

## On Caitlin Sweet, *The Door in the Mountain*

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CAITLIN Sweet cares little for nostalgic attachment to the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur: *The Door in the Mountain* departs from the familiar shores of the myth and offers remnants of the familiar in an utterly defamiliarised landscape.<sup>1</sup> The lines between what is known and unknown are blurred; characters once liminal become central, while those once instrumental now inhabit the peripheries, often in unrecognisable forms. The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur hinges upon its archetypal characters: its masculine Hero, its monstrous Villain, and its passive maiden in need of saving.<sup>2</sup> Sweet's *The Door in the Mountain* shatters the original myth, and from these disjointed fragments, an unexpected and unorthodox appropriation is reformed.

Indeed, Ariadne, once an archetypal embodiment of the Princess, is the main character of Sweet's novel.<sup>3</sup> In the original myth, Ariadne was a relational narrative construction contingent on central male characters for narrative presence: the daughter of King Minos; the pupil of Daedalus; the slighted lover of Theseus; and the fortunate bride of Dionysus.<sup>4</sup> As such, the original myth's construction of Ariadne is entirely passive. Sweet's Ariadne, in contrast, utterly rejects

the role of the submissive maiden — she schemes, manipulates, and betrays. In doing so, Sweet's Ariadne severs her dependence on male characters and, by extension, subverts the patriarchal system by which Ancient Greek society was ordered. However, in rejecting her historical status as a tragic, sympathetic female figure, Sweet's Ariadne also comes to embody the role of the Villain. Ariadne's villainy is a means of survival: she obtains power from treachery. Through acquiring power, Ariadne can exert independence and agency, but can no longer remain a liminal figure. Ariadne's malevolent actions cause other characters to distrust her, but she utilises this rift to separate herself, and through this estrangement, she finds a freedom that her classical counterpart had been denied. The extent of Ariadne's malevolence is revealed at the beginning of Sweet's novel, where she sets her infant brother Asterion alight, only to discover that it is heat which engenders his transformation into a bull (41–43). She then uses this information to eliminate her brother from the Cretan kingdom and to acquire political power by securing his entrapment in a volcano, forcing him to become permanently bestial against his will (114–17). Throughout the novel, Ariadne secludes herself, moving “away from my brothers and my parents and all their chattering, dim-witted subjects” (192) to achieve autonomy in her isolation.

Sweet's subversive shifting of the Theseus myth also extends beyond empowering formerly passive maidens. The monstrous figure of the Minotaur, once cast as the archetypal Villain, has a complicated presence in *The Door in the Mountain*, and instead becomes a tragic figure in need of rescue. The title “Minotaur,” employed in the traditional myth, translates as “Bull of Minos” — the original “Minotaur” is a linguistically degrading title that reduces Asterion to both animal and possession. In contrast, by referring to the Minotaur as “Asterion” — his human birth name — Sweet semantically divorces the “Minotaur” from his historically subhuman status. Asterion takes on a human form for the majority of Sweet's novel, with his physical and psychological development, his faculties of speech, and his experiences of intense pain and emotional vulnerability all operating to humanise the Minotaur. Once again, Sweet's reader is swept up in a defamiliarised shore, where

the cultural archetype of a bestial Minotaur is defied. In fact, Asterion is never pitched in direct opposition to Sweet's Hero, the slave Chara, who resolves to rescue him from entrapment. We see not only a reversal of the genders that typically occupy these representational archetypes but also an expansion of the social statuses of the characters who would have been depicted in traditional Greek myth. Slaves, though a reality in Ancient Greece, lingered in the wings of their society's stage, often entirely absent from the literary and artistic depictions of Greek culture and society. Within *The Door in the Mountain*, though, they are promoted, even granted a palpable presence. Again, Sweet takes us to uncanny shores, and to a Crete made unfamiliar.

In the original myth of Theseus, peripheral female characters are confined to narrow roles sanctioned by their contexts, but Sweet also upends this stereotype. Theseus's unorthodox dual paternity is positive — he is both Athenian royalty, and partial divinity, and enjoys the advantages of both: never is he punished for the transgressive circumstances of his birth.<sup>5</sup> Yet, when female sexuality is prominent, sexual transgressions are ultimately negative. Pasiphaë's uncontrollable, bestial lust — a curse from the gods — degrades her, diminishing her status as a celestial daughter of Helios — the Sun itself — to a base woman, unable to control her sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Pasiphaë's sexual transgression takes physical form in her child — the Minotaur — whose monstrosity is a result of female promiscuity. Strikingly, however, Sweet's Pasiphaë is not punished for her sexuality but revered for it:

“You will not cast me out,” the queen said. “When you banished him, my people rioted — they shattered Zeus's altar — imagine, Husband, what they would do to the island if you did the same to me. No. [...] I will bear Poseidon's child here.” (12)

The acceptance of female sexuality here is a radical conceit: Sweet is again reconceiving the status of the feminine in both the historical and the contemporary space.

The patriarchal structure of Ancient Greece shifts in Sweet's novel, as the sociopolitical hierarchy is restructured around an enigmatic and supernatural form of power called “godmarks.” Godmarks, within *The*

*Door in the Mountain*, are supernatural abilities that are granted by a certain god; and they are also individually distinctive. However, not all individuals in this world are “godmarked.” The power of the Cretan royal family relies largely on the power of their respective godmarks; as Ariadne perceives, “royal families have to keep having godmarked children... our family has been great since the earliest days, when we were commoners whose marks were better than the king’s” (14). In Sweet’s reconfiguration of the myth, Pasiphaë, for example, is able to access higher echelons of sociopolitical power than before due to her powerful godmark. Unlike her previous incarnations, this character becomes dominant; she is revered and respected by other characters. And yet, even as Sweet constructs a new hierarchy within the novel, she also challenges it. Her two most central characters are “unmarked.” Rather than simply equating supernatural ability with actual social power, then, Sweet explores the pitfalls of hierarchical social structures, as Chara and Ariadne both grapple with the subordination they experience because of their “unmarked” status. Sweet’s Ariadne is able to overcome her subordination through her own intelligence: that is, through the scheming, manipulation and deceit she employs in order to climb the ranks of society and obtain the power otherwise denied by her unmarked status. Pasiphaë makes this explicit through her accusation: “You meddle and scheme because this is all you can do without a mark — and you turn everything around you into chaos” (91). We are left to ponder, however, whether Ariadne’s method of rebellion is truly the hallmark of female emancipation, particularly considering Sweet’s removal of Ariadne from the misogyny that is rampant in her traditional context. Although Ariadne is removed from a patriarchal sociopolitical hierarchy that dominates the original myth, she is still peripheral — and still ultimately inferior — to other characters in Sweet’s alternative societal structure.

When Ariadne is diametrically opposed to the Hero of Sweet’s narrative, Chara, we see that villainy is not the only method one may employ to acquire social and political authority. Like Ariadne, Chara embodies a traditionally peripheral figure brought to the narrative forefront. Chara’s preeminence in Sweet’s novel is solidified by the fact

that, as the narrative progresses, she is the focaliser; Sweet's third-person narration shifts from Ariadne to Chara, following the latter's quest to rescue Asterion. However, Chara's individual presence is attenuated throughout the novel; and even as Chara functions as Asterion's Hero, she is also utterly preoccupied with Asterion. Indeed, Chara's very name suggests an inextricable link between her and Asterion: in the modern constellation, *Canes Venatici*, the larger, Northern hound is called Asterion, while its smaller, Southern counterpart is called Chara. By transfiguring these constellations into characters, Sweet effectively strips the bestial from both Asterion and Chara, once again humanising the pair. Through an anachronism, these characters are also bound in a romantic relationship, and Chara — in constant contiguity with Asterion — proves a modern embodiment of the relational construction which typified classical myth.<sup>7</sup> As a result, explorations of gender, slavery, and subordination, relevant to both the context of Ancient Greece and of Sweet's own text, are muted.

Though overtly interested in Greek myth, Sweet presents these ideas in what may be described as a "Young Adult" novel, a genre that has its own conventions and constraints. Of course, adaptation is a tricky business. When translating Greek myth into Young Adult fiction, the author must not only ensure that plot and character are reconfigured, but that language, culture, and structure are all transmuted accordingly. One is tempted to ask when reading an adaptation: "What of the original source remains?" But Robert Stam implores us to forego anxieties about textual "fidelity" and instead to understand adaptation not as an attempt at recreation but as an "intertextual dialogism" — a conversation between an adapted text, its original source, and of all other influential texts, which converge to create something novel.<sup>8</sup> The new shores of Sweet's *The Door in the Mountain* provide exactly such a critical engagement with classical myth; it is a new perspective on the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, one that is engaged in conversation not only with its original source but its contemporary textual landscape. The past decades have heralded the expansion of women's roles within literature and broader society, a change reflected in the growth of the Young Adult fiction market. Thus, Chara's

status as a Heroine seems muted in comparison to the complexities of Ariadne's characterisation and function within Sweet's novel, or even compared to the wealth of central female characters in the post-*Hunger Games* Young Adult Fiction context, where women characters tend to follow in Katniss Everdeen's footsteps.

As a modern reimagining of an Ancient Greek myth, *The Door in the Mountain* is a fascinating experiment that shifts liminal characters from the peripheries to the forefront. But, like sailors in a chaotic sea, readers may be left uncertain while reading the text, not knowing where they stand nor how far they are from the familiar shores of the Greek myth. For a classical conservative, this experience will undoubtedly be unsettling, as archetypal characters once crucial to the narrative are utterly subverted, and often become unrecognisable. And yet, Sweet deftly seizes on what once lingered on the peripheries of classical myth — a distant Crete, the monstrosity of the Minotaur, one-dimensional women, and absent slaves — and reconfigures them so as to create a strikingly modern novel.

## Notes

1. Caitlin Sweet, *The Door in the Mountain* (Toronto, Canada: ChiZine Publications, 2014). All subsequent references will appear in the body of this essay and will refer to this edition.

2. The myth has been repeated and typified by looming classical figures such as Plutarch, Hesiod, and Apollodorus.

3. Following Alex Jones's *The Shape of Stories* (Sydney: Lionworks, 2017), I use the capitalised terms "Princess," "Villain," and "Hero" to denote the character archetypes that are common to many ancient stories. I do, however, recognise that these labels are imperfect.

4. Most classical iterations of the myth place Ariadne as a daughter of King Minos of Crete and his wife, Pasiphaë. She helped Theseus defeat the Minotaur by giving him a sword and a ball of thread to weave his way through Daedalus' labyrinth, and when Theseus was victorious, left Crete with him to elope. However, Theseus abandoned her on the island of Naxos, where she was then discovered by the god, Dionysus. She married him, then after her death, joined him in Olympus.

5. According to Aristotelian biology, the Greeks believed that a child could have two fathers, which was a common theme among Greek heroes who could

therefore be divine and royal simultaneously. Theseus was both the son of the Athenian King, Aegeus, and Poseidon, after his mother Aethra waded in the ocean after her sexual encounter with Aegeus.

6. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Pasiphaë was the daughter of Helios, the sun god, and Perse, the Oceanid, making her a divine figure. She is also sister of the infamous witch of the *Odyssey*, Circe. Therefore, she is clearly of divine origin which makes her adultery, as Rebecca Armstrong argues, a debasement of her divinity, and her infelicity reduces her to a mere human status. See Armstrong, *Cretan Women: Pasiphae, Ariadne, and Phaedra in Latin Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169.

7. The Canes Venatici is a modern constellation, created in 1687 by Johannes Hevelius.

8. Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 64.

