

MERCILESS: A CRUDE HAGIOGRAPHY

by

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The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Lindsey Ann Klessens Appell, and they evaluated her presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the culmination of a project that began as an attempt to explore my relationship, as a teenager, with the Main Street of my hometown, Roundup, MT. In the process of looking through the Roundup Record-Tribune archives and revisiting adolescent memories, I began to see connective tissue between the autobiographical aspects of this documentary project and the work I had been doing in reclaiming, repurposing, and “translating” folklore and mythology in my poetry. Coming out of classes in Old English and translation theory, I had also developed an interest in experimental and creative translation of early medieval texts, which resulted in the final chapter of this thesis, “Juliana, a mistranslation,” which is rooted in Cynewulf’s version of the story of St. Juliana of Cumae/Nicomedia, found in the Exeter Book. In bringing these seemingly disparate creative and scholarly interests together, I created a new lens through which to examine my selves at different ages, and how those selves navigated, warred against, and at times fell to, the long legacy of patriarchal expectations and power structures.

Understanding and articulating the self is a constant act of translation, and so translation, or often *mistranslation*, plays a significant role in this book. In “On language and words,” Schopenhauer argues that translation is a fundamentally impossible task, because words, as the basic units of language, are expressions of *concepts*, which are not universal. The phenomenon of the “untranslatable” word comes both from linguistic differences between languages and from the fact that concepts and ideas are culturally-bound constructs. Schopenhauer sees the task of translation as something which must transcend concern for word-for-word fidelity because such translation, in addition to its aforementioned futility,

does not foster understanding of the language's speakers, and by extension, texts produced by those native speakers. This is rooted in the link, for Schopenhauer, between the mind's development and a person's first language; the self is formed in language. The self, for Schopenhauer, cannot be honestly communicated without mastery of a language, and such communication of self in a foreign language is the marker of mastery. Walter Benjamin, in "The Task of the Translator," argues for a similar distinction between what might be described as "direct translation" and translation which can capture the "poetry" of the original. He suggests that translation which merely "intends to perform a transmitting function" is in fact "the hallmark of bad translation." However, for Benjamin, translation performed by a poet runs the risk of "inaccurate transmission of an inessential content" (Benjamin 253). A translator who is not a poet is likely to strip a work of its art in the effort to transmit information; a poet, on the other hand, is likely to embellish in ways which compromise the translation's fidelity to the original.

Both Schopenhauer and Benjamin ultimately call into question the nature of translation and its relationship to art, but Benjamin introduces an ethical dimension, as well when he argues that "a real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light" (Benjamin 260). His idea of "linguistic complementation" works against dubious appropriation of texts in living languages, by "allow[ing] the pure language [...] to shine upon the original all the more fully" rather than centering the work of the poet-translator (260).

For me, the answer to, "What is the task of the translator?" hinges on this ethical dimension. As a translator primarily of older forms of European languages, the ethical implications of my more experimental translations have less to do with colonization than they do with questions of relevance. One of the questions this thesis seeks to answer is, how can

the light of language “shine upon the original” when the original is so far divorced from its historical and cultural context?

As a poet, I am drawn to the role of archetypes in maintaining oppressive structures and their potential to be broken down and repurposed. I am interested in the paradox of the personal archetype in poetics: the particular arrangement of symbol and figure whose meaning can only be decoded by a single mind, but which still manages to resonate with, challenge, or haunt the reader. The ways in which I go about translating, adapting, repurposing—or even bastardizing, depending on one’s perspective—medieval texts, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and mythological figures owes much to this paradox of the universal particular.

Jung classifies the primary archetypal figures of the subconscious in the following way: “the *shadow*, the *wise old man*, the *child* (including the child hero), the *mother* (‘Primordial Mother’ and ‘Earth Mother’) as a supraordinate personality (‘daemonic’ because supraordinate), and her counterpart the *maiden*, and lastly the *anima* in man and the *animus* in women” (“The Psychological Aspects of the Kore” 157). Although full of their own recurring motifs and figures, medieval romances do not always neatly align with Jung’s archetypes; while a specific retrospective understanding of chivalric romance forms, at least in part, the basis of modern Western heteronormativity, many recurring medieval motifs serve to challenge and destabilize the status quo. Saracen princesses, disguised female knights, and foolish hero-kings are a few examples of such motifs which transcend their formulaic purposes.

Jung notes a particular archetype which, while Ancient Greek and not a medieval concept in origin, has the potential to challenge patriarchal structure, even though it reinforces gender essentialism. For Jung, the Demeter-Kore myth is unique in its exclusive femininity: “I would conclude, for a start, that in the formation of the Demeter-Kore myth the

feminine influence so outweighed the masculine that the latter had practically no significance. The man's role in the Demeter myth is really only that of seducer or conqueror" (158). He even goes so far as to suggest that the lack of Eleusinian mysteries in modern culture has been psychologically detrimental to women:

It is immediately clear to the psychologist what cathartic and at the same rejuvenating effects must flow from the Demeter cult into the feminine psyche, and what a lack of psychic hygiene characterizes our culture, which no longer knows the kind of wholesome experience afforded by Eleusinian emotions. (162- 63)

There is a tendency in the general readership to take for granted a certain proscriptive quality of medieval texts, believing self-awareness or social critique to be modern inventions. But "man's role [...] of seducer or conqueror" does not go wholly unchallenged in medieval texts; is Gahmuret to be admired for leaving both of his wives behind to raise sons on their own? Sons who must endure countless trials in order to achieve success and, ultimately, the Grail? My task with *Merciless* has been, in some ways, to create a new Eleusinian mystery through archival detritus, medieval texts, and mistranslations: a renewal of a feminine psyche which does not subvert medieval archetypes so much as it works with their already often subversive nature.

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