Ayelet Peer, "Entry on: Pandora's Jar: Women in Greek Myths by Natalie Haynes", peer-reviewed by Lisa Maurice and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1192. Entry version as of November 06, 2026.

Natalie Haynes

Pandora's Jar: Women in Greek Myths

United Kingdom (2020)

TAGS: Alcestis Amazons Athena Clytemnestra Euripides Eurydice Helen Hesiod Homer Jason Jocasta Medea Medusa Oedipus Orpheus Pandora Penelope Phaedra





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Pandora's Jar: Women in Greek Myths
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2020
First Edition Details	Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in Greek Myths*. London: Picador an imprint of Pan Macmillan, 2020, 310 pp.
ISBN	9781509873135 (ebook)
Genre	Nonfiction*
Target Audience	Adults
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This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



Portrait, courtesy of the Author.

Natalie Haynes , b. 1974
(Author)

Natalie Louise Haynes is a British classicist, writer, broadcaster and comedian. She has a degree in Classics from Christ's College, Cambridge and was a member of Cambridge University Footlights Dramatic Club. She writes for "The Guardian" and is a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4. She is also an art reviewer and a judge for the Theakstons Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year (2010), The Women's Prize for Fiction (2012), and the Man Booker Prize (2013). Her novels are *The Amber Fury* (2014), *The Children of Jocasta* (2017) and *A Thousand Ships* (2019). She is also the author of *The Ancient Guide To Modern Life* (2010). She was awarded the Classical Association Prize in 2015 for bringing classics to a broader audience.

Sources:

nataliehaynes.com (accessed: October 6, 2020).

gliterarylunches.com (accessed October 6, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

This book is not fiction nor a retelling of myths. It offers a literary and scholarly analysis by a well-known classicist of various female characters from Greek myth. As the author explains, "I decided I would choose ten women whose stories have been told and retold – in paintings, plays, films, operas, musicals and more – and I would show how differently they were viewed in the ancient world." [location 67].

The author chose the following mythological women: Pandora, Jocasta, Helen, Medusa, the Amazons, Clytemnestra, Eurydice, Phaedra, Medea, and Penelope.

Each chapter has a photo of a relevant painting (ancient or modern) or a statue (for Medusa). The book refers to modern and ancient works of art visible in various museums.

Analysis

As the author states, she endeavours to display the female mythological characters as complex human beings, not as mere villains or monsters. She wishes to strip away (metaphorically) any later connotations associated with them and minutely examine their initial appearance in the ancient texts and how they were treated or mistreated by the ancient male writers. Furthermore, the writer is also interested to show how misconceptions regarding these women have penetrated our modern thinking via centuries of reception. She wishes to uncover the humanity of these women, as she argues, "They are not villains, victims, wives and monsters: they are people." [location 74]. The author is not interested in the clichéd stereotypes or the categories into which these characters were branded (monster, villain etc.), but rather she wants to uncover them as "real" people, with hopes, reasoning and tragic lives.

The author gives a brief outline of each characters' mythological "background" and focuses on the representation of the character in the ancient sources and its reception in later adaptations.

The language of the book is clear, ironic and comical at times, and can be easily understood by general readers, although the book caters for academics as well. The author cites various researchers yet there are no footnotes that may interrupt the reading for some readers. The notes are placed at the end of the book. The author does not trace all

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the various and at times sporadic ancient texts, which present a specific character, yet focuses on many of the initial Greek texts in which these characters originally appeared. This book intertwines literary analysis of plays, epic and other ancient texts as well as reception study of the female characters

The author rightfully notes that "myths may be the home of the miraculous, but they are also mirrors of us. Which version of a story we choose to tell, which characters we place in the foreground, which ones we allow to fade into the shadows: these reflect both the teller and the reader, as much as they show the characters of the myth." In her analysis, she is interested in the mythological women, but also in the ancient writers and readers who have brought them to light and in what form. Why was Pandora portrayed as villainous by Hesiod and others for example?

The author notes she was highly influenced by the *Clash of the Titans* film (1981) and especially Ray Harryhausen's depiction of the various mythological creatures, particularly Medusa. Her own admission can tell us a lot about the importance of reception as a gateway to the classical world, but also at the stereotypes reception can create of various mythological characters. As a result, we are at times left with this incomplete impression of a specific character. This, in a way, is what the author sets out to rectify concerning the mythological women.

As noted, the author reviews and analyses ancient texts especially plays. She also compares the ancient narrative to modern adaptions, cinematic and others. For example, the author compares Eve and Pandora, mainly considering how they were both treated by the male society around them or male authors as the source of evils. She shows how Hesiod was against women but also had a feud with his brother, therefore his version of the Pandora myth puts the blame on Pandora and Epimetheus. She argues that "the guiding principle when searching for the cause of everything wrong in the world has been, all too often: cherchez la femme." [location 283]. It is the author's wish, therefore, to rectify this false assumption and look for the women in order to display their humanity not just their flaws.

In portraying Eurydice, the author compares it to the story of Alcestis and ponders about love and devotion. She reviews multiple adaptions of the tale among them *Orfeu Negro*, the award-winning 1959 movie by Marcel Camus. When discussing the Amazons, the author offers a

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	comparison with a modern-day Amazon in the image of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Hence the author connects the past and its reception. While studying the reception but by also focusing on the mythological women's inner motives and actions, the author bridges the gap between past and present and makes the ancient characters alive and relevant while also showing how in her view they should be received. The book is not aimed at young readers but can be used for high school, for example during literature classes as a source of further information on the ancient myths whole encouraging more in-depth discussions of gender and myths.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Alcestis Amazons Athena Clytemnestra Euripides Eurydice Helen Hesiod Homer Jason Jocasta Medea Medusa Oedipus Orpheus Pandora Penelope Phaedra
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Death Emotions Femininity Gender Gender expectations/construction Gender, female Heroism Journeys Magic Revenge

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