“Seething in Oily Rage”: Greek Myth and the Woman Question in Emily Pfeiffer’s *Studies from the Antique*

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1. Emily Pfeiffer: A Victorian Woman of Letters

On March 25 1878 Edward and Emily Pfeiffer held one of their “at homes” in London, inviting the ladies to dress in ancient Greek style[1]. Apparently more than fifty ladies joined the literary salon that evening, including the classicist Anna Swanwick, who had recently completed the English translation of Æschylus’ whole corpus of tragedies. Within the following two years, Emily Pfeiffer would publish her *Studies from the Antique* (1880) tackling Greek drama in poetic form from the point of view of two of its most famous heroines, Kassandra and Klytemnestra.

Pfeiffer was part of a growing number of Victorian women of letters engaged in coeval socio-political debates and actively supporting the cause of emancipation. In 1885 she published “The Suffrage for Women” in *The Contemporary Review*, an essay in which she rehearsed the most common arguments against female franchise in an attempt to prove their weakness and in view of a new motion to be brought before Parliament. Along similar lines, *Women and Work* (1888) grapples with the then widely debated question of how women’s intellectual activity could affect their health. The collection of essays was singled out by Oscar Wilde for its “most admirable prose-style”, as well as for the bold and well-informed approach to “one of the great social problems of our day” (Wilde 1889:

[1] A letter from the Pfeiffers to the Prime Minister William Gladstone affords us an insight into that Greek evening (Olverson 2010: 84-85).

135). In fact, Pfeiffer was responding to George Romanes' study on the mental differences between the sexes which, moving from Darwin, sought to demonstrate the unbridgeable distance between male and female brains. Pfeiffer argued against the widespread idea of natural mental inferiority and its scientific underpinnings which sanctioned the opposition culture *vs.* women, discouraging their access to higher education.

Like many Victorian women, Pfeiffer could not attend university; she studied at home and later pursued a literary career with the help of her husband – the rich German merchant Edward Jurgen Pfeiffer who shared his wife's views on female emancipation. He promoted the publication of her work, but apparently the poems were for the most part out of print after 1888 (Hickok 1999: 389). All the same, before 1880 she had acquired a "high reputation" for poetry[2]. On the whole, she brought out eight volumes of verse, besides essays and travel books whose fame was not to survive the end of the century, despite the general praise in the contemporary press.

Excerpts of Pfeiffer's poetical production crop up in Late-Victorian anthologies such as Elizabeth Sharp's *Women Voices* (1887), later republished as *Women Poets of the Victorian Era* (1891), and Eric Robertson's *English Poetesses* (1883). The latter includes very short critical biographies of the authors: as regards Pfeiffer, the editor begins with the unflattering consideration that "Mrs. Emily Pfeiffer has made more bids for the highest place among women poets of the day than any other, but it may be questioned whether she attains to that place" (Robertson 1883: 348). Robertson's undergirding assumption was the intellectual inferiority of women and the subsequent weakness of their artistic creations, which were therefore doomed to be forgotten within a few years.

Indeed, in the course of the nineteenth century, Pfeiffer – as well as most Late-Victorian women poets – has been largely ignored. The critical neglect has confirmed, however inadvertently, Vita Sackville-West's disparaging opinion about female poetry of the 1870s, which appeared utterly uninteresting, in the

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[2] *The Westminster Review* 1879, LV (January-April), "Belles Lettres" p. 590. Available online https://www.archive.org/details/westminsterrevi01volgoog/page/n614 (visited 10/10/2018).

critic's view, with a few exceptions. In "Women Poets of the Seventies" (1929), Pfeiffer is mentioned twice, first as an instance of nascent feminism in Britain and then as an example of the widening range of opportunities opening up for women of letters at the time (Sackville-West 1929: 116, 118). Poets like Pfeiffer could avail themselves of unprecedented possibilities: they could study and contribute to social change through their writing. And yet, Sackville-West contended, they did not.

At the end of the 1990s, Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain edited a collection of essays aimed at recovering some of the forgotten poetic voices of the Victorian era, including Pfeiffer. Kathleen Hickok's chapter in this volume sets out to investigate the reasons at the root of her marginality, yet no conclusive answer is provided to the title question "Why is this woman still missing?". The lack of critical attention, Hickok suggests, might be due among other things to the absence of heirs as well as to her predilection for the sonnet form, which by the 1880s had gone out of fashion.

Pfeiffer was regarded as an excellent writer of sonnets by her contemporaries. Even Robertson (1883: 350), for all his disparaging attitude towards modern "poetesses", recognized that "Mrs. Pfeiffer's most abiding reputation will rest upon her sonnets, and of these the best deal with two great questions of the day – evolution and the woman's sphere". She is also mentioned among the best living English sonneteers, together with J. A. Symonds, Theodore Watts and Mathilde Blind (Noel 1885: 47). The latter was a woman with no heirs either, whose poems were however edited and published posthumously by Arthur Symons with the help of Richard Garnett. Nonetheless, Blind suffered just like Pfeiffer and many others from the overall critical neglect reserved to women poets, and has languished in obscurity for a long time. On the whole, Late-Victorian female poets were not extensively studied before the 1990s. Emily Pfeiffer is still largely ignored today, and yet, as Hickock advocated in 1999, she would deserve more attention in terms of "aesthetic merit" and a broader recognition of her "significance in literary history" (Hickok 1999: 373). What appears to be crucial to a full reappraisal of her work is to place it within a wider frame, that is in the longer history of female authorship, as well as in the context

of Victorian rising feminism, as Sackville-West did not fail to see; furthermore, some of her poems and non-fictional writings could be read in connection with what Yopie Prins has recently defined the culture of "Ladies' Greek", namely "an ever-expanding female domain of classical letters" (Prins 2017: 182).

This essay focuses on Pfeiffer's *Studies from the Antique* (1880), "Kassandra" and "Klytemnestra", in the light of a growing interest in ancient Greece on the part of Victorian women along with their active engagement in the cause of emancipation. The Woman Question and what by the end of the century emerged as a "Greek Question" ("A Woman's View on the Greek Question" 1891: 1) were at the time closely interrelated. Overall, Hellenism had come to prominence as a complex discourse, inextricably imbricated with sexual politics: from a female perspective, it could even become "heretical" (Fiske 2008), bringing to the fore sexual double standards, in the past as in the present, working out new systems of values and alternative models of femininity.

2. Re-reading ancient tragedy: Emily Pfeiffer and the Classics

From the very beginning, Ladies' Greek was bound up in coeval momentous transformations of women's social status, especially as far as higher (and classical) education was concerned. In this respect, it was inherently "political", as Tracy Olverson argued in her chapter on "Worlds without Women: Pfeiffer's Political Hellenism" (Olverson 2010: 83), for it implied an on-going confrontation with the most controversial issues of the time. Even as a traveller to the East, and especially inspired by "the contemplation of ancient Greek art in Athens", Pfeiffer was always alert to possible "indications of the present position and future prospects of the question of sex-equality"[3]. As a poet, she contributed to a creative rethinking of ancient literature and myth, along with Amy Levy, Augusta Webster, A. Mary F. Robinson and many others. Like them, she was well-aware

[3] *The Westminster Review* 1886, 70 (July-October), "Politics, Sociology, Voyages and Travels" p. 254. Available online https://www.archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.21712/page/n273 (visited 10/10/2018).

of the connection between past and present, and of the implications of classical learning in terms of access to education and Culture as a whole.

The relationship between British culture and antiquity had been an established one since the end of the eighteenth century, but it was in the nineteenth that the main focus shifted from Rome to Greece and during the 1870s that women first entered what was increasingly becoming a site of contention between academic and popular culture. In the hands of women, “a bright and serene Hellas” (Evangelista 2009: 32) revealed multifarious dark sides which challenged the prevailing idea of Greece as a realm of aesthetic perfection, while bringing to the fore an obscure, Dionysian Hellas. In turning to the ancient world, women writers and pioneer scholars also prompted an overall re-structuring of Classics, as an institutionalized field of study, raising doubts about standard curricula and examinations, for instance, or promoting previously ancillary subjects such as archaeology. Overall, they contributed to the complex Late-Victorian classical reception, as “an active production for the transmission and transformation of classics” (Prins 2017: 26).

Pfeiffer was not a scholar herself but lived in a period of transition between the self-taught and the professional classicist educated in the newly opened ladies’ colleges. The engagement with Greece in Victorian Britain took different shapes at different levels, from theatre to painting, from translation and popular lectures to scholarly studies. Crucially, antiquity provided a means of tackling contemporary sexual anxiety and desire: not unlike the classic revival in painting, women’s poetry dealing with the ancient world allowed to inscribe and explore daring topics safely displaced in a classical Elsewhere, so as to “visualize passion through antiquity” (Goldhill 2011: 77). V century BC tragedy attracted particular attention inasmuch as it disclosed a threatening and yet fascinating dark side replete with vehement passions, destructive desires, and strong-minded heroines, thus offering an opportunity to test alternative values which would be destabilizing in a Victorian context.

2.1. Kassandra, the "sun-stricken"

It is not surprising, therefore, that Pfeiffer turned to the Greek world and to V century theatre in particular. Her *Studies from the Antique* (1880) are pivoted on two of the most controversial *dramatis personae* of the ancient past. Kassandra and Klytemnestra are each at the centre of two coupled sonnets forming a complex multi-layered diptych in which past and present are closely linked and mythical women provide at once a model and a warning for nineteenth-century society. The title might refer, as Olverson claims, to Charles Mackay's *Studies from the Antique* (1864), which included a poem called "Cassandra", whereby implying a Victorian male tradition of verse dealing with the siege of Troy (Olverson 2010: 95). Here the prophetess of Ilion is often represented as a seer, pointing to the "signs of the times" and warning her contemporaries of impending catastrophes. From this angle, Kassandra might stand as a symbol of classical authority and also embody the role of the sage-artist, the events of Troy being "a broadly applicable story of social doom" (*ibid.*). This is what we see in Mackay's "Cassandra", where the eponymous heroine is but the voice of the Victorian poet, who speaks "*as* and *for* her" (*ibid.*). The identity of titles does not in itself testify to a direct influence of the Scottish writer. It might even be casual, or most likely suggest that Pfeiffer had read Mackay's poems – either in the first edition (1864) or in the volume reissued in 1876 – and later reused a title she had found particularly evocative of the tradition which Mackay exemplifies. It is possible, as Olverson contends, that in dramatizing the ancient Trojan seer, Pfeiffer was deliberately co-opting – and at the same time resisting – elements of nineteenth-century sage discourse (*ibid.*: 94). Another correspondence between Pfeiffer and the Scottish poet might be found in the latter's Preface to the second edition of his *Studies from the Antique* (1876) which bears testimony to the author's commitment to Greek culture as a repertoire of ideas whose value and relevance survive the passing of time, though their form may vary. In response to recent criticism, Mackay insists that he has written his classicizing poems "in the most reverent spirit", without adding anything to ancient myths, only "suggesting that out of the infinite interpretations of which they are susceptible, some might happen to fit the sorrows and the aspirations and record the experience of our time" (Mackay 1876: 451). It is the underlying connection between the ancient

world and modern Britain as well as the possibility of interpreting mythology in different ways without betraying its spirit that might have resonated with Pfeiffer. In all other respects but this, however, her "Kassandra" departs from Mackay's prophetess, who is, as Olverson claims, no more than an allusion to the classical world, only meant to cement the poet's own authority as a Victorian seer[4].

What Pfeiffer does, instead, is staging two classical figures, retelling their stories while suggesting multiple imbrications between the past and the present. In so doing, she aligns herself with a longer tradition of Ladies' Greek, looking back to V century tragedy to rethink and reframe the roles of powerful female characters. The use of a mediating voice to bring into sharp focus the heroines' subjectivities hints at the claim to classical literacy of the (New) Woman of Greek Letters.

Significantly, the first sonnet is dedicated to Kassandra whose power of speech was most fascinating, not least because of its unintelligibility. In the *Oresteia* she speaks only before the Chorus, though her warnings are ignored, just as they were at Troy, because her gift of prophecy is fatally compromised. The pathos of Kassandra's words did not fail to impress Late-Victorian scholars; in particular, what attracted attention was her mysterious cry upon her arrival to Argos in the *Agamemnon*, the prophetic *otototoi*[5] which "simultaneously resists and provokes translation" (Prins 2017: 45) and which would also prompt Virginia Woolf's reflections on classical literacy in "On Not Knowing Greek". In the Æschylean version, the outburst follows the prophetess' obstinate silence and stillness before Klytemnestra who bids her enter the palace, a behaviour which is not due – as the Chorus and the queen initially seem to believe – to a foreign tongue; rather, it proceeds either from fear or defiance on the part of the captive princess. Kassandra was a controversial figure in antiquity: first given prominence by Æschylus, she was characterized from the start by an ambivalence which would become stereotypical in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, that is the tension between

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[4] The incipit of Mackay's "Cassandra" sets the tone for the following five stanzas: "We live in a time of sorrow, / A time of sorrow and change, / When the Olde goeth down to destruction / And the new cometh sadly to life, / Unshapely, unwelcome, uncared for". (Mackay 1876: 489, ll. 1-5)

[5] The English translator renders it as follows: "O-o-o-oh! Horror! No! / O Apollo, O Apollo!" (*Ag.* 1072-1073).

two different roles, the “pathetic victim” and the “maniacally assertive seer” (Collard, in Æschylus 2008: xxviii).

Unresolved contradictions of roles – assertive sage and passive victim, desiring subject and object of men’s lust – are at the heart of Pfeiffer’s revision, which draws from different versions of Kassandra’s story. Her heroine is indeed a seer, yet utterly dependent upon male benevolence. It is thanks to Apollo that she has been endowed with the gift of prophecy in Sonnet I, and it is because of him that she is deprived of it in Sonnet II. Although not explicitly stated, both gift and loss have to do with sexual reasons; the connection is suggested however by the Æschylean hypotext. In the *Agamemnon* the prophetess has deceived Apollo, refusing him after she had consented to become his lover, and has been punished accordingly. She has offended the god, yet she is also a victim of his lust and unforgiving wrath; moreover, she is brought to a foreign city as Agamemnon’s concubine. Looking back to this tradition, Pfeiffer endows her Kassandra with both weakness and strength, subjection and power, resignation and self-assertion. If Sonnet I focuses on the euphoric consequences of Apollo’s influence on the Trojan princess along with *her* desire for him, Sonnet II dwells on the dysphoric results of the same power on a – now victimized – heroine. The incipit of the first poem presents the reader with a young maiden at the time of an innocent meeting with the sweet sunlight by the streams of Ilion, a foreshadowing of the erotic encounter with the god:

> Virgin of Troy, the days were well with thee
> When wandering singing by the singing streams
> Of Ilion, thou beheldest the golden gleams
> Of the *bold sun* that might not faced be,
> Come murmuring to thy feet *caressingly*;
> But best that day when, steeped in noontide dreams,
> The young Apollo wrapped thee in his beams,
> And quenched his love in thine as in a sea!
> And later, in thy tower ‘twas sweet to teach
> The loveless night the joys high day had known;
> To dream, to wake – and find thy love impeach
> Late sleep with kisses, and thy spirit flown
> To his, and the ivory gates of speech
> Breaking in words as burning as thy own. (Pfeiffer 1880: 45)

The touch of the sunbeams on her feet prefigures the overtly sexual images of the following lines which describe Kassandra's passion for the bold sun, who first makes his appearance as "young Apollo" at line 7. Sonnet I concludes with Apollo's love gift to Kassandra, namely the power to speak with "words as burning as his own" (14). The image of the "ivory gates of speech" (13) opening before her is significant, for it evokes a recurrent trope describing Victorian women's access to culture, the "gates of the Temple of Learning" (Harrison 1915: 117)[6], often identified with Classical learning. Nevertheless, as for nineteenth century women the conquest of knowledge was difficult, so for the ancient prophetess the power to speak with authority is short-lived: the ivory gates suddenly close and, in the initial lines of Sonnet II, the princess and happy lover has turned into a prisoner of war.

> How far from Ilion, and how far from joy,
> Captive Kassandra, wert thou, when in sight
> Of conquering Greece thou satest on thy height
> Of shame – a waif from out the wreck of Troy!
> Thine still the burning word, but slave employ
> Had from thy trembling lip effaced quite
> The kisses of the god, and heavens's light
> Now shone upon thee only to destroy.
> For thee, sun-stricken one, th' abysmal sties
> Of sin lay open as the secret grave –
> Things of which speech seemed madness – while thy cries
> On wronged Apollo lost the way to save;

[6] Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928) became the first Research Fellow in Cambridge in 1898, after a long career as an independent lecturer and archaeologist. She studied Classics at Newnham (1874-1879) and sat the Classical Tripos at a time when examinations were still unofficial for women. "Examinations were novelties then", she wrote about the new Matriculation Examination of the London University, "I felt the whole honour of the College was on my shoulders and I was almost senseless with nervousness (Harrison 1925: 35). In her autobiographical writings she often emphasized the struggles to acquire a higher education as a Victorian girl. As a pioneer of Classical Studies, she would always lament the subordinate position of women students due, among other things, to the lack of previous training in Greek. No woman but Harrison figures in Frank Turner's *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1981), one of the first comprehensive studies on Victorian Hellenism. Here she is remembered for being a controversial scholar, though Turner focuses on the early works, where her most daring ideas were not yet developed. Later criticism (Hurst 2006; Fiske 2008; Evangelista 2011; Prins 2017) has given her a prominent place in Late-Victorian classical scholarship, as a key figure in female education who established Greek as a symbol for women's intellectual emancipation. She is famously mentioned in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and has been the subject of some biographies, most notably Mary Beard's *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (2000).

> Till at the last, the faith of upturned eyes
> Brought him to right, as death to free the slave. (Pfeiffer 1880: 46)

As is evident, the second sonnet marks an abrupt shift of place and situation for which no reason is provided. This is how the daughter of Priam is introduced in the *Agamemnon*, silent and silenced victim of Apollo whom she calls “my destroyer” (*Ag*. 1081, 1086) alluding to his attempt to rape her at Troy and her current situation at Argos. Loxias has left her utterly powerless and now condemns her to a most cruel fate, for she knows she is soon to be murdered by Klytemnestra. Pfeiffer’s sonnet emphasizes the loss of Kassandra’s authority as a female seer and speaker, while also hinting at the god’s role in her demise, ironically suggested by the reference to “wronged Apollo” (12). In Sonnet II then Kassandra is a victim of the god’s desire – of which, in the *Agamemnon*, she is ashamed[7] – whereas she is previously represented as a desiring subject, willing to yield to “the golden gleams / Of the bold sun” (I. 3-4). In her overwhelming passion for Apollo, Kassandra is indeed “more Euripidean than Æschylean” (Olverson 2010: 92), that is less a sage than a sensual woman, less a victim than a happy lover. The incongruity is left deliberately unresolved: the juxtaposition of roles and blending of different sources raises doubts about traditional accounts of the tragic heroine, as well as pointing to the instability of widespread ideas of femininity which were increasingly challenged in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In Victorian painting Kassandra is often portrayed as a victim, from Frederick Sandy’s 1863 *Cassandra*, where the princess is crying out in despair, to Solomon Solomon’s *Ajax and Cassandra* (1886) showing the rape of the prophetess by Ajax, who, according to one version of the story, was thereby punished by the goddess Athena because he had violated her temple. Solomon’s Cassandra is naked and as white as the marble at her back, desperately trying to disentangle herself from the warrior’s arms. The princess of Troy is also prominent in Evelyn De Morgan’s aestheticized fin-de-siècle version, where she stands on a carpet of roses, tearing her hair while the fallen city is still burning in the background. As regards theatrical versions, Kassandra’s popularity on the stage would grow in

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[7] “Before now, I was ashamed to speak of this” (*Ag*. 1203).

the course of the 1880s[8] but by that time the tragic figure was already well-known for her overwhelming passions and suffering.

2.2. Klytemnestra's "oily rage"

As we have seen, the victimisation prevails in Pfeiffer's second Sonnet as well, where the daring maiden of the first poem becomes a harmless prisoner on her way to death, as proleptically revealed in the last line ("death to free the slave"). The scene of the captive woman is reminiscent of another tragic character, Iphigenia, who was sacrificed for the sake of the Trojan war. The parallel implicitly connects "Kassandra" with the following sonnets on Klytemnestra, for in the palace of Argos the prisoner will fall prey of Iphigenia's revengeful mother. Like the imposing figure in Frederic Leighton's contemporary painting, Klytemnestra is waiting for the Argives to return home (*Clytemnestra from the Battlements of Argos*, 1874) and ready to carry out her murderous plot against her husband. In the *Agamemnon* it is a Watchman who is standing guard on a tower when a signal announcing the defeat of the enemies is finally seen. Despite the victory, however, an ominous anxiety looms over the city, mainly stemming from the absence of its legitimate leader. The opposition between male (legitimate) and female (illegitimate) power is given expression at the onset of the tragedy in the words of the Watchman himself who laments how the house "is not managed for the best as it was before" (*Ag.* 19).

The tension clearly resonated with Pfeiffer, so that the uneasy connection between women and power is at the heart of her sonnets on Klytemnestra. The first introduces the heroine as a strong-minded woman who has been thinking about her revenge for ten long years, and has now accomplished it.

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[8] Several adaptations from the *Oresteia* were performed in the course of the 1880s, most noteworthy George Warr's *The Tale of Troy* in 1883. The Girton student and future archaeologist Eugénie Sellers Strong played the role of Kassandra in the Greek version, while Jane Harrison was Penelope.

> *Daughter* of gods and men, great ruling will,
> Seething in oily rage within the sphere
> Which gods and men assign the woman here,
> Till, stricken where the wound approved thee still
> *Mother* and mortal, all the tide of ill
> Rushed through the gap, and nothing more seemed dear
> But power to wreak high ruin, nothing clear
> But the long dream you waited to fulfil.
> *Mother* and *spouse* – queen of the king of men –
> What fury brought Ægysthus to thy side?
> That bearded semblant, men to outward ken,
> But else mere mawworm, made to fret man's pride;
> Woman, thy foot was on thy tyrant then –
> Mother, thou wert avenged for love defied! (Pfeiffer 1880: 47, emphasis mine)

While the murder of Agamemnon was "the long dream [she] waited to fulfil" (l. 8), Kassandra's was not pre-meditated, yet the Trojan princess brought to Greece by the victorious warrior could not be spared, for in Klytemnestra's eyes she embodied the last of many blows her husband inflicted her. Despite their connection in the *Agamemnon*, where they meet before the palace of Argos in an awkward encounter, the two characters are not explicitly linked in *Studies from the Antique*, so as to avoid any interpretation in terms of contrasting stereotypes of womanhood – the victim and the monstrous badwoman. Rather, they are two compelling *dramatis personae* who eschew and unsettle conventional definitions of femininity. "Klytemnestra" significantly begins *after* the slaughter in the palace of Argos. Not unlike other classical heroines in contemporary poetical revisions, such as the Medeas of Augusta Webster (1870) and Amy Levy (1884), the scenes of the murders are not foregrounded. Rather, at the core of their rewriting is the woman's subjectivity, while emphasis is laid either on the causes at the root of the crime or on the consequences of it. Here the assassinations are not dramatized – not even offstage – instead, they are either narrated as past events or foreshadowed as ominously imminent. The expunction of violent scenes could be read within a process of de-spectacularisation of the female criminal whereby the focus of attention shifts "from sensationalism to subjectivity" (Fiske 2008: 25). Crucially, Pfeiffer's Klytemnestra is not represented as a scheming *femme fatale*; she is above all a daughter (1); a mother (5, 9, 14); a spouse (9); a woman (13) and eventually "woman and Greek" at the beginning of Sonnet II:

> *Woman* and Greek – so doubly trained in art! –
> Spreading the purple for the conqueror's tread,
> Bowing with feline grace thy royal head –
> How perfect whelped-robbed *lioness* thy part!
> One wrong the more to wring the ancient smart,
> Than three swift strokes, and the slow hope blooms red,
> Who shamed the hero lays him with the dead,
> Where nevermore his word may vex her heart.
> *Bold queen*, what were to thee the gods of Greece?
> What had been any god of any name,
> More than the lion-heart you made to cease,
> Or the live dog to all your humours tame? –
> The very furies left your soul in peace
> Until Orestes' sword drave home their claim. (Pfeiffer 1880: 48, emphasis mine)

The emphasis is again laid on Klytemnestra's suffering as well as on her authority: not a usurper nor an unwomanly woman playing the leader, as she was in ancient drama, but a "bold queen" (9), who has justly avenged her daughter and killed "the hero" who has vexed her heart (8).

Revenge is what connects the first Sonnet with the second, and it is a key theme in *Agamemnon* as well. In fact, the elements looking back to the *Oresteia* are manifold: "the purple for the conqueror's tread" (2) for instance, recalls the purple cloth on which Agamemnon was persuaded to walk by his wife's cunning words. Likewise, the images of the lioness (4) and the lion (11) are drawn from Æschylus, inasmuch as the lion here stands as the emblem of the house of Atreus and is a figure for Agamemnon himself. Even Klytemnestra's boldness recurs in the trilogy where it refers to her audacity, with a negative connotation. Like her half-sister Helen, the queen of Argos is characterized by an excess – in terms of both ambition and sexuality – "a daring past all daring" (*Ag*. 408) that leads her to challenge all boundaries, to transgress women's proper place and therefore destroy the socio-political order. In *Libation Bearers*, Klytemnestra is reproved by her children and finally killed by Orestes because she dared what she should not. Contrariwise, in Pfeiffer's version, Klytemnestra's boldness acquires a positive connotation: she ran the city of Argos with her "great ruling will" while the king was away (1), then killed him, an unfaithful "tyrant" (13), upon his return. Her rage and revenge mainly stem from the death of Iphigenia: in Æschylus, the sacrifice of the young maiden is narrated by the Chorus of Argives in the *Agamemnon*, but

its significance much underplayed. This was indeed Agamemnon's great fault and, as Klytemnestra herself claims in the *Oresteia*[9], it has never weighted on her husband's reputation. The cruel bloodshed is alluded to by Electra in the *Libation Bearers*, where however Orestes downplays it as a sacrifice his father offered in honour of Zeus. Pfeiffer expands on these sexual double standards which had strong resonances for a Victorian audience, throwing into sharp relief the wrongs Klytemnestra has suffered and the ensuing anger.

At the core of the sonnets dedicated to the Greek heroine is her "oily rage", a long-running resentment against Agamemnon, but also, in a broader sense, against male authority which for too many years has confined a "great ruling will" (l. 1) like her own within a stifling domesticity. By referring to the Victorian trope of the woman's "sphere" (l. 2), the poet implicitly calls into question nineteenth-century sexual double standards alluding to the destructive potential lurking in patriarchal order. In dwelling upon the pain Klytemnestra has endured, the speaker seems to approve of her rebellion, notwithstanding the violence it brought about. Like Medea's fury in Webster's and Levy's dramas, Klytemnestra's cruelty is understandable, being the outcome of a long story of abuses. In this respect, Pfeiffer's character seems to anticipate Janet Case's view of the heroine which in turn influenced Virginia Woolf's "On Not Knowing Greek". In "Women in the Plays of Æschylus" (1914) Case defines the dramatic figure as the Æschylean ideal of womanhood, albeit "poisoned at the source and turned into evil things by the intolerable pain of wrong and suffering" (Case, in Prins 2017: 41).

Pain is indeed what provides the connection between Pfeiffer's heroines, for their lives share a *fil rouge*, a red thread of violence, which at a textual level emerges in the isotopy of wounding: if Kassandra is "sun-stricken" ("Kassandra" II. 9), Klytemnestra is "stricken" ("Klytemnestra" I. 4) where she had already been wounded, on "the ancient smart" (II. 5). Both poems are structured upon the dichotomy power *vs.* disempowerment: in Sonnet I Kassandra is given the power

[9] She forcefully asserts it in the *Agamemnon*, after the slaughter of her husband and his concubine (Ag. 1412-1424), then alludes to the sexual double standards that condemned her and saved Agamemnon when confronting Orestes in the *Libation Bearers* (*LB* 918). She would insist on the injustice she had to suffer even after her own death, as a ghost in the *Eumenides* (*Eum.* 94-116).

to see and speak, but is silenced and imprisoned in Sonnet II. As to Klytemnestra, she seems an unwavering avenger, yet on closer examination, her fury appears as caught in the middle between the abuses of the past and the violence still to come. Sonnet I opens with a brief excursus of the queen's background of suffering, starting even before her birth – and culminating in the last betrayal, Iphigenia's murder. According to myth, Klytemnestra was the daughter of Leda, queen of Sparta, raped by Zeus in disguise as a swan while she was washing herself by a river[10]. As Klytemnestra's daughter Iphigenia fell victim of men's violence and was sacrificed for the sake of war, so her mother Leda was an object of lust and abuse. Leda's rape by Zeus is alluded to in the very first line of Pfeiffer's "Klytemnestra", where the eponymous protagonist is called "Daughter of gods and men", a hint to her half-divine ancestry. Pain, power and rage define the character at the onset of the poem thus setting the scene for socio-political instability and future catastrophe. The tragedy unfolds at lines 5-8, where the slaughter at Argos is evoked in a rapid sequence which leads to the city's "high ruin" (7) through a series of events, underscored by the enjambements. What we see is a quick shift from resentment to action, from the previous stagnation to an overwhelming "tide of ill" (5) whose impetuous rush (6) will not stop until the heroine's dream is finally fulfilled (8).

Emphasis here is laid on the suffering mother and wronged wife who finally avenges "love defied", whereas there is no hint to the curse looming upon the Atreides and thus to the fate that Agamemnon, Klytemnestra and then Orestes could not escape. As in the *Oresteia*, the queen plays an active role in devising the net which would entrap – figuratively as well as literally – her husband, whereas Ægisthus, her lover, is given a much weaker part. A "mere mawwarm" (I. 12) in Pfeiffer's poem, he is despised as an effeminate "cowardly lion" (*Ag.* 1224) in Æschylus' trilogy, in contrast with the Homeric version, where he is mainly responsible for the plot.

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[10] Helen, future wife of Menelaus and then of Paris, was the offspring of this union, while the paternity of her (half-)sister Klytemnestra is less certain. According to Æschylus' version, her father was Tyndareus: "Daughter of Tyndareus, Queen Klytemnestra" (*Ag.* 84).

In the light of the chain of suffering which started even before Klytemnestra was born, her outburst seems justified, as violence rooted in violence. The insistence on her being “*still* / mother and mortal” (l. 4-5, emphasis mine) brings further attention on her subjectivity and the wrongs she endured. Male oppression has stained her existence since its very beginning, so that her “oily rage” eventually strikes back, in “three swift strokes” (ll. 6). The number three evokes the Æschylean trilogy as well, for here Klytemnestra stabs her husband thrice, while Ægisthus is in turn slain by Orestes’ sword with three thrusts[11]. The final line of Sonnet II foreshadows future bloody deeds, hinting at Orestes’ homecoming to avenge his father, an event which is central in the *Libation Bearers* and whose consequences are dealt with in the last tragedy of the *Oresteia*, the *Eumenides*.

The focus of Pfeiffer’s sonnets is however neither Orestes nor Agamemnon but the outstanding figure of Klytemnestra, her ambition and determination, her power and rebellion. As we see in John Collier’s 1882 canvas, what is most striking about this dramatic heroine is her unflinching determination in carrying out her bloody plot. Collier’s paintings – both the 1882 and the 1914 versions – foreground the woman’s fiery glance and statuesque pose, while drawing attention to the blood dripping on the white marble of the palace stairs. She is caught, as in Pfeiffer’s poem, just after the slaughter, triumphant – if only momentarily – over tyranny.

Nonetheless, Collier’s *Clytemnestra* endorses current stereotypes of womanhood, representing her essentially as a *femme fatale*, like other female figures featuring in much Late-Victorian painting about antiquity. A significant exception in this respect is, in Goldhill’s view, the classicizing art of John William Waterhouse (1849-1917) that explores desire either by focusing on moments of suspension – that is to say *before* destructive eros is fully acted out – or by destabilizing conventional images of femininity (Goldhill 2011). Waterhouse’s figures are disturbing precisely because they avoid categorization: like the nymphs in *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896), they are only potentially dangerous

[11] The number recurs elsewhere in the *Libation Bearers*, for instance, when Orestes knocks three times at the door of the palace of Argos (*LB* 655) and when the Chorus laments the triple misfortune (the murder of Tyesthes’ children, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and the death of Agamemnon) that has ruined the house of Atreus, at the very end of the tragedy (*LB* 1065).

while keeping a “wistful beauty and mysterious sadness, as if they cannot help what they are doing, and rather regret it” (Wood 1981: 144). Not much differently, as we have seen, Pfeiffer’s Kassandra is a victim no less than a murderer: if in Collier’s canvas she unequivocally embodies threatening femininity (a characterization that will be all the more apparent in the 1914 version), in Pfeiffer’s sonnet she is first and foremost a woman, an individual with her own story and experiences. Bearing this crucial difference in mind, it is however worth underlining that both poem and painting share an emphasis on colours and on red in particular. As noted before, red undergirds Pfeiffer’s sonnets signifying pain and violence while standing as a warning to patriarchy of the latent threat of oppression. Moreover, the attention to colour recalls the V century BC trilogy, which is permeated by black *vs.* white and dark *vs.* light oppositions, and whose chromatic contrasts inspired some Victorian classicizing paintings like Leighton’s *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon* (1869). Besides, it is significant that a similar chromatism appears in other female rewritings of Greek myth and history, like Levy’s “Xantippe” (1879) and “Medea” (1884), where red, black and white form one of the structuring paradigms of the poems. Such chromatic tensions add to the disturbing resonances of these mythical revisions which not only dramatize women’s challenge to the *status quo* in a classical setting, but also and more crucially interrogate Victorian sexual double standards, putting to the test male and female roles in marriage, politics, civil life and culture at large.

3. The darkness of Ancient Greece: Emily Pfeiffer and late-Victorian Hellenism

As previous studies have demonstrated (Hurst 2006; Fiske 2008; Olverson 2010; Prins 2017), female classicism is an integral part of the intense Victorian debate around Greece, an arena of discourses involving a wide range of questions, from morality to politics and, of course, gender. Even more crucially, as we have seen, women’s appropriation of the classics contributed to work out a different view of the ancient world, delving into its irrational “dark” sides and thus undermining from within what Frank Turner has called Victorian humanistic Hellenism (Turner 1981), that is the humanist tradition which informed the reception of Greece in

Britain throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. The prevailing vision of an idealized Greece, mediated by German culture and most influentially theorized by Matthew Arnold, was increasingly challenged from the late 1860s onwards, notably by Walter Pater who, while subscribing to Winckelmann's ideal of Greek art as characterized by noble simplicity and grandeur, was also revising the very meaning of this ideal. Pater, as well as other intellectuals and artists – men and women – articulated "a language of dissent" (Evangelista 2009: 11) within the discourse of Hellenism, so that by the turn of the century a more complex notion of Greece had emerged, which was aware of the different and historically determined views preceding it, in line with Pater's "cumulative sense of history" (Evangelista 2009: 4). This multi-layered image is perhaps nowhere better brought out than in the words of the Greek scholar and translator Gilbert Murray, who in 1897 saw "the serene and classical Greek of Winckelmann and Goethe" as a mere phantom. "He has been succeeded", said Murray,

> by an aesthetic and fleshly Greek in fine raiment, […] a phantom too, as unreal as those marble palaces in which he habitually takes ease […] Many other abstract Greeks are about us, no one perhaps greatly better than another; yet each has served to correct and complement his predecessor. (Murray 1897: xix-xv)

He concluded by remarking that the Hellene of the 1890s, though "without the Hellenism", or for this very reason, was the expression of a more adequate conception (*ibid.*). The 1890s were also the decade which marked the beginning of a large-scale reception of Nietzsche in Britain. The philosopher's work on ancient tragedy disclosed what Pater had already seen, that is "the suffering, sorrow and darkness that are central but often lie hidden in the core of Greek classicism" (Evangelista 2014: 179).

Hence women were not alone in complicating the terms of nineteenth-century Hellenism. They contributed to a wider cultural context, wherein a more brightly coloured and at the same time more obscure version of Hellas was coming to prominence, uncovering its "elements of strangeness, passion, colour"

(Evangelista 2009: 43)[12] while all had previously been sweetness and light. For this reason, it is perhaps no coincidence that Pfeiffer chose to entitle her poems *Studies*, recalling Pater's *Studies*[13], while also possibly hinting at a more in-depth connection with the eminent classicist's idea of the ancient world. Pfeiffer – along with other poets and intellectuals, like Amy Levy and Jane Harrison – was indebted to Pater's idea of Greece as existing only in fragments that could be reconstructed and interpreted by "a 'visionary' rather than a historian, a philologist, or a scholar" (Evangelista 2009: 6).

The idea of fragmentation might also be at the core of Pfeiffer's choice of the sonnet, a form "well-suited to the aesthetic project elaborated by Walter Pater" (Houston 2003: 153). In this light, *Studies from the Antique* could be read as fragments of the reception of Kassandra and Klytemnestra, where different mythical and tragic versions coalesce[14]. Furthermore, in appropriating such a popular genre Pfeiffer was situating herself in a wider context of sonnet writing in the Victorian age, at a time when the form was still widely used by poets of both sexes to deal with a variety of topics. Throughout the nineteenth century "editors and critics emphasized the labor and discipline required to read and write these small, formally constrained poems" (Houston 1999), which were often described in terms of aesthetic objects, such as pearls and diamonds[15]. *Studies from the Antique* were praised as "veritable *gems* of poetic art" (Pfeiffer 1882: 8, emphasis

[12] Here Evangelista quotes from an unpublished manuscript which would serve as an Introduction to the volume on Greek art that Pater was assembling at the end of the 1870s (see also Evangelista 2009: 171).

[13] *Studies from the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and *Greek Studies*. As is known, the latter were published posthumously, though the proofs of a volume including some of the essays later featuring in *Greek Studies* were ready for printing by 1878. According to Arthur Symons, in 1889 Pater was assembling another volume on Greek art which was to be called *Studies of Greek Remains* (Evangelista 2014: 182).

[14] It is worth noting that in the same years Amy Levy (1861-1889) was writing "Medea" and had recently published "Xantippe", two fascinating poems with a classical setting, both subtitled "A Fragment".

[15] Some examples of the sonnet as a small concrete thing and aesthetic object in Victorian anthologies are in Chapman 2002: 101. In this respect, Chapman also brings attention to the paradoxical status of the genre in Victorian sonnet criticism, as a valuable commodity and "an anti-commodity, beyond economic value […] isolated and removed from cultural exchange" (*ibid.*: 105).

mine) while Pfeiffer's sonnets as a whole appeared no less valuable, "among the finest *gems* produced in modern times" (*ibid.*, emphasis mine).

If it is true that the form had no explicit gendered connotations (Houston: 2003) and sonnets by men and women alike were generally appreciated and widely anthologized, it is also true that *Studies from the Antique* reframe the stories of two controversial figures which *did* have political resonance and gendered associations for Victorian readers. Whilst being part of the coeval revision of the Hellenic ideal, Pfeiffer's rewriting of Greek myth simultaneously offers an original perspective on the ancient world which is marked by gender.

The female pioneers of Classical Studies articulated new ways to look at Greek culture, embracing the connection between past and present – well-established by the mid-Victorian age – while shifting attention to the contemporary Woman Question. Such a perspective was unique to women for it afforded a glimpse of patriarchal oppression *from within*. Equally important, female position into Victorian Hellenism was defined by its marginality, which did not mean exclusion from but rather engagement with the ancient world at different levels, from popular to scholarly culture. As Prins points out, it is from this being on the boundaries that the erotics of Greek originated, that is a narrative of desire which shaped women's relation to Hellenism, always oscillating between knowing and not knowing, ambition and frustration. The emerging Woman of Greek Letters was "a mediating figure between classical literature and its popular reception" (Prins 2017: xi) in a period of transition from informal to formal education in Classics, when Jane Harrison's professional qualifications still required quotation marks ("A Woman's View on the Greek Question" 1891:1)[16].

Emily Pfeiffer was among those Victorian women who contributed to make classical myths and dramas "available to a wider range of readers: as passionate amateurs, they turned to Greek tragedy not only to perform their passion for

[16] "A Woman's View on the Greek Question" was an interview with Jane Harrison published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1891. The title is telling, for it introduces Harrison as *the* authority in the field, almost as a living Greek. Still, what is implied in the article is that she embodies "a version of classical scholarship on the boundaries of the profession" (Prins 2017: 18).

ancient Greek but also to transfer this experience to others through various creative transformations" (*ibid*.: 243).

Pfeiffer's *Studies from the Antique* call for a cultural authority over ancient culture that Victorian women were increasingly claiming, while still remaining in the margins of classical scholarship. In reframing a tragic subject in a highly codified form like the sonnet, Pfeiffer advocates for herself the role of interpreter antiquity, as a Woman of Greek Letters entitled to give, in James Thomson's (B.V.) words for Xantippe, "her own statement of the case" (Thomson 1881: 223), that is her own view of the past, exploring and exposing its obscure sides which speak to the present.

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