

Feminist revisionism: Gender performativity and female agency in Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne*

Zujaja Zahid, Zohra Fatima and Sundus Suleman Durrani*

Abstract: This study examines Jennifer Saint's 2021 novel *Ariadne* as a retelling of the classic myth of Ariadne. Saint's novel aims to reclaim the feminine agency denied to most female characters in Greek mythology. Through the lens of Butler's performativity theory, we analyze Saint's novel to explore how the novel portrays and challenges the oppressive gender norms of ancient Greek society. Furthermore, the focus of the analysis is the motif of dance as a performative act and the development of Ariadne's character in the novel through subversion and retaliation. Ariadne goes through a challenging journey starting as a compliant princess and growing into an empowered woman who eventually defies patriarchal expectations. Saint's retelling challenges the traditional representation of women in Greek mythology by highlighting the potential for individual agency and resistance within oppressive structures. Ariadne's character disrupts the socially constructed gender roles by her actions and decisions that defy the social expectations – thus illustrating the power women can reclaim to redefine their narratives and destinies.

Keywords: feminist retelling, Greek mythology, gender performativity

Introduction

Ancient Greek myths have served to spark the imagination of poets and authors for centuries. These narratives are deeply imbued with universal themes and motifs on the one hand and yet are perplexing on the other as they shed light on the complexities of human nature and human life. In addition to serving as a way of entertainment, the stories recounted in Homers' *Iliad* and *Odyssey* holds a religious significance

* Zujaja Zahid; Zohra Fatima (✉)

Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University, The Mall, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan

Sundus Suleman Durrani

NUST Business School (NBS), National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan

e-mail: zohrafatima@fjwu.edu.pk (corresponding author)

for the ancient Greeks. These myths provided an explanation of an overwhelming world – with narratives ranging from the account of the origin of the universe to narratives explaining various natural phenomenon that humans couldn't make sense of. However, one cannot help but be surprised at the deeply misogynistic portrayal of women in these myths that reflect the patriarchal and oppressive norms of the Ancient Greek society (Özdemir 2023; Tsolas 2022). In Greek myths the feminine is often synonymous to the deceitful, the chaotic and the vengeful. This discriminatory representation of females has sparked an interest in the retelling of Greek myths and various authors have attempted to provide a rewriting of several Greek myths in an effort to lend the agency back to the females.

This attempt at reclaiming the silenced voices of women from the ancient world has been aptly termed as 'feminist revisionism' by Macmillan and Ostriker. Feminist revisionism aims to deliberately rewrite and modify existing mythological narratives so that the gender stereotype deeply ingrained within these narratives can be challenged and retold. These rewritings aim to not only respond to the male-dominated classical tradition but also reshape these narratives for a modern audience (Macmillan 2020; Ostriker 1982). This approach enables the contemporary writers to imbue ancient narratives with modern literary tropes bringing forth a critical and feminist perspective.

In this context, the present study explores Jennifer Saint's (2021) novel *Ariadne* which is a retelling of the classical myth of 'Ariadne' – a Cretan Princess. We approach the novel from the perspective of Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" to underscore how Saint's novel retells Ariadne's story to challenge the oppressive gender norms and stereotypes of the time. There are two main aspects that the present study focuses on; firstly, on how Saint reimagines Ariadne's story from a feminist perspective that challenges the oppressive gender roles and secondly, this study aims to elucidate how the novel contests the misogynistic assumptions inherent in the original myth of Ariadne. Saint's novel demonstrates the power of redefining and rewriting narratives to counter the traditional male-dominated accounts that represent females without agency. In addition, this novel underscores the need to dismantle the oppressive social structures associated with patriarchy while providing a more nuanced understanding of female agency. In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the literature on the representation of females in Greek mythology.

Women in Greek mythology

There is a considerable body of work addressing the problematic portrayal of women in Greek literature from a critical perspective. Pomeroy argues that the goddesses of Greek mythology and literature do not represent the females of ancient Greek times but rather present the “archetypical images of human females, as envisioned by males” (Pomeroy 1995, 93). Pomeroy contends that powerful female figures like Hera, who embody mature femininity, generated anxiety among insecure men, leading to the creation of simplistic “either-or” roles. Virtuous, virginal women like Athena, who reject their femininity, are lauded for their non-threatening nature, while sexually mature women are demonized as “dangerous” and “destructive.”

Forma Zeitlin, in her analysis of Greek drama, shifts the focus from the origins of tragedy to the nature of femininity within the literature itself. She highlights the marginalization of female characters, noting that while they may have garnered audience attention, their roles were primarily catalytic, serving as “either spoilers or destroyers sometimes helpers and saviors” (Zeitlin 1996, 347). Zeitlin argues that “functionally women are never an end in themselves, and nothing changes for them once they have lived out their drama on stage” emphasizing their role as foils to male protagonists. This analysis underscores the systemic silencing and objectification of women within Greek narratives.

In response to these historical injustices, modern retellings of Greek mythology have emerged as a powerful tool for feminist revisionism. Scholars like Ostriker and Macmillan have recognized this phenomenon, highlighting the efforts to “challenge and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myths” (Ostriker 1982, 73). These retellings go beyond mere responses to the “classical male tradition” (Macmillan 2020, 87) they actively reshape narratives to align with contemporary values and literary propositions. Macmillan asserts that these works represent “vivid engagements with the modernist literary canon and valuable contributions to the ongoing agenda about the generation of meaning in twenty-first century literature” (Ibidem).

Dedebas further explores the prevalence of feminist adaptations in contemporary literature, particularly in the works of Marina Carr. Carr’s adaptations focus on victimized women, reframing their narratives from a feminist perspective. By deconstructing Greek myths, Carr creates space for reimagining these tragic figures,

challenging male dominance and showcasing the extreme violence they endured. Dedebas (2013, 248) suggests that Carr “re-envisioned the female identity”, empowering these women to seek liberation from patriarchal constraints.

Rich (1972, 18) echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival”. Rich argues that understanding the assumptions that permeate our culture is essential for self-knowledge and resistance against the “self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (Ibidem).

Theoretical framework: Gender performativity

Butler’s groundbreaking work on gender, particularly *Gender Trouble* (1990) challenges the notion of gender as a static, inherent trait, arguing instead that it is a social construct performed through the reiteration of acts that conform to societal expectations. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988), Butler defines gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, 519).

Butler’s theory emerged in the wake of the second wave of feminism, addressing the fundamental question of what constitutes womanhood. She argues that gender is not a fixed, definable entity, but a social practice dependent on individual behavior. This concept builds upon Simone de Beauvoir’s famous assertion, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir 1949, 330), emphasizing the social construction of gender. Butler’s concept of performativity is further supplemented by John Searle’s speech act theory, which posits that utterances can perform actions and effect change. Butler extends this idea, arguing that gender is performed through a range of acts, including utterances, gestures, and decisions. Gender performativity, therefore, means that individuals bring their gender into being through these repeated performances.

Butler also highlights the oppressive nature of societal norms that dictate femininity, arguing that “the category of women is socially constructed in such a way that to be women is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation” (Butler 1988, 523). She acknowledges the role of feminist theory in “bring[ing] female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women” (Ibidem, 523).

Crucially, Butler suggests that the repetition of gender performances can also lead to subversion. She posits the “possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Ibid, 520), enabling individuals to resist oppressive norms.

A considerable number of existing studies have utilized Butler’s theory to analyze female protagonists in literature. Molin, for example, explores the self-destructive tendencies of female protagonists in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* and Doris Lessing’s *To Room Nineteen*, attributing their misery to the conflict between their modern ideologies and the traditional roles they were forced to play (Molin 2018). Similarly, Fitriani, Sunggingwati, and Nasrullah (2019) examine Soman Chainani’s *The School for Good and Evil* demonstrating how the novel reflects Butler’s concept of gender as a social construct. The study highlights the characters’ initial adherence to traditional gender roles, followed by their eventual assertion of individuality and defiance of societal expectations.

Butler’s emphasis on societal oppression and the potential for subversion provides a critical framework for analyzing the character of Ariadne in Saint’s modern retelling. Butler asserts that gender is embodied through repetitive actions, including language, behaviors, and gestures, based on socially constructed ideas and her framework has been adapted as a theoretical framework for the present study with an emphasis on the following tenets of the gender performativity theory:

Oppression against women

Society imposes oppressive norms on women, forcing them to conform to misogynistic behaviors because “the category of women is socially constructed in such a way that to be women is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation” (Butler 1988, 523). This study explores how *Ariadne* portrays societal oppression and the feminist response to it.

Repetitive nature of performative acts

Individuals construct gender identity by performing socially prescribed acts to claim a stable gender identity. The analysis in the present study identifies patterns of repeated actions within the novel that reinforce or challenge gender norms.

Subversion and retaliation

Recognizing gender as performative enables individuals to resist and challenge societal norms and leads to a “possibility of a different sort

of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Ibid, 520). Correspondingly, this study analyzes instances where Ariadne and other female characters subvert traditional gender roles through their actions and choices.

The following sections present an analysis of the novel within the framework of the above-mentioned tenets of Butler’s performativity theory.

Mothers, wives and daughters: The constraints of oppressive gender norms

Butler’s notion of gender as a performance rather than an essence opens up possibilities for change, as individuals can disrupt and redefine these performances through their actions. However, in patriarchal societies like ancient Greece, the performances associated with masculinity and femininity are often rigidly defined, granting men power and freedom while imposing severe restrictions and unrealistic expectations on women. Judith Butler argues that patriarchal societies establish gender norms that inherently oppress women, stating that “to be a woman is to be oppressed” (Butler 1988, 523). Saint’s novel *Ariadne* vividly portrays the societal constraints and injustices women faced in ancient Greece. The novel’s setting, a male-dominated society, forms the basis for gender-based oppression, denying women authority and freedom. Saint meticulously presents various instances of this systemic mistreatment, highlighting the pervasive nature of patriarchal control.

Saint underscores the mistreatment of women by the Greek gods, who frequently misused their divine power to trouble mortals. Mortal women, in particular, suffered disproportionately from this tyranny. A poignant example is Poseidon’s punishment of Ariadne’s mother, Pasiphae. As retribution for Minos deceiving Poseidon, Pasiphae was cursed with an insatiable lust for a divine white bull, resulting in the monstrous birth of the Minotaur. Ariadne reflects on her mother’s plight, recognizing the inherent injustice: “My mother was no more than a thin shell lying almost transparent on the sand, worn to nearly nothing by the crashing waves” (Saint 2021, 24). Pasiphae had to endure punishment for her husband’s crime just because the god of sea was whimsical. This unjust punishment highlights the arbitrary nature of the oppression women faced from the gods, who often held them accountable for the transgressions of men.

Ariadne also draws parallels between her mother's fate and that of Medusa: "I couldn't fail to see the parallels between Medusa and Pasiphae. Both paid the price for another's crime" (Ibid, 23). Medusa, originally a beautiful maiden, was punished by Athena for Poseidon's violation of her in Athena's temple, transforming her into a monstrous figure. This retelling of Medusa's story, told from her perspective, foreshadows the novel's approach to reframing the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur from Ariadne's point of view. These incidents serve to illustrate the deeply ingrained gender bias of the Greek gods, who consistently punished women for the crimes of men, thereby shaping and reinforcing oppressive gender norms.

Ariadne initially conforms to the societal expectations imposed on women and princesses in ancient Greece. Witnessing her mother's suffering, she internalizes the fear of deviating from these norms, recognizing the potential for divine retribution: "What if the Gods- I gulped through my tears-what if they take my hair and leave me bald and ugly? If father makes them angry again!" (Ibid, 21). In ancient Greece, women lacked individual identity, defined solely by their relationships to men. They were subjected to punishment for the perceived transgressions of their male relatives. Ariadne feels the immense pressure to be a righteous daughter, fearing her father's potential to anger the gods once more. In the world of gods and ancient Greek society, women were subjected to oppressive gender norms, limited agency and power, unequal treatment and discrimination based on gender and eventually it is the women suffering for men's wrongdoings. She recognizes the precariousness of women's lives, understanding that their fates are often determined by the actions of men: "however blameless a life we led, the passions and greed of men could bring us to ruin, and there was nothing we could do" (Ibid, 22). While her brother Deucalion was sent away for protection, Ariadne and Phaedra were left to face the repercussions of their parents' actions: "Phaedra and I, doomed as daughters, had to stay" (Ibid, 30).

Women's roles were confined to domestic duties, limiting their freedom and agency. Phaedra echoes this sentiment after marrying Theseus and becoming the queen of Athens: "A princess was a princess, wherever she was, and in Athens, like Crete, the pastimes available seemed limited to weaving, dancing and smiling at men" (Ibid, 145). Marriages in ancient Greece were often arranged to elevate family status, with women viewed as tools for enhancing honor and forging alliances: "Minos had always talked about the marriage I

would make; a glorious union that would heap honor upon Crete” (Ibid, 21). Women were treated as accessories, their lives and destinies subservient to the ambitions of their male relatives. Men, on the other hand, enjoyed freedom from marital responsibilities, their lives unencumbered by the domestic constraints imposed on women. The lives of women, both before and after marriage, were often characterized by monotony and a lack of personal fulfillment.

Motherhood was a central aspect of femininity in ancient Greece, laden with societal expectations and demands for maternal sacrifice. Saint explores these expectations throughout the novel, highlighting the burdens placed on women in their roles as mothers. Despite her monstrous child, Pasiphae embraced her maternal role, demonstrating unconditional love and acceptance: “Pasiphae would step forward with the rats, unflinching as they twisted and screamed in her grasp before she flung them to her son” (Ibid, 26). Pasiphae conformed to societal expectations, putting aside her own trauma and societal stigma to care for her child. Ariadne, too, embraced motherhood, finding fulfillment in nurturing her children: “I threw myself into motherhood, absorbed in every new discovery my children brought to me” (Ibid, 182). Ariadne’s experience of motherhood reflects strength and resilience, challenging the limitations imposed by ancient Greek society and demonstrating the power of maternal love.

Repetitive performative acts: Dance as a conduit of expression

Butler (1988, 519) defines gender performativity as “stylized repetition of acts” where gender identity is constructed through adherence to societal norms. In *Ariadne*, dance serves as a recurring motif, reflecting Ariadne’s emotions and providing a conduit for emotional expression. It is a source of catharsis, connecting her to her mother and providing a sense of freedom within societal constraints. Farleigh argues that “Dancing always expresses something of livingness... Dance reflects life” (Farleigh 1996, 172). Ariadne’s dance is a form of emotional release: “I could lose myself in a whirling dance that could consume me. Even without music it muffled the distant rumble” (Saint 2021, 19).

Her mother taught her unconventional, free-flowing dance steps, symbolizing freedom within societal constraints: “She gave me gift of making fluid, sinuous shapes out of crazy chaotic movements” (Ibidem). Bitong (2017) asserts that dancing is primarily a cathartic activity as it embodies emotions and tensions, and by embodying them

provides an outlet. In Saint's retelling as well, dance becomes a liberating activity, allowing Ariadne to express her individuality and reclaim her body from societal control. Her emotions are reflected in her dancing: "So I danced. As I danced faster and faster, the pounding of my feet grew louder in my head and bottled out the cruel laughter I heard tinkling behind me wherever I walked" (Saint 2021, 31).

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity hinges on the idea that gender is not a natural, innate quality, but rather a social construct that is brought into being through repeated actions. These actions, or "performative acts," are not isolated events; they are part of a continuous, often unconscious, process of reiteration. In *Ariadne*, Saint uses the motif of dance to illustrate this concept of repetitive performative acts. Dance, in this context, becomes a powerful symbol of how individuals embody and reinforce societal expectations of gender. In ancient Greek society, as depicted by Saint, dance was not merely a form of entertainment; it was a social practice laden with cultural meaning. Certain forms of dance, certain movements, were associated with femininity, while others were associated with masculinity. By engaging in dance, Ariadne and other female characters are participating in a ritualized performance of their gender. They are enacting the behaviors that society expects of them.

In *Ariadne*, dancing is representative of the stylized repeated acts that Butler refers to in her theory. These stylized acts can either subvert or reassert a gender identity and in the novel the repeated movements, the choreography, become a way of inscribing gender onto the body. Each time Ariadne dances; she is reinforcing her identity as a woman within the context of her society. The repeated movements become a form of bodily inscription, a way of internalizing and externalizing gender norms. While dance can be seen as a form of conformity, it can also be a form of emotional expression. For Ariadne, dance becomes a way of processing her emotions, of finding release from the constraints of her society. Even within the confines of societal expectations, Ariadne finds a way to express her individuality through her dance. The way she dances, the fluidity of her movements, becomes a way of asserting her own identity.

Although dance is a repetitive act, it also holds the potential for subversion. Even as Ariadne conforms to the expectations of her society, she can also subtly challenge those expectations through her dance. The very act of engaging in a repetitive practice allows for the possibility of variation, of deviation. Ariadne's unique style of dance,

learned from her mother, shows that even within repetition, there is room for individual expression, and therefore, for potential change. This is shown through the fact that even though the dance is a source of release, it is also one of the few outlets that the women in the novel are given. The idea that gender performativity is not something that is voluntary or a radical choice of individual, is shown through the fact that Ariadne does not create the dance, but learns it, and preforms it, thus showing how gender is a repeated act. In essence, the motif of dance in *Ariadne* serves as a powerful illustration of how gender is performed and reinforced through repetitive acts. It highlights the complex interplay between conformity and resistance, between societal expectations and individual expression.

Claiming agency through subversion and retaliation

Ariadne's journey in Saint's novel beautifully encapsulates how the subversion of oppressive gender roles can lead to the redefinition of societal norms. For Ariadne, the process is a gradual one and her transformation is foreshadowed in how she contemplates the fate of Pasiphae and Medusa. Ariadne's musings about Medusa's retaliation foreshadows her own struggle as she deliberates herself: "I would be Medusa if it came to it. If they came for me to punish a man's action, I would not hide away like Pasiphae" (Saint 2021, 23). Ariadne rejects passive acceptance and she is aware of the injustice suffered by Medusa although she is demonized by the patriarchal narrative – signifying Ariadne's own defiance. Medusa's femininity is deemed monstrous because it challenges male authority and Ariadne knows that she might have to face the same challenges as she prepares herself to resist oppression.

Firstly, Ariadne's defiance is apparent in how she interacts with her father Minos who represents patriarchal power. Not letting her father see her fail is one of the ways in which Ariadne's resistance is manifested, especially when she vows that "I would not let my father see me falter or let him luxuriate in my reluctance" (Ibid, 42). Ariadne's resolve to hold her ground represents a remarkable departure from the acquiescence associated with dutiful daughters. She knows that she has the ability to outwit Minos and therefore she does not need to resort to physical confrontation: "but what if he did not need to be fought? It would take a cunning mind to do it, but what if Minos could be outwitted?" (Ibid, 51). Ariadne's decision to use her intellect is a

subversive act defying a society that places more value on physical strength over female intellect.

Ariadne's defiance is realized more significantly when she helps Theseus to navigate the labyrinth and slays the Minotaur. She takes charge of the narrative and challenges the established order by procuring help from Daedalus. In a society where women are expected to be silent observers, Ariadne subverts the norms by her intervention and later through her decision to leave Crete with Theseus. She rejects her familial and societal obligation and embraces her autonomy: "I knew that I would do this. Betray my father. Send death to my brother, desert my mother. And, of course, leave Crete and never return" (Ibid, 75). Although, Ariadne's struggle to gain agency is further marred by Theseus's betrayal, it ultimately results in her self-discovery as she realizes that her worth is not dependent on her relationships with men. Dionysus encourages her by supporting her choice and helps her in understanding that she should not bear the burden of Theseus's actions as she eventually says: "I would not let a man who knew the value of nothing make me doubt the value of myself" (Ibid, 171).

Ariadne's journey in Saint's retelling is a testament to the possibly of reclaiming agency that leads to self-discovery. By the end of the novel, the male oppressions and betrayals Ariadne's had suffered through and survived become emblematic of war-wounds she can carry as a reminder of her own strength. Through Ariadne's character, Saint illustrates a possibility for subverting the established order, reclaiming agency and reshaping one's own narrative. Ariadne finds a way out of the oppressive structures by resisting and redefining the existing norms, and her transformation underscores the tremendous potential of subversion to challenge and redefine gender norms.

Conclusion

Greek myths, in essence, perpetuated patriarchal societal norms, subjugating women by portraying them either as weak damsels in distress or evil if they tried to refuse the gender norms or dared to have a voice of their own. The contemporary retellings of evidently patriarchal Greek myths are an attempt to reimagine all the misrepresented women, who faced ill-treatment from the male dominated ancient Greek society. Modern retellings attempt to present Greek myths from the perspective of these females providing a new and feminist outlook. Jennifer Saint's retelling of Ariadne's myth reveals the oppressive repercussions of patriarchy in ancient Greek

society and provides us a story from the female perspective. Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a comprehensive framework for analysis of Jennifer Saint's novel *Ariadne* as a feminist retelling. It emphasizes on the oppressive gender norms, repetitive performative acts of gender construction and finally the subversion and retaliation against the societal gender roles. *Ariadne* asserts herself by defying the societal expectations associated by women. Saint depicts her as a woman having her own agency, making decisions for herself, by herself. Gender performances that were expected of women in ancient Greek society only inhibited women and did not grant them any power of authority; nonetheless, *Ariadne* found a way to fight back and over society's expected performances.

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