

Reclaiming Stories – Invoking the Goddess

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that values personal storytelling and autobiographical insights gathered through ‘research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political’.¹ The process of telling and sharing stories can be transformational and empowering, allowing for a more expansive and liberated self that is able to critique and resist the audit culture, synonymous with processes such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that have turned universities into ‘anxiety machines’.^{2,3} In earlier work, we adapted our autobiographical experiences via established fairy tales to create an original text where we could explore our roles as women academics and resist dominant discourse in academia that is often male, heteronormative, objective, expert⁴. We described ourselves as ‘middling witches’ doing the domestic and intensive labour in a land far, far away whilst the wizards lived in castles, feeling important but doing very little⁵. We developed a method of collaborative autoethnography,⁶ writing ourselves as the protagonists in contemporary fairy tales that critiqued patriarchal narratives, developing a method of storying ourselves that aligned with autoethnographic that:

- is about women and can be used by women
- does not oppress women
- developed feminist perspectives that challenge dominant intellectual traditions⁷.

Alexandra Symonds suggests that ‘[h]elping a woman resolve her ... fear of self-assertion, helping her to emerge with a more authentic identity to handle her hostility and the hostility of others, involves an additional layer of anxiety since she will differ from the expectations of the culture’,⁸ and we found that this playful approach to research and critique developed our connection with each other, offering a safe space in our professional lives to discuss our lived experiences as mothers and academics, juggling our time and always feeling guilty. It also enabled us to publish research that has been entered into the REF and so we decided to develop this practice and continue this method of collaborative writing that had many positive properties. Rewriting fairy tales did confirm for us however that we viewed our roles in academia as being down-trodden and negatively domestic, with us working incredibly hard and enabling ‘wizards’ who had the ultimate power.

In this new work, presented as autobiographically inspired poems, we move away from fairy tales, choosing instead to invoke the goddess, rewriting ourselves as characters in Greek myth that have previously been silenced, weaving our own autobiographical experiences in with their imaginary lives. This weave of lived and imaginary stories opens up a safe space where we can take

risks, be creative and discuss what the new stories might mean, for ourselves and also for our research. We selected the tale of Demeter and Persephone, within which the two women become the playthings of the gods, pushed and pulled between the dominant male egos of Zeus, king of the gods, and Hades, king of the underworld, without thought for either woman's welfare. Zeus believes his daughter Persephone is his to control as he pleases – until Hades takes ownership of her. Neither considers the pressure this puts on Persephone, nor the impact on her mother, until things get too desperate for anyone on earth to bear. We see this mirrored in the male dominated, goal-driven culture of higher education and in our society at large, where the wrath and power of a woman is still feared and controlled.

As autoethnographers this was an opportunity to produce work in the spirit of social justice and spiritual freedom that offers a resistance to dominant oppressive structures, often synonymous with traditional academic work⁹. As Celia Hunt argues, by fictionalising autobiographical experiences, the writer is able 'to move beyond entrapment in a single image of herself and to expand the possibilities for self'¹⁰ and that by storying the self, women are able to express themselves in a way that gives them permission to be different.

We argue that this approach can help women to feel differently about work and gain a more empowered sense of self, capable of disrupting dominant narratives.

This method of 'storying ourselves' whilst adapting established narratives offers a space to play, make and better understand the self through imaginative dialogue and writing. Stories are shared and their meanings discussed, in terms of lived experiences of HE and the uncomfortable overlap of our personal and professional lives – the domestic and the academic, the mother and the tutor – all jostling for space.

Jess: Awakening the Goddess

A recent article in the *Guardian* reported that four-fifths of staff in higher education are struggling with an increased workload and poor mental health¹¹. According to a survey by the University and College Union, more than half (57.5%) of the staff surveyed said their workload had significantly increased, while more than a fifth (23.3%) identified as having to work harder than ever. In earlier work,¹² we have argued that the neoliberal agenda has undermined and changed the way we work in higher education through 'a quiet ruination and decay of academic freedom'¹³. Economic cuts and a management agenda have driven **fra**ameworks like the REF and the TEF, which measure an academic's worth in a more competitive and stressed higher education environment that is

simultaneously adjusting to the notion of students as customers following the introduction of fees¹⁴

But despite this turn, academics still join the profession with the optimistic ideal that they are contributing to a better world, or at least better conversations – it is certainly not for the money or the glory. Like most academics, we ourselves joined with the utopian idea that teaching can and will make the world a better place¹⁵. Instead we find ourselves overwhelmed by the pressure to do much, much more for much, much less, and with a significant increase in bureaucracy and administration eating into time for research and pedagogy. And yet we both believe that what we do matters, that supporting and teaching students while developing our own research helps us contribute to a more creative, learned, optimistic world.

In the poem below, I **invoke the goddess** Persephone, who was forced to live in the underworld by her husband Hades. Greek myths are dominated by male heroes and male perspectives, and rewriting women in these stories has become a way of giving voice to the voiceless¹⁶ By bleeding my own life story into that of Persephone, I have created a fiction that helps me to see myself, not as trapped and overwhelmed by the domestic/professional juggle, but as creative and expansive; in control of my imaginatively written ending, but also my own life. As part of this adaptation, Hades is no longer the male kidnapper and controller but instead a non-binary partner encouraging Persephone/me to please her/myself.

Persephone

How can I please you mother,
Teacher, brother, peer reviewer, boyfriend,
Partner, husband, lover, friend from school, friend from gym,
Nurse at smear test, next of kin,
Midwife, surgeon, breastfeeding trainer,
Waxer, taxer, therapist, student, colleague, nemesis,
Bank manager, life insurer, younger sis.
Builder, baker, my own maker, newborn, new one, stepson,
Nan?
How can I bring your spring, your summer,
Urge you from the winter mother,
How can I always be your sunrise when
The night in me wants her say?

How can I please you with my six weeks too early, too late to have a baby,

Too tall in the school photo, too nice to get promoted, too sarcastic in meetings,
Too much, too too much,
Too many crisps, too many cigarettes, too many drinks, too many pills – green and yellow, smiley
faces and
Red like pomegranate seeds.
Too much homework, too many friends, too often on the phone,
Too fucking smart, too gay, definitely too fat to get fucked.
Too much staying in then too much going out,
Too many clothes, too much flesh, too obvious, too little,
Too many boys, too much choice, too much no choice at all.
Too feminist, too much asking for it, too high, too hard when I fell.

All these wanting faces, wanting me to be more, do more, give more.
Never quite enough.

When Hades came, he did not drag me off the way father had it said,
My story and my mother's – always his, never ours,
Him the hero and us bit parts in his one-sided play.

When Hades came,

I was tired. In the garden planting seeds to please my mother,
He offered me his hand, his kingdom, and said:

Please yourself.

Myself?

And I dared wonder how that might look and feel and smell and sound and taste

And I wanted to try it on, twirl around and say:

It fits just right.

In the Underworld, at first, I did not know

What I then was,

My hands and legs would flit and flinch,

A Frankenstein of what I might be.

A queen, I thought, should help


The souls who seek the sun but no,

Their journeys are their own and then

I tried to make my marriage work

But Hades only laughed when I did the
Things I'd learnt to keep the peace.

Please yourself.

He said again and I 
Gave in.

And now I know myself, my joy
Is to live life for me and not a
Boy or Zeus who would not share
The light and made my mother
Frozen, white. Now when I return
To her embrace, her warmth and love,
Her tender face, she knows that while it
Brings her woe, back to my queendom I will go.
In summer, I am at her side
But in my realm, I now reside.
My newfound bliss? Not on my knees
But on my feet with me to please.
Not too much but just enough,
A woman I have come to love.

Vanessa: Invoking Goddesses

When I discovered the myth of the goddess Persephone and her mother Demeter, I knew immediately that it was a tale I could relate to because it invokes an anger within me that rebels against the notion of women controlled by men. I didn't so much identify with Persephone, who is tricked into marrying Hades and sent to live in the Underworld, but instead with her mother, Demeter, who was left behind.

As the story goes, Zeus married his daughter off to Hades, presumably without her mother's knowledge as Demeter searched the earth tirelessly looking for her daughter. This separation of mother and daughter was responsible for the first winter or, depending on the version, the harsh Mediterranean summer. Whichever, plant life stopped growing and, eventually, in fear that all life would perish, Zeus had to rethink his grand plan and strike a deal that if Persephone had not eaten during her time with Hades she could return to her mother. She had eaten seeds from a pomegranate, either through trickery or intention, and so a deal was struck that she'd spend half the

year with her mother and the other half in the Underworld with Hades. When Persephone is gone, Demeter, the goddess of harvest, agriculture and fertility, mourns her loss and the earth is barren; when she returns so does warmth and life and the earth can flourish again, hence the seasons.

Demeter holds the power of life yet is simultaneously powerless. 'Production, reproduction: the passing on of life ... These are all things women are familiar with,' writes Penny Summer.¹⁷ Our maternal goddess knows this too. She must live with the knowledge that she can both make and still all life on earth, yet even in this context she must bend her will to Zeus. The dominant narrative of his power persists.

Demeter

'These days they tell you that the tilt of the earth's axis controls the seasons, just as apparently the moon controls the tide. But I'll tell you a secret, someone set that axis and that someone was me ...'

The cycles of life are impossible to resist if you are a woman, yet others are imposed upon us too. The rolling intakes of students, semesters and exam boards of higher education patterns our seasons, but this is not data on a sheet to be processed. As female academics we are more often the ones to take on the role of *loco parentis*. We nurture students' troubles and successes until they graduate and the new cohort of need rolls in. Those of us who are mothers too must learn to balance this with the needs of our own children as they grow up and learn independence, ready to leave us. What is the cost to the domestic academic¹⁸ as she prepares for winter?

I am bedding down for winter

Sending my Mother's soul to sleep

Pouring cold water, set to ice, on my yearning

As the days draw shorter I close the hand that that first held mine

Into a secret fist

And then she is gone

Winter is coming

I begin at midnight

Raging

Tearing clods of earth, cold and cloying, with raw fingers

Each nail a perfect crescent moon

Ringed with dirt

Autumn is the afterbirth of summer

I must labour at its graveside

Straddling

Heaving

A liver-like unwieldy mass of discarded nurturing

Soft scent of iron

Sickly sweet decay

Mixed with seas of salty tears

Hades claims her and I am alone again

There is nothing left to do but wait in the cold for Spring

Creative autoethnographic practice, explored here through the process of creating and telling stories, is transformational and empowering. It enables the personal to become political,¹⁹ uniting us as the authors with a sense of collaborative purpose, a shared cause for change and recognition. My own experiences of exerted male power, which I've angrily fought to resist, inform my writing, allowing space for reasoning and expression within a female storytelling process that is as old as the legends I'm exploring. I relate to the urge of a goddess to wreak havoc through the pain of her loss, and that the pain could be so extreme as to still all growth on the earth. The normalising and naturalising features of neoliberal discourse²⁰ suggest that this power might not be in our hands, that we are the playthings of Zeus and the gods (read: modern equivalents). However, I am writing with a mother's voice; if you tear a mother from her daughter then the gods are forced to bargain or offer a compromise, and to realise that power is held not by them but by those who birth life itself. But again, at what cost?

To Zeus

What of the mother

When the child returns to her father?

Does

Fear

Pride

Seep like poison to taint a mother's love?

What of the mother

When he folds half-truths into lies of his own imagining?

Can she unpick what has been sown?

What of the mother

When he claims her child as his own?

Will

Anger

Hatred

Hurt

Brandish a knife to tear his heart out too

Will this save a mother's love?

What of a mother when her own heart tears

What of him?

What of them?

What of the child?

What of the mother when his child picks at the seams of his carefully spun deceptions

Will it be their unravelling?

What of the cloth that tightly binds her heart

To keep it safe

Hidden

Should she use it to strangle him or to muffle her cries?

What if she becomes undone?

Can she too be torn like cloth?

Does all love turn to hate?

Time is lost

Small intimacies forgotten

The rift becomes a chasm

Becomes a gulf.

Mothers fall in love with their daughters. A motherly love of course, but love all the same and like no other love on earth. All women are born from women and we are challenging, emotional, terrifying, charged with maternal energy. I've imagined this parting of mother and daughter as something that tears the mother apart and challenges her sense of her own self. As for the daughter, she must break free of the cord that tied them, for a while at least, while she finds her own way in the two different worlds she inhabits. Did she mourn for her mother too, or secretly delight in the tantalising opportunity to live in the Underworld with Hades?

To Persephone

You have drawn a line in the sand

That I dare not cross

I tiptoe along it

My bare feet,

Slipping

You have built your wall beside it

A wall made of words

Hard unwieldy slabs of stone

Which you have set with silence

And then of courses there is Hades, the ultimate manipulator.

To Hades

Your love is like a poison

Dependency administered

One

Single

Seed

At a time

Conclusion

Marina Warner writes that fairy tales reflect 'lived experience, with a slant towards the tribulations of women'.²¹ These stories are 'an historical source, or a fantasy of origin [that] gains credibility as a witness record of lives lived, of characters known'.²² The myth of Demeter and Persephone resonates with us both in this way too. Whilst the stories of gods and goddesses are more fantastical

than the forests and stew pots of fairy tales, the power struggle they depict between men and women is as relatable as ever. We recognise these tropes in the power plays of higher education and again in domestic experiences that we try to leave behind us.

We now plan to develop this method via a funded project for the Arts and Humanities Research Council, looking at women's experiences of domestic violence during the pandemic. We believe that this practice of storying the self and invoking the goddess will help us develop a collaborative autoethnography with the women where we tell and share stories that seek to contribute to positive social change.

Notes

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