

Blog Four

Re-Claiming Myths of Creation

By Mary Moynihan



Very often myths and legends can be used to pass down narrow minded or patriarchal interpretations and new myths and legends need to be re-invented to reflect traditions and ethics in society that we want to pass on particularly in relation to re-shaping the story of a woman that is powerful and in control of her body and able to live freely in a safe and equal world. Many myths that we tell are sexist and are simply perpetuating oppressive ideas about women and how they are treated in society. I have researched the Europa myth and have many concerns with this myth and the 'beautiful' figure of Europa. Once again we have a myth that perpetuates the story of a beautiful young woman being abducted by an older man. Here is a summary of one Greek version of the myth:

'the Phoenician maiden named 'Europa' was one of the many objects of affection of Olympian chief god Zeus. At first sight of Europa, the god was infatuated by her striking beauty and grace. Not being one to ignore his desires, Zeus immediately comes up with a cunning plan. In order to avoid the anger of his

jealous wife Hera, and to get his way with the girl, Zeus metamorphosed in a beautiful white bull. While the young maiden was gathering flowers, she saw the bull, and – fascinated by its handsome flanks and gentle behavior - caressed him and got onto his back. Zeus took that opportunity to abduct Europa and swim to the island of Crete. He there revealed his true identity, raped and impregnated her. Europa gave birth to Minos, who would become king of Crete'.¹

In the myth the woman is helpless and unable to defend herself. There is no action in the story showing the woman resisting or fighting back. The woman herself has no '**active agency**' in the myth, she plays no direct part in controlling or attempting to control her own fate, it is her brothers and father who attempt to 'save her'; it is her sons who go on to succeed and become the 'just leaders' of society and instead of the woman overcoming her difficulties and succeeding *herself*, once again it is the men who dominate, while the women's voice is silenced and her 'active agency' denied.

Most of the re-telling of this myth 'glosses' over the brutal nature at the heart of a story i.e. the violent abduction and rape of a young woman, terrorised, traumatised and made to endure a 'forced marriage'. The myth very subtly reinforces the idea that the rape 'was not too bad'. In several versions of the myth, even though it is a forced marriage caused by rape, the woman remains passively in the marriage and goes on to have fine sons as if it all turns out 'OK' in the end!

The following is a passage from a book *Voices of the Women's Health Movement, Volume 2* (the italics are ours) where the author is addressing the myth:

"Here we see Europa lying flat on her back on top of a bull (figure 4.). Her legs are spread wide apart facing the viewer in anticipation of receiving her abductor rapist. Europa's rapist is, once again, Zeus, who has transformed himself into a ridiculous, drooling white bull, decorated with garlands of flowers around his neck and horns, as if that would make him more appealing. The reality of being raped by a bull is grotesque, yet this painting is considered delightful.

¹ Europa and the Bull: The Significance of the Myth in modern Europe, by [Sarah Dejaegher](#), June 2011, The New Federalist.

Museums all over the world are filled with images *that glamorise and romanticize rape and we have come to accept these images as part of the nature of things*. Most often the woman *looks like a helpless but willing victim*. At other times she appears to be enjoying her situation.

In reality a woman confronted by a rapist will close her legs rather than open them, shield her body rather than expose it, she will fight her attacker using any means – scratching, clawing, kicking, gouging. She will not submit willingly. All rapists are ineffectual men who force sex in a misguided attempt to secure love. But even a rapist knows that no weapons or threat of power can force love from a woman against her will. ²

When we are re-telling this story we need to reference the misogynistic aspect of the rape of the Europa myth. It is better to not perpetuate the telling of negative myths that promote inequality and discrimination, *without exposing or drawing attention to the true nature of those myths*. We need to move away from continuing to tell narratives that depict a woman as helpless and incapable of defending herself against sexual violence, to move beyond the fact that no-where in the ‘traditional telling’ does Europa resist or fight back, or have active agency.

There is the story itself and the fact that it hides or is made up of ‘hidden’ sexual violence and horrific abuse. We have to change the narrative of making it OK to tell stories of sexual violence without drawing full attention to the horrific nature of the story in terms of the woman’s experience (to be abducted and raped is not the type of myth we want to perpetuate). Zeus may be imagined as a God yet he is a sexual predator committing an act of violence by abducting and raping a young woman against her will. The sexual violence at the heart of the story should not be glossed over. It is a misogynistic depiction of a woman ‘defiled’ by man with the woman rendered silent and inactive. Re-telling this story without highlighting the abuse at its centre is not acceptable.

What is clear is that the majority of women who suffer sexual assault may suffer long-term damage, distress or illness with irreparable damage done. In addition, many

²https://books.google.ie/books?id=myiDn9jV5csC&pg=PT363&lpg=PT363&dq=why+is+europa+a+helpless+woman&source=bl&ots=jRS8lFOad0&sig=dzILHFairdihw5V_zcLdyDeaNE8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiGk7GZt5ncAhVlKsAKHY8wCgY4ChDoAQg3MAE#v=onepage&q=why%20is%20europa%20a%20helpless%20woman&f=false

women do fight back but these stories are rarely told. Indeed there is a lack of strong female role models both in myth and in history. Re-telling a myth where a woman is raped and then 'seemingly' everything turns out OK, unfortunately this plays a part in perpetuating a patriarchal society. The Europa myth with a story of rape, abduction and imprisonment at its core, is *not* a story of celebration.

There is sexual content as well as gender stereotyping in many myths. There is nothing wrong with talking about a 'beautiful woman', however we are perpetuating gender stereotyping when women are always framed in terms of their looks. We currently live in a society where young people both male and female are subjected to serious mental health issues because of the way society depicts women as 'beautiful' or men as 'macho, muscular' etc. Gender stereotyping may be on the lower end of the scale but it is part of a continuum that has gender stereotyping on one end and rape on the other.

Many Myths were 'made-up' to fit the storyteller's need or to 'affirm how a society behaves and thinks', in the past this required women to be passive and silent, hence the majority of stories and myths are about things happening *to* women as opposed to women making things happen themselves. The women in myths like the Rape of Europa have no active agency. All societies have strong female role models and there is a need to tell stories that depict women as well as men determining their own fates and the type of worlds they create, to incorporate **active agency** at all times for women on an equal basis to men – in stories, language, etc. By continuing to re-tell myths that perpetuate a patriarchal society we are undermining human rights and equal citizens. Women are powerful beings today and in the past and it is important to reclaim and re-name myths so they show women as powerful cultural heroes playing a key role in the past, present and future.

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