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The Age of Rage

In Greek mythology, misogyny was often a virtue. Tales from antiquity made heroes of the men who killed Amazons, warrior women considered the equal of men.

One exception to this narrative was Antigone, the young woman whose defiance and death in Sophocles' tragedy destroys the household of Creon, the king of Thebes. Some 2,500 years later, Antigone has become a symbol of feminist resistance.

In her new book, "Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths" (Bold Type Press, 2020), [Helen Morales](#), the Argyropoulos Professor of Hellenic Studies at UC Santa Barbara, takes a fresh look at feminism and what the millennia-old stories tell us about what it means to be human today.

"The Antigone myth appeals today because of the fantasy that one young woman can take down a fascist state," she said. "The spirit of Antigone is one of female anger and defiance in the face of patriarchal intransigence. Our modern Antigones include Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai and Ilesha Evans. This spirit of resistance is growing: Antigone (is) Rising.

"That said," Morales continued, "if we take a closer look at the most well-known version of the myth (Sophocles' "Antigone") the battle lines between right and wrong are not so clear. Antigone ends up dying — not a great model for resistance — and is very focused on herself."

She notes that there are other versions of the Antigone myth, ancient and modern, that emphasize collective political action and that allow Antigone to live and have a

future. One of the aims of the book is to explore some of the less well-known adaptations of the myth, such as Sara Uribe's "Antígona González," that provide more compelling models for modern activism.

Today, Morales said, a new culture war is being waged over the legacy of ancient Greece and Rome. President Trump's recent executive order mandating that all new government buildings be built in the classical style, she said, is intended to strengthen the link between classical antiquity and conservatism. Additionally, alt-right groups are staking a claim to be the true heirs of ancient Greece and Rome, which they fashion in their own image.

"But antiquity, especially its myths, provides rich resources for progressive politics, too," Morales asserted. "They have much to say about the dangers of controlling women, the environmental crisis and the Me Too movement."

Morales said she knew she would write the book after the killings in Isla Vista in 2014.

"The misogynistic and racist motivations of the killer, as expressed in his manifesto, are very similar to the motivations of ancient 'heroes' who killed Amazons," she explained. "I was so angry at the loss of our students' lives, and I channeled that anger into exposing some of the destructive narratives that have been hardwired into our culture from antiquity."

Greek myths also resonate in the age of coronavirus. As Morales notes, "Rampaging diseases are not new phenomena."

In 430 BC, for example, Athens was decimated by what we'd call a virus today. The historian Thucydides wrote that people became feverish, had difficulty breathing and despaired at the "terrible spectacle of men dying like sheep."

Myth helped the Greeks make sense of this kind of catastrophe, Morales explained. Plagues feature in two of the most influential Greek myths: the story of the Trojan War and the tragedy of King Oedipus.

"The lesson in both of these myths: the disease is a symptom of bad leadership," she said. "Agamemnon in Homer's 'Iliad' causes Apollo to inflict a plague on the Greek army when he puts personal profit over the well-being of his people (and abuses a woman in the bargain). Oedipus is a tyrant, not a democratic leader, and

he has little capacity for self-reflection. When at last he faces up to who he is (including his unwitting marriage to his mother — another stereotype of the tyrant), Oedipus realizes that he himself is the cause of his city's 'deadly pestilence'. The myth of Oedipus ends happily for his people, if not for him. The plague stops when the tyrant is no longer king."

But it would be a mistake to think that all ancient Greeks took these myths literally, Morales said. Instead, they were a way of making connections between political dysfunction and natural disaster, and between what they had control over and what they did not.

"The key takeaway from these myths is, I think, as much the process as the content," she said. "They are a way of thinking through crises, in a complicated and nuanced way. They do the opposite of the political sound bite or tweet."

"The task for us all right now," Morales added, "is to do all we can to slow the spread of COVID-19. But when the virus is under control, the kinds of stories that we tell about it, and the changes that they propel us to make, will also become important."

"Antigone Rising" takes an unflinching look at indignities women have faced for millennia — murder, body shaming, sexual assault — and how they ride the slipstream of time into the present. It can be hard to peer into this mirror on our worst impulses, but Morales says she wants readers to see how myths can connect us to our greater humanity.

"I hope that people will take away some of the magic of the Greek and Roman myths," she said, "and how they can be read afresh to speak to modern concerns and promote empathy, equality and empowerment."

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