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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# “THE ESCAPE BACKWARDS AS AN ESCAPE FORWARDS”: MOMENTS OF DEMYTHIFICATION IN CHRISTA WOLF’S *CASSANDRA* AND *MEDEA*

NIKOLAOS-IOANNIS KOSKINAS

### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to discuss demythification and the subversion of myth in Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra Project* (1983) and *Medea. Stimmen* (1996). Wolf considers literature as an archaeological project, as a quest for the truth and the “blind spots” in personal and social history. On this quest she turns her attention to Greek mythology. A myth is not a context, but a frame. It is a supertemporal, multidimensional phenomenon, which allows a writer to move into free spaces. Thus, Wolf’s versions revise the myth in some fundamental points. Her main concern is to shed light on the manipulation of truth and the discrimination of the stranger. The author does not write, however, against the myth per se. On the one hand she points out the close connection between myth and politics and on the other hand she tries to explore the potential of myths in order to understand the present situation better and to look for livable alternatives or yet untried patterns. The reminiscence on the origins of the alienation offers a matrix for the explanation of today’s conditions and at the same time permits a glimpse into the future: “the escape backwards as an escape forwards”.

### **Keywords**

Alienation, Enlightenment, otherness, subversion, mythopoiesis, demythification, mythification, otherness, oppression, patriarchy, scapegoat, memory, blind spots, barbarism, taboo, utopia, instrumental rationality.

### **Título**

“La fuga hacia atrás como fuga hacia adelante”. Momentos de desmitificación en *Cassandra* y *Medea* de Christa Wolf

## Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es analizar la desmitificación y la subversión del mito en *Cassandra* (1983) y *Medea* (1996) de Christa Wolf. La escritora considera la literatura como un proyecto arqueológico, como una búsqueda de la verdad y de los “puntos ciegos” en la historia personal y social. En esta búsqueda dirige su atención a la mitología griega. Un mito no es un contexto, sino un marco. Es un fenómeno supratemporal, multidimensional, que permite a un escritor ocupar espacios libres. Por lo tanto, las versiones de Wolf revisan el mito en algunos puntos fundamentales. Su principal preocupación es arrojar luz sobre la manipulación de la verdad y la discriminación del extranjero. La autora no escribe, sin embargo, contra el mito en sí. Por un lado se señala la estrecha relación entre el mito y la política. Por otro, trata de explorar el potencial de los mitos para comprender mejor las condiciones actuales y buscar alternativas o patrones aún no probados. El recuerdo de los orígenes de la alienación ofrece una matriz para la explicación de las condiciones actuales y al mismo tiempo, permite una mirada al futuro: “la fuga hacia atrás como fuga hacia adelante”.

## Palabras clave

Alienación, Ilustración, alteridad, subversión, mitopoiesis, desmitificación, mitificación, opresión, patriarcado, chivo expiatorio, memoria, puntos ciegos, barbarismo, tabú, utopía, racionalidad instrumental.

Is this culture planning its own downfall? What causes wars? Why do our societies today still need scapegoats? What is the role of literature in view of alienated social conditions? What is the nature of the relation of literature to myth, ancient and modern, to the subjectivity of the modern self, to psyche and psychology, to peace research? Can an “aesthetics of everyday life” become an “aesthetics of resistance”?

The *Cassandra Project* (1983) signals the beginning of a new stage of Christa Wolf's ideological criticism on the modern industrial society and its “roots”. Wolf's writing is a combination of memory, self-exploration, dealing with the past and constantly experimenting with the limits of the speakable. According to Wolf literature is an archaeological work, a search for the truth and the “blind spots” of personal history as well as those of society. In this search, the author turns her attention in the *Cassandra Project* and in the novel *Medea. Stimmen* (1996) to the Greek myth.

Myths occur today everywhere in the world again and again, even though they often appear to the modern I as meaningless and absurd (Lévi-Strauss 1980, 24). The myth is, however, not a priori irrational. The general formula of the gradual transition from myth to logos seems to be from today's perspective particularly problematic. Myths are not a

“primitive” or “wild” early form of logos, but a fundamentally different form of thought. The myth is an extremely complex act of the intellect, which simply follows a different logic than the instrumental thinking of science. In this way is the “myth-boom” in Western culture and art after 1950 to be understood. It can be primarily described as an attempt to criticize the modern sacralisation of reason.

Paradigmatic for myth reception in the GDR is Heiner Müller's fascination for “the return of the same [...] under very different circumstances [...] and thereby also the return of the same as something else.” Precisely this element of the myth, the presentation of the recurrence of the same, was one of the writing impulses for Christa Wolf. The category of (varying) repetition has always been inherent in the myth. The myth as we know it today is already interpretation. With the transition from oral to written culture its essence was “distorted” (Jamme 1991, 2), so that we cannot talk today about the original myth: “The original remains hypothesis [...]. Neither Homer nor Hesiod or the pre-Socratic philosophers present us with something of the absolute beginning; they produce themselves from the act of reception [...]” (Blumenberg 1971, 28).

The myth is not a context, but a frame (Blumenberg 1971, 51). Variation and elasticity are parts of the elementary structure of this frame (Blumenberg 1971, 51). The mythic is not a finished phenomenon, but a very open structure, which allows one to move into free spaces. A myth consists of all its variations: “There is no ‘true’ version, in relation to which all others were copies or deformed echoes. All versions are justified. All versions are part of the myth” (Lévi-Strauss 1977, 241).

Unlike Marx, who considered the myth as “popular imagination”, Christa Wolf agrees that it is actually mostly invented, but she is convinced that it also includes historical elements. With the help of the distance that the mythical costume creates, the myths of Cassandra, the great seer, whom no one believed, and of Medea, perhaps the most heinous, gruesome, but also extremely fascinating woman in Western culture, are re-read. In light of today's destructive conditions the author directs her gaze to Greek mythology to discuss the following question: is the “eternal recurrence of the same” inevitable, or is there still “room for change” (Wolf 1996, 111)?

Christa Wolf's attempt to “de-mythologize” the myth is not necessarily a degradation of the myth. On the contrary, the author shows great respect for the extraordinarily complex nature of mythology and assesses its potential for today's conditions. During this process the author's main concern is not the loss of the mythic element in the development of the myth, but stepping out of the statics of an image.

Christa Wolf does not write against the myth as such. The real core of the problem is rather to figure out how and for what purposes certain myths are constructed. Mythology is not *de facto* irrational, but it also includes—at least from today's perspective—irrational elements that can confuse the recipient or that can be manipulated by the prevailing social order—leaning on the attractiveness of the phenomenon—in order to stabilize its power.

By “demythification” Christa Wolf understands a re-interpretation of the mythic with the aim to reveal all its irrational elements and resolve or identify the structures that lead to its manipulation. In her *Antiquity* projects this act takes place in three steps: firstly, she “de-mythifies” Cassandra's and Medea's gift of prophecy and identifies vision with perception. Secondly, she “de-heroes” the heroes and the heroic acts of the Trojan War and the Argonauts' voyage, and in a third step, she criticizes today's still existing “everyday myths”.

In this attempt, she is taking a leap in time to understand the present better: the “escape backwards as an escape forwards” (Wolf 1996, 85). The author seeks to find an answer to the crucial question of her life asked in *Kindheitsmuster* (1979): “How did we become what we are today?”. The basic idea behind this formula is that in the eyes of Wolf the past is an indispensable prerequisite of managing the present. In this process memory plays a very important role. Wolf's reminiscent archaeology is a reminder of the “tradition of the oppressed” as described in Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history.

The transition from the myth to the (imaginary) social and historical coordinates, the “historicizing” of the mythic element, has as its first station pre-history. The central question in this process is: Who were Cassandra and Medea, before anyone wrote about them? From the “depth of time” we meet characters, in which “the times meet” (Wolf 2002, 10). Wolf's title characters come from an era in which a large value change is said to have altered the course of history forever. This change could be paradigmatic for similar processes today: “It has always been about the values, about changing the values in society. Today this can happen very quickly, but then it took centuries or even millennia to change from matriarchal to patriarchal features, at least in the Mediterranean” (Hochgeschurz 1998, 62).

The development of the myth is closely connected with power and, accordingly, with alienation. The author is convinced that with the implementation of patriarchal thinking mythologies have changed, that they had to be changed. One order replaced the other, and gradually got the monopoly on the truth and the constitution of history. Christa Wolf is

for example relieved when she finds out that there are many former sources about Medea, which we don't even know that existed and that the mythologeme of the infanticide was invented by Euripides.

An extremely strong and smart female character would be unbearable for the patriarchy and had to be reshaped. Medea is—in vast contrast to the character of Mary in the New Testament (Stephan 2006, 2)—one of the most outrageous figures in world literature, a figure which seriously violates the taboos of our civilization. Christa Wolf's new reading of the myth is looking for a way out of this situation, which she regards as paradigmatic for the relationships between the sexes, but also for the handling of otherness in the patriarchal culture.

Christa Wolf is attempting in some fundamental points a radical break with traditional historiography. The truth of this historical fiction lies not in the fact, whether what is being remembered has actually been the case, but in the critical potential of these representations of the past. Let us now follow the author's argumentation: the collapse of the pre-Greek culture and the establishment of patriarchy had a major downside. There is no doubt that patriarchy made the orgiastic and incestuous aspects of the matriarchal cult a taboo, an act which Lévi-Strauss called “the transition from nature to culture” (1981, 73). The triumph of patriarchy led, however, also to the strict dominance of the father's law and the simultaneous oppression of women.

Wolf's study of the alienation and oppression syndromes of women in patriarchy results, however, in a much more momentous conclusion. Alienation has become in today's modern industrial societies a problem of both sexes. In light of today's “collapse of all alternatives” (Wolf 1996, 20), the logic of a system that thinks only in antinomies is in the works of Christa Wolf called into question. Thus, Cassandra and Medea become the paradigm of the “tradition of the oppressed” par excellence.

Christa Wolf subjects in her *Antiquity* projects both modern society to a rigorous critique. In a similar vein to Horkheimer and Adorno, Christa Wolf studies the dialectic between myth, enlightenment and modernity with the same intention that the founders of critical theory indicate in the introduction to the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*: an attempt to criticize the entwinement of “enlightened” civilization and barbarism (cf. Adorno and Horkheimer 1969, 6; Wolf 1996, 30). By “Enlightenment”, both the Frankfurters and Wolf understand in this context not only the historical epoch, but rather a certain timeless rationalistic attitude, based on reason, ideology, and domination over nature.

However, Wolf's objective is not an anti-Enlightenment. She writes not against the project of the Enlightenment as such, but against its

perversion, the exclusive rule of reason, the belief in infinite progress, and the simultaneous exclusion of all non-rational elements from the concept of progress. Christa Wolf's concern is to prepare a positive concept of Enlightenment, not to reject it in toto. She finds the causes of Enlightenment's self-destruction and its relapse into mythology in the fear of the truth. In Wolf's works the modern civilization is not rejected. In contrast to the pessimistic diagnosis of modernity of the Frankfurt School, for Wolf there is still reason to hope. Her goal is on the one hand to deal with the past in the sign of a better future—the search for “liveable alternatives”—and on the other to highlight those aspects of the Enlightenment that may be productive for the modern self.

Wolf considers identity as something changeable, as something that is evolving. Her Cassandra describes the following as vital: “not being afraid of the most difficult: to change the image of myself” (Wolf 1996, 202). Wolf's Antiquity projects discuss the problems of “depersonalization” and emancipation, of ego manipulation and ego identification. Her characters recognize what their social environment, which has been alienated, doesn't “see”. They liberate all the oppressed in their psyche and gain knowledge from experience.

In the centre of both Wolf's Antiquity projects are people who were caught between the worlds as the author herself. The allegedly “enlightened” societies of Troy and Corinth are in fact alienated and destructive. In contrast to their surroundings, Cassandra and Medea are able to “see” into the situation. A first significant deviation from the tradition of Wolf's version is associated with the problem of vision. Her characters are no prophets in the traditional sense. The ability to “see”, an important feature in Wolf's work, is based on nothing superhuman, but is a long process of cognition and self-discovery.

Instead of the arbitrary will of the gods, which determines—at least to an extent—human action in the mythology, the acts and decisions of Wolf's characters are based on their ability to discern the reality and to realize the intentions and motives of the people around them. Wolf's Medea does not leave Colchis because of her passionate love for Jason, which according to the myth has been manipulated by Hera and Athena. On the contrary, she uses the Greek hero, in order to leave her alienated homeland. Equipped with the ability to “see”, it is not long for Medea before she discovers that her new home, the supposedly “enlightened”, “golden” Corinth, is an alienated society.

On the other hand, Cassandra's subjectivity can be read as an act of “liberation” (Wolf 1996, 105). Only in retrospect does she acknowledge her paradoxical situation. She, the seer, cannot “see”. Nevertheless, the

young Trojan woman manages to overcome her fear and frees her I from any kind of coercion. In her attempt to touch the untouchable her body reacts with disease.

The madness of the protagonist is a very important moment of “demythification” in the *Cassandra Project* and is closely related to the problem of “seeing”. The hysterical and epileptic seizures of Cassandra are not to be confused with the “θεία νόσος” of the ancient world, the supernatural “sacred disease” par excellence (Robertson 1970, 40). The disease in Cassandra clears the way “for insight into lifelong self-deceptions and failures of character” (Sontag 1978, 46). In this process comes also the issue of guilt into play. Disease is not a static metaphor, but raises the question of touching the “blind spot” of the sickening culture.

The reason why Wolf's title character falls into madness is not the wrath of the gods. Like Hippocrates, the author deprives the crisis of any irrational elements (Hippokrates 1994, 157). In the Attic drama the Furies look to blind the hero through the crises until he is destroyed. Disease offers Cassandra the possibility to really “see” using her own abilities. After her crises, she can finally understand the connections, internal and external, and react accordingly.

*Medea. Stimmen* begins right where Cassandra ended. When the action begins, Medea is already an autonomous subject. Compared to Cassandra, Wolf has equipped Medea with a dual function: she is both “healed” and healer. Madness plays an important role in *Medea. Stimmen* as well. Glauke, the princess of Corinth, in the myth the silent figure par excellence, becomes one of the six voices in Christa Wolf's novel. Glauke's desires and drives that are locked in her unconscious can not be repressed anymore. She lets the oppressed momentarily free by becoming sick. Medea brings her back from madness. In contrast to the tradition, Wolf's Medea does not consider Glauke as a rival. Now Glauke is also a “seer”. Nonetheless, Medea can not save her. The values that the Corinthian society has imposed on her drive her to death.

Unlike Glauke, Medea and Cassandra are constantly “active” but not in the sense of the tradition. Their ability to “see” is gained from experience and introspection. So Cassandra “sees” that the war reason is not based on a heroic deed and that the war will result in the destruction of her town. There is no noble hero who wants to win back his wife. Helena is a “mirage”, a “figure invented by the poets” (Wolf 1996, 120). The real cause of the Trojan War was imperialism, greed and gold.

In Christa Wolf's works there is no room for heroes. Everything heroic is dismantled in a second “demystification” step. An example of this subversion of the heroic is the re-evaluation of the characters of Achilles

and Jason. Both are outwardly strong, but inwardly very weak characters who embody the ill flip side of patriarchy and remain trapped in the vicious circle of history, which knows only victors and victims.<sup>1</sup>

While Cassandra and Medea act “demythifying”, the masculine heroes act “mythifying”. The ancient myths of Troy have been replaced by the mono-myth of rationalism and progress. The boundaries between truth and falsehood are no longer recognizable. Much more than her predecessor Cassandra, Medea becomes in Christa Wolf’s version witness of the processing of mythopoesis, of the formation of the myth of the evil woman. In the supposedly highly civilized, “humane” Corinth a woman becomes a myth.

The myth is in the novel in the hands of those who have the power and is manipulated by them. This creates a very interesting game: the construction of a new mythology, a myth in the myth. In the exemplary case of the “evil woman” the novel examines the association between civilization and barbarism, in a similar vein to the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. The only way out of this situation can and should however not be the brutal outrage of the oppressed woman. The focus is concentrated on the manipulation of truth by power and the discrimination of the stranger as a life necessity of the “enlightened” civilization, which by definition identifies itself as humane, although it often tends to fall back into barbarism and mythology. On the basis of this argumentation arises the following key question: “What would you believe, what would you be willing to accept, to cover up, to do in order to save your own skin or to stay close to power? Whom would you sacrifice?” (Atwood 1998, 74).

The dominance of instrumental reason leads to the exacerbation of bipolar thinking. On behalf of society, women, slaves and immigrants are being oppressed, abused, sacrificed. Medea shows significant differences to the Corinthians in terms of her world view, and the way she deals with the truth. Medea’s sensitivity against lies takes the nature of the Corinthian society ad absurdum. The strong, intelligent woman, who knows the truth and dares to express it, becomes gradually a “scandal”, an unpredictable threat to the powerful.

Therefore, Medea very quickly becomes the “centre of danger” (Wolf 2002, 154). Her diversity makes her an easy victim, the perfect scapegoat. The “enlightened” city-state of the early Greek culture indicates Medea’s desire for true enlightenment as “evil craft” (Wolf 2002, 162). Due to her sensitivity for humanity she offers herself as a victim. The strangeness of

<sup>1</sup> “On this disc, which we call earth, there is nothing left [...] but victors and victims” (Wolf 2002, 104).

Medea is rooted not in her origin or her self-confidence as a woman but in an ethical difference (Birge Büch 2002, 81).

The gifted, humane healer becomes “unnaturalness in person”, who has allegedly committed the most unnatural and appalling crime, the murder of her own children. Medea has to be humiliated, stigmatized, transformed into a monster. Christa Wolf’s Medea by no means ignores the mythologeme of child-murder. The author rather develops the issues behind it by reinterpreting it. Meidos and Pheres are the third child sacrifice in the novel. The first two were Absyrtos in Colchis and Iphinoe in Corinth. All of them make up the typical scapegoats as described by René Girard.

Christa Wolf follows this process to the present day, in a third “demythification” step, against so-called “everyday” myths. Christa Wolf’s research on this side of the myth corresponds to the theories of Roland Barthes. According to Barthes, everything can become myth for the purposes of political ideology: sports, advertising, film, a new car, Einstein’s brain (Barthes 1964, 85). Myth in this context is a second-order semiological system, a statement defined much more by its intentions than by its words (Barthes 1964, 105).

Between mythology and the myths of political ideology lies a chasm (cf. Kerényi 1967, 237). In contrast to the unfinished, open phenomenon of myth, such “myths” are a closed structure, which claim truth and applicability. Their aim is the legitimacy of the bourgeois statu quo and the ossification of the historical process (Jamme 1991, 141). Unlike the original phenomenon myth, which preserves the general human dimension, their meaning is not arbitrary, but motivated (Barthes 1964, 108). In short: such instrumentalized myths are “de-politicized statements” and for that reason “demythification” in this context is a political act.

In this way is also Wolf’s attempt of “demythification” to be understood. On the one hand, she seeks to reveal the manipulation of the mythic potential for political purposes; on the other hand, she tries to explore precisely this potential in order to understand the present situation better and to highlight possible alternatives to it. The memory of the origins of the alienation provides the author with a matrix for the explanation of the current situation and at the same time it allows her a “groping” into the future.

This “groping” into the future remains uncertain in both texts. The invention of the counter-world at the river Scamander is by no means a “concrete utopia” in the sense of Ernst Bloch. However, the text leaves open the possibility of conflict-free coexistence in an indeterminate future. The task of the seer-priest or the contemporary writer would be to keep the

memory of this counter-society awake. The “concrete” utopia of the actually existing socialism has been transformed in the *Cassandra Project* to this indefinite utopia of the “precious everyday”.

The “aesthetics of everyday life” is gradually becoming for Wolf an “aesthetics of resistance” against social and personal constraints. Through the invention of the alternative world at Scamander, Wolf tries to point out that the description of the ordinary, of everyday aspects of life, has a utopian impetus, if people have freed themselves from any belief in idols. In a time when subjectivity is a “scandal”, the author considers it the only way to overcome the problems that the modern I is facing.

Unlike Cassandra, Medea reaches at the end of the novel exactly the point where she had started; she is caught in the crossfire. The utopia has become at the end of the novel really *ου τόπος*, but also *ου χρόνος*, achrony. The author confronts us with the paradox that Medea considers her hopelessness and anger as tremendous freedom. This fact signals the end of all old utopias, the end of the belief in any god, in any ideology.

Outwardly, Wolf’s Medea ends exactly like that of Euripides: with the hopelessness of a woman who cannot adapt to the new conditions of the new order. In mythology, and even in Euripides, the gods decide on the fate of man. The sun god appears as a *deus ex machina* and Medea is transformed into an untouchable mythic figure. In this way, Euripides’ character falls—exactly in the sense of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*—back into myth. Euripides needs the irrational elements of the myth to bring his concept to the end.

In contrast, Wolf’s Medea is aware of the futility of her attempts to change the world. However, she is not a broken person. Free of external, but also of self-constraints, of the messianic attempt to change the world, she opts for the survival and is one of the few main characters of Christa Wolf that end up staying alive. And along with her survives also, paradoxically, a hope. Wolf’s protagonist arrives in a no man’s land without any hope of salvation, and yet this is the first utopia in the work of Christa Wolf with no features of a romantic idyll. This is certainly the greatest merit of this very important text: the signalling of the beginning of a real hope with little promise of solution.

The utopia in *Medea. Stimmen* marks a conclusive end of all things heroic. It is not to be understood in the sense of Bloch, but also not in the sense of the *Cassandra Project*. Medea is lonely, but at the same time she is able to move on and proves to be infinitely patient. For her, one can find no faith, only the faith in the people who continue to operate. This extremely important moment of “demythification”, the gradual rejection of wrong hopes and utopias, the loss of the central perspective, leaves free

spaces open, which one didn’t even know existed. The author had only hinted it in the *Cassandra Project*: “to live without alternative and yet to live” (Wolf 1996, 107). The awareness of hopelessness produces hope, it also produces good literature.

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