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This interview with Emma Bridges was recorded in London on 8th December 2016. It is one of a series which was recorded for *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* as a result of the colloquium 'Remaking ancient Greek and Roman myths in the twenty-first century' which was held at the Open University's London centre on 7th July 2016.

EB. Thank you very much for joining me in conversation today, Mercedes. How did you first come to think about using ancient Greek and Roman myths as a source of inspiration for your own creative writing?

MA. It began a long time ago when I wanted to rewrite the Greek myths as tales for children and young people who didn't already know anything about myth. The first one was so popular that it became a series which I wrote with Alicia Esteban, a colleague of mine in the Universidad Complutense.¹ That was in Spanish, with illustrations, and it was (and still is) quite successful in schools where classical civilisation was being taught. That was the beginning, and from there I wanted to go a bit further. I always wrote fiction, although I never wrote it professionally; I started thinking of this as a way of reworking myths and writing with them.

EB. What was the first story you wrote for children?

MA. The first tales from Greek mythology I wrote were stories set in the underworld. I also did some stories of Olympus and the gods; from there I went on to write tales set on earth, with things like the foundation of cities, and another group of stories was to do with the sea.

EB. So you now write stories which are aimed more at an adult audience. How do you go about choosing which myths you're going to work with?

MA. That's more tricky than doing a series. For this it was more about stories which suggested something to me or inspired me in some way; sometimes I thought that I liked a myth but I couldn't find any way to set it in the contemporary world. So it was more about finding a parallel that could work in modern society. For example 'Through the lens', one of the stories in *Mythical Tales of the Everyday World*, is based on the story of Hephaestus and Aphrodite, and her affair with Ares as told in the *Odyssey*. It's such a basic emotional, romantic story that I thought it could fit anywhere. Then I started thinking of using the idea of the photographer to capture the lovers on film – maybe because I like photography myself – and that was quite easy for me to do.

¹ *Cuentos de la mitología griega*, Madrid, Ediciones de la Torre (series of 8 books).

EB. Yes, it's a story with lots of recognisable emotions – jealousy, lust and so on. It also has an element of voyeurism as well, I think. It was really interesting to me how you used the cameras in the story to mirror the net which Hephaestus creates in the *Odyssey* to catch Aphrodite and Ares in the act. Do you think that your other stories share similar themes with this one?

MA. Well, I like thinking about human relationships and their psychology. I've been asked before how I manage to give voices to the gods. I go past the fact that they're gods to think about what's behind their behaviour. So for my Dionysus character, Victor Devine, in 'The woman who couldn't remember', I tried to combine all of the characteristics of Dionysus but without the supernatural dimension – he's attractive, good looking, a little bit feminine – as well as his charm and the impact he has on people.

EB. The gods are such a strong presence as physical entities in the ancient myth, and in many of your stories you hint at those supernatural elements without having actual divine characters. Was that difficult to achieve so that it worked for a modern audience?

MA. I think that's why there are some stories which I couldn't find a way to recreate, precisely because the supernatural elements were so important and it wasn't possible to do it in a different way. But there are aspects in some stories which can be translated into human relationships, or human defects and attitudes. That's probably why the story which was most difficult for me was the Perseus one, because it has so many supernatural things in it. It was a bit of a struggle to think of what to do with the Gorgon Medusa, for example, but I managed to focus on other aspects which belonged to human psychology; my Medusa is a woman with a tendency to 'absorb' others in a relationship. There is even the appearance of an Athena figure in the shape of a policewoman there, though.

EB. Do those details emerge as you're writing or do you have them planned out at the start?

MA. Sometimes they emerge as I go along; I find little tricks which I put in for my own enjoyment. In the Perseus myth, for example, I have a sentence which refers to later paintings of Andromeda. I'm very conscious of these coming through as I write.

EB. So it's quite a playful process; myths are often playful ways of looking at the world around us, aren't they? In relation to that, one of the things I found interesting was your choice of names for your characters and the ways in which you used their names to link them with their ancient counterparts.

MA. Yes, it is playful. The names were something which I discussed with Richard [Buxton, the classical scholar, to whom Mercedes Aguirre is married, and who translated *Mythical Tales of the Everyday World* into English], and he helped with the inspiration for some of the names. He's very interested in the names of mythical characters. It was a case of playing with words. So for example, Lucía in 'The woman who couldn't remember' was linked with Agave, whose name is to do with 'shining'. Victoria, the Alcestis figure in 'Let me die for you', is of course linked with victory; she is also called Anastasia in the same story, meaning 'she who comes back to life'. Sometimes it's phonetic. I also have Jorge in the Perseus story because of the parallel with St. George and the dragon; at the beginning of the story the actor is playing that character on stage.

EB. Do you find that when you're working you are drawn to particular ancient texts or authors?

MA. Sometimes I take a particular work, a particular play, like the *Bacchae* or *Alcestis*, so I have the plot already; other times it's just an idea. For example in 'For the love of beauty' I

take the myth in which Zeus abducted Ganymede for his beauty. From that I created a story in which the myth is only incidental; I mixed it with many other elements. I mention Oscar Wilde, and there is also a Platonic and Socratic idea behind it.

EB. With a story like that it's not the case that we have, as with, say, the Ares and Aphrodite story which you mentioned earlier, a continuous narrative from the ancient world. Often we're dealing with snippets from lots of sources.

MA. Yes, the story is in lots of different places.

EB. In writing the way you do, do you think that you get to understand a little more about the creative processes of the ancient authors?

MA. I think so, because sometimes when I'm working with Richard, with whom I'm working on the *Odyssey* for a book on the Cyclops myth, I think I have a Socratic writing process. I have that mentality, and I ask 'How would I do this?' 'How would they explain this?' 'Why did they think this?' You see myths from a different perspective if you have to describe something; you see more deeply into the narrative of the ancient myths. I think I learn a lot by doing it, so it's a two-way process.

EB. The short story form, with which you work, isn't really a genre that we find in the ancient Greek texts you're working with. Do you think that there are still areas of overlap with poetry or drama in the form you use?

MA. I'm also now writing longer novels as well as short stories; but the short form worked for me because they are stories which don't need to be too long or elaborate, with a long narrative. Obviously if you want to write about the whole of the *Odyssey* that would be different and more difficult, but for *Mythical Tales of the Everyday World* I tried to pick out interesting features but not to develop them into a very long story.

EB. Well, a lot of the ancient texts, like tragedy, are very concise in conveying a story too; you don't necessarily need a long narrative to make a point.

MA. At the moment I'm working on a longer story but the myth I'm using is a very small part of it; there are other elements which are just purely fiction to make a longer novel.

EB. What's that novel going to be about?

MA. It's going to have a *Trachiniae* story in there, but it's going to be crime fiction. I write fiction quite slowly because I have so many other things to do.

EB. You talk a little in the epilogue of *Mythical Tales of the Everyday World* about how you've chosen to set these stories in very ordinary everyday situations. We're quite accustomed to ancient myths as having grand settings – Mount Olympus, the ancient palaces, the grand scale of the Trojan War and so on. Why did you choose to bring these stories quite literally down to earth?

MA. It was precisely to show that these stories are for ever; they are closer to us than we might think. The story of Aphrodite's betrayal and Hephaestus' jealousy can happen anywhere. These stories can be familiar to everybody.

EB. Does that also show just how flexible myth is as a medium?

MA. Exactly. We can adapt it; myths have this quality where they can be adaptable to any situation.

EB. I agree; they can have meaning across the generations, and there are these very human elements which are always recognisable. How closely did you feel that you needed to adhere to the details of the ancient versions when you adapted the stories?

MA. I think I felt that I could be quite free. In fact in 'Let me die for you', when I was working with the Alcestis myth, I had these characters I'd created and at the end of my story I felt that the woman, Victoria, could not just go back to her husband as Alcestis does. So I changed the end of the story in the myth to make it more interesting for a modern audience. I felt free to work with a plot based on the myth but to be able to expand it in a different way.

EB. Well, a contemporary audience might feel less sympathetic towards a very passive female character like Alcestis.

MA. Yes, I think they'd be disappointed. My aim was to make a story which would be a good story for a reader now.

EB. Can you tell me also about how you arrived at your choice of contemporary locations for your stories?

MA. Sometimes it's random, sometimes there's a reason. So I set 'The two brothers' in Bilbao in northern Spain because of the tradition of the high cuisine and expert chefs in the region. That had particular meaning in relation to a story which implied food (Atreus and Thyestes). I set the first one in London probably because there was a personal connection for me; I have been coming to London for a long time and I love it here. I think it's a good setting for something peculiar because I always think of London as a city open to everything. The Perseus story, 'The quest', has this idea of travelling, and going very far away, so I used Argentina. The Alcestis story, 'Let me die for you', came out of something I read in the news about a journalist who had been kidnapped in the Philippines. That fitted in with the idea of the story I wanted to write, although it had nothing to do with myth to start with. Sometimes I'm not sure where inspiration comes from but I'm a good observer when I travel, and these things happen!

EB. Some of the themes which myth deals with are quite disturbing and can be difficult and uncomfortable for us to talk about. For example, you mentioned your story 'For the love of beauty', about the relationship between a teacher and pupil which borders on being inappropriate; it touches on the theme of paedophilia. Why do you think that myth allows us to talk about some of those things which we might otherwise find very difficult?

MA. I agree. It seems that when we use myths we are allowed to do anything. It's like with painting in Victorian times, or in Spain in the Baroque. They could show a naked woman if it was a mythical scene; if it was a normal woman that would be a shock. I think that's precisely one of the qualities of myth. It's a way to allow us to deal with themes which are uncomfortable.

EB. So it creates a sort of distance?

MA. Perhaps.

EB. And that's also true for, say, the fifth century BC tragedians, who could use mythical settings as ways of talking about problematic issues.

MA. Yes. It doesn't mean, though, that you can't write about a relationship between an older man and a younger man; but myth gives it a different perspective, a different way to look at it. In the end with that story I leave it a bit open; I suggest that something could be inappropriate but maybe it's not.

EB. Do you think, then, that individuals read the stories in different ways?

MA. For me it's quite interesting when I talk to readers who don't already know anything about myth. One of the things I realise is that they work as stories. The reader doesn't need to know the myth; that's more for us as academics.

EB. So does it matter to you as the author whether someone knows the ancient story?

MA. It doesn't matter very much. Sometimes I can even feel more proud if someone who doesn't know about myth says it is a good story and that they enjoyed it. There are two sides to me; I'm a writer and not just somebody who is always working on Greek mythology.

EB. At the end of each of your stories you provide a short quotation from an ancient text which relates to the myth you've alluded to in the story. Do you hope that some readers might follow that up if they didn't know about the myth before?

MA. I think it depends on the reader. It was interesting when my husband sent copies to some of his friends and colleagues. We sent a copy to David Konstan [Professor of Classics at New York University] whose wife is Spanish too. He sent an interesting email reply about how he'd read them; and he guessed all of the myths apart from the last one [based on the story of Zeus and Ganymede]. He thought it was something to do with Achilles. I think probably for classicists it's a kind of game to work out, and then you have a clue at the end. For me, it doesn't really matter. If somebody reads the story and tells me it's a good story and they enjoyed it, that's enough.

EB. I confess to having read them in different ways; for some, I started reading without knowing what the myth was going to be, and then guessing as I went along, as I wanted to look for the clues. For others, I cheated and looked at the quotation first! It made me think as well about revisiting some of the texts which I hadn't read for a long time. Would you also like it to pique the interest of people who might otherwise have had no interest in Classics?

MA. Yes, absolutely. I did a little bit of the story of Hephaestus and Aphrodite with a group of students a few years ago. They were students of the history of art and I gave them the passage in the *Odyssey* and the story without the quotation, just to see what they thought. And they thought of things I hadn't thought of; one suggested that the red lights to do with photography in the story reminded them of a volcano. I'd never thought of that.

EB. That raises an interesting point about meaning, and whether it's the author or the reader who creates meaning. In places you also allude to post-classical receptions of the myths – for example, Virginia in 'The race' is fascinated by the Guido Reni's painting of Atalanta and Hippomenes. Why was it important for you to bring in those later versions of the stories?

MA. For me it gave the feeling of this continuity of the myths. When we're looking at a later author who has reworked myths we cannot forget all of the intermediate things before that author. So I was doing it to show how these stages of the myth are also important. It's a reminder of that.

EB. So do you think that we're receiving a whole tradition, not just one text in isolation, and we can't really shake off all of the assumptions which we bring to a story from different versions?

MA. Yes, precisely. It's not just Euripides and then us, with a huge bridge. The tradition is important as well. I feel that any writer is influenced by those traditions and you can't help it; you don't just write out of the blue even if it's not conscious engagement.

EB. As well as writing creatively you're also an academic, and you've written a lot of scholarly articles about ancient mythology. How does the process of doing academic research compare with the process of creative writing?

MA. My creative writing is something I can't do along with my everyday work; that would be impossible. I like to go to cafés to write fiction, so I isolate myself a little bit and the surroundings inspire me. It all depends on the moment but the two are very separate. Sometimes I need the creative writing as something to refresh me after my classes, when I can dedicate holidays and the summer to it. I need to feel that I have time, and that I'm comfortable, and then things come into my mind. But if I leave the creative writing for some time, because I didn't have time, it takes me a while to get back to it. The year I was in Cambridge as a Visiting Fellow in Clare Hall, I used to go every morning to the University Library to do my work. One day I went for a cup of coffee in the middle of the morning and I wrote a short story just there, in that moment. That worked for me, but I couldn't work like that in my office in Madrid!

EB. Do you find that you can be writing a research paper on a topic and that it then provides the inspiration for a story?

MA. Yes, but it can happen the other way around too. I remember writing one of those tales of Greek mythology for children and then I had an idea which I developed into an article. In fact now I have something in my mind, a short story, and that came out of two things; one is that I was reading a book on forensic psychology, and also the book I'm working on with Richard on the Cyclops. That's an idea which is there to develop later.

EB. You've also worked with other mythological traditions, including Celtic and Basque mythology. How do they compare with the ancient Greek mythical traditions?

MA. Well, there are similar themes, but one of the things I find is that you can see the difference in how those myths haven't expanded the way that classical mythology has. With Basque mythology, apart from small communities where people know the traditions, it hasn't spread like Greek mythology. These other mythologies are important in their own societies – like Celtic mythology in Wales, or Scotland and Ireland – but they're much smaller groups and they haven't spread to, say, Italy. In Basque mythology there are names of characters like Olentzero, and there leprechauns and selkies in Celtic mythology, but nobody else will know these or write about them. But this [ancient mythology] is like a language for culture; we all know about it. I went to an exhibition at the Royal Academy recently and there was an abstract painting, 'Ulysses'; it's a language we all understand. We see the name and we know about it.

EB. Does that make classical myth easier to work with, or is it more challenging in some ways when everyone has some preconceived ideas about it?

MA. You have to find a new way to do something with it; I couldn't rewrite the *Odyssey* because I'm not James Joyce and that's already been done. You have to do something different.

EB. Could you tell us about some of the other things you've written, and what's next for you?

MA. Well, the novel I wrote after *Mythical Tales of the Everyday World* is a story about a conference on myths and legends and storytelling. It's based on a Greek island and is called *El narrador de cuentos* ('The teller of tales'). My second novel, *El cuadro inacabado* ('The unfinished painting') is set in two different times, in the nineteenth century and the

contemporary world. It's a parallel story about a mythological painting and how the painting affects the lives of people in the past and in the present. It's set in Cambridge, partly in the Fitzwilliam Museum, and uses my knowledge of the pre-Raphaelites, which has been part of my research. Then my new novel, *Vidas, historias y cafés* ('Lives, stories and cafés') is about a journey from Ithaca. The steps of the journey are in European cities and it has little details about the *Odyssey* as well as the social aspect of life in cafés; in each café there is a different story. The main character is the same as in *El narrador de cuentos*, and it's like a prequel to the previous novel, with a bit of mystery. In these two books I have some things which can be interpreted as supernatural or not; I like leaving things a little bit unexplained. The novels haven't yet been translated into English.

EB. You also mentioned a book about the Cyclops which you're writing with Richard Buxton.

MA. Yes, that's an academic book, for OUP, looking at the myth of the Cyclops from antiquity to today. I've been working a lot on modern art, for example the symbolists and the abstract expressionists, for that.

EB. Fantastic. Good luck with all of that, and thank you very much for talking to me today.