking of oneself as resistant to it.

### **The Solution: Leaning into the Traumatic Experience of a Text**

These responses to the figure of Penelope in particular, and Homer's epic generally, are demonstrative of Junger's thesis. There is a clear desire to be traumatized by the text at work here, or at the very least an understanding that others, that a potential audience, desires such a traumatic interaction with the text, illustrating what Junger writes of when he writes of the need for a traumatic experience which provides meaning and understanding. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of Junger's *Tribe* is his discussion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which it is immensely important to apply to the traumatic texts like that of Homer and Ovid, framed so often as they are as being dangerous because they offer re-traumatization experiences. Junger speaks of the problem of PTSD from a perspective of evolutionary purpose, particularly in terms of flashbacks, which he argues "serve to remind you of the danger that's out there--a "highly efficient single-event survival-learning mechanism," as one researcher termed it" (74). This framework for understanding triggers and flashbacks is particularly vital in terms of the reactions students had to texts like the *Metamorphoses*. The initial objection to the text at Columbia was raised by a rape survivor, who seemed to experience the very idea of the text as a sort of "re-traumatizing." Indeed, perhaps reading such a text for a rape survivor is exactly that. This, however, is a strength of the text rather than a failure, as it has been framed by these students and by the discussions of classical texts which have been included here. The issue with such an incident is the obliteration of agency on the part of the trauma sufferer, which can only cause greater damage to the psyche at a point during which healing should be occurring. No where in such discussions of the text is the

idea that leaning into, that embracing, the repetition of trauma which Ovid offers may actually help victims, by allowing them to process their trauma in a controlled way that encourages confrontation rather than damaging avoidance.

It is illuminating, in this context, to look at Junger's discussion of the Mende warriors who, after having fought in the civil wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone, were branded with the label of victimhood after the arrival of relief workers. As Junger notes, "these people committed terrible acts of violence during their wars, and many of them felt enormously guilty about it, but they were never able to work through those feelings because their victim status eclipsed more accurate and meaningful understandings of violence" (99). It is important here to apply this concept to the inception of the incident at Columbia, specifically the student who survived sexual assault. While the experience of being a sexual assault survivor and the survivor of a war in which one actively committed atrocities are qualitatively different, the impact of the victimhood lens is the same. The Columbia student thought of Ovid's text as something which must be contained because her experience of it was one of re-victimization, and one can understand how damaging such a view is through the application of Junger's theory. The "victim status" of which Junger writes is, in the Columbia case, also preventing any deeper understanding of the violence in Ovid's text, and this response deprives both the survivor herself and other trauma survivors of a chance to engage with Ovid in a manner which encourages meaningful emotional and intellectual growth, missing the opportunity provided by Ovid to process traumatic experience. This is similar to the ways in which the narrative of victimhood, as Junger argues, deprives the Mende warriors of a chance to process and

properly integrate their trauma into themselves. Junger makes a vital distinction by noting that “one can be deeply traumatized...without being viewed through the lens of victimhood.” Junger writes of this in the context of the deleterious effects that expanded disability status often has on the self-image of veterans, who are given no opportunity to be agentic after returning home from war. A similar phenomenon is at work among students who feel attacked by Ovid and Homer--a vicious cycle of self-victimization (or self re -victimization) which further precludes the necessary effort to become agentic and to exercise as much power as possible over one’s own life. The efforts at colonizing the trauma offered by these texts, on the part of the students at Reed and Columbia, is an unconscious effort at accessing trauma that gives necessary meaning and shape to one’s experience of life. But because the effort remains unconscious, it leans heavily toward the unproductive, to the effort to censor, sanitize, or in some way “cover up” these texts and the upsetting realities they often confront. Should this desire for trauma, for the contextualization of prior traumas, be brought to consciousness, such a force can be marshalled in the efforts to make life meaningful, and to successfully integrate the traumatic experience into one’s life.

It is helpful here to discuss how Junger writes of the Sun Dance, a Lakota ceremony intended to reintegrate warriors into society after their traumatic combat experiences. The ceremony’s central purpose is the deliberate infliction of and recapitulation of pain. Reading Homer and Ovid, for the survivors of traumas, both war-inflicted and otherwise, and for those needing an outlet for trauma-need, can serve a

similar purpose. Reading classical texts for the purposes of feeling pain, for the purpose of suffering, is in effect its own kind of Sun Dance, the pain of which Junger describes:

“...dancers have wooden skewers driven through the skin of their chests. Leather thongs are tied to the skewers and then attached to a tall pole at the center of the dance ground. To a steady drumbeat, the dancers shuffle in a circle and lean back on the thongs until, after many hours, the skewers finally tear free.”

That there is a deliberate infliction of pain upon the self is the vital component of the ceremony, an effort at repeating the trauma through which one has gone in order to more fully understand what it has to impart. Leaning into the trauma which classical texts have to offer can potentially serve the same purpose--the conscious infliction of pain in order to access the wisdom which results from suffering. Gomez, a veteran with which Junger discussed the ceremony, describes the results of the Sun Dance:“I had this incredible feeling of euphoria and strength, like I could do anything. That’s when the healing takes place” (119). While Gomez is spoken of specifically because he is a veteran dealing with combat trauma, this concept of repeating and revisiting one’s trauma, one’s pain, is something which can be potentially immensely healing for all manner of trauma sufferers, and this Sun Dance experience can be achieved through the reading of texts like that of Homer or Ovid. Healing might take place if, as when one subjects themselves to the pain and suffering of the Sun Dance, one subjects themselves also to the traumatic experience of reading Ovid, when the experience is embraced rather than insulated against.

In “Trauma: Theory--Reading (and) Literary Theory in the Wake of Trauma,” Tom Toremans notes, in his discussion of the development of the PTSD diagnosis, that “this recognition does not seem to have produced a more complete understanding of the phenomenon” of trauma, and the idea that one may in fact seek out the traumatic deliberately is the least understood element of all (333). Toremans goes on to say that he is surprised by the “tentative nature of the addition of ‘literature’ to the list of discursive practices involved in the radical thinking through of trauma and its dislocating potential,” indicating that not only is the active desire for the traumatic hardly understood, but the role which literature can play in meeting that need is also not being considered in the manner it deserves to be (334). Toremans goes on to write of the “ethically charged ‘new mode of reading,’ responding to the demand of the language of trauma,” and that certain texts have a “traumatic core” and “consequently they defy and demand our witnessing...” (337). Toremans is writing of theoretical texts, but this idea of the “traumatic core” is illuminated by contemporary responses to Homer and Ovid, texts which have at their hearts the experience of the traumatic, which demands the witnessing of an audience, one that would be far better served by meeting that trauma head-on rather than evading it. Toremans’ article is helpful in understanding what the stakes are in terms of how people are responding to Ovid and Homer--that not only might the embrace of the trauma offered by these texts be better for the individuals who interact with them, but that this might aid in our societal understanding of the traumatic.

Some efforts are at work embracing the trauma depicted by Ovid, and there are those who seem to understand, as Toremans does, the role literature might play in trauma

and its processing. In an article entitled “Translation in the Age of #MeToo,” Sewanee Classics professor Stephanie McCarter discusses her effort to translate the *Metamorphoses*, and the ways in which Ovid depicts sexual violence. McCarter discusses Ovid’s story of the Sun, who assaults a mortal woman, citing Ovid’s Latin, in which the phrase *vim passa est* is used to describe the encounter. *Vim passa est* indicates the use of force, implying that Ovid is aware that an act of violence is occurring, even if he might lack the modern language used to contextualize rape (Parrish). McCarter’s claim is that previous translators have attempted to obfuscate the violence intrinsic to the text, which indicates an effort on her part to lean into, rather than draw back from, the trauma of the text. McCarter notes that, in teaching the texts to her students, she often appeals to the original languages: “I would find myself saying [to students], ‘Well, this is what the Latin actually says...’” McCarter’s dissatisfaction with previous translations is that they seem to soften the blow which Ovid intends, and McCarter wishes to correct this effort at sanitization. McCarter’s efforts at rendering Ovid in a way which, in her view, more faithfully captures the traumatic core of his texts mirrors the efforts of Wilson to do so with Homer, and both women seem to concern themselves with conveying the trauma of these texts, which indicates an understanding of the need and desire for the traumatic experience, particularly for the female reader, of such stories.

In a 2018 *New Yorker* article entitled “Reading Ovid in the Age of #MeToo,” author Katy Waldman hints as well at the power Ovid might have to help process trauma:

“Ovid’s epic positions female pain as the beginning or hinge of the story, not the end; victims are transfigured, their suffering made new and strange. Daphne becomes a

tree. Leda hatches two eggs. Persephone's lingering in the underworld gives rise to undreamed-of seasons. That violence against women might lead to unexpected outcomes--to a legal-defense fund for sexual-assault survivors, backed by the most glittering red-carpet walkers; to the resignations and downfalls of many powerful men; to the unthinkable moving public recital of more than forty victim-impact statements in a single courtroom..."

Waldman's comparison between the text and real-world events, as well as the means by which she frames the results of female suffering in the text, hints at the transformative power of pain and suffering, a power which is on offer from texts like the *Metamorphoses*. Waldman opts to see Ovid as not fetishizing or "prettifying" (as Wilson framed previous interpretations of Penelope) the pain of his female figures, as is so often assumed to be the case. Rather, Waldman sees in this text a rich opportunity for the contextualization of female suffering, as a means by which to dignify such trauma, as a chance to use the text as a means of grappling with and constructing meaning out of the trauma intrinsic to life in a rape culture. Should others begin to see not just Ovid, but the entire body of the classics in a similar way, then we might begin to open ourselves up for the richness and understanding provided by the traumatic experience of reading these texts, the growth promoted by pain. This is a knowledge that can only be gained by those who wish to use the suffering offered by these texts rather than running from it.



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