

Myth-Reversal and Empowerment in Charlie Covell's *Kaos* (2024)

Charlie Covell's Netflix-original series, *Kaos*, is a darkly comedic reimaging of Greco-Roman mythology that focuses on dysfunctional relationships and their impact both within the realm of the gods and that of humans. A tyrannical Zeus in a midlife crisis starts spiraling into paranoia when the ancient prophecy that governs his existence and foresees his downfall, seems to be coming true. When a wrinkle appears on his forehead, Zeus interprets it as the beginning of his end and frantically tries to avert it. In *Kaos*, like in Greek thought, prophecies are central to the storyworld because they highlight the role of fate and the interconnectedness of people and events. As it is soon revealed, three mortal characters, Eurydice, Ariadne, and Caeneus, share the same prophecy with Zeus—without knowing it—and are destined to reshape the future of humanity by defying him.

The Greco-Roman stories of Eurydice, Ariadne, and Caeneus, feature the eponymous characters as marginalized or liminal gendered-othered figures, with little to no agency over their stories. However, in *KAOS*, their stories are rewritten in ways that provide them with agency over their narratives, identities, and an ancient plot that seeks to bring Zeus down. In this paper, I discuss how the series reverses key-elements in the main mythological storylines of those three gendered-othered characters rendering them in the storyworld empowered figures who can challenge Zeus's patriarchal order.

I begin my analysis by tracing the central differences between the myth-story and the series-story of each of the three protagonists to demonstrate how in *Kaos* they are established as active agents. I explain that *Kaos*'s Eurydice is a woman trapped in her marriage while still alive and, after her death, she is unwilling to return to Earth. Yet, once she realizes that the divine

world is corrupted and she is one of those who can change that, she steps first back into the realm of the living and asks Orpheus to turn and look at her, becoming the subject in the narrative—in contrast to her passive nature in myth (Ov. *Met.*10.1-85; Verg. *G.*4.453-527). Similarly, Ariadne is a woman trapped in a life designed for her, forced to exist in the shadow of her twin brother Glaucus whom she supposedly killed. Yet, when she discovers that this was her father's scheme to secure his power and serve the gods, Ariadne kills him, and stays in Crete—unlike her mythical counterpart (Plut. *Vit.Thes.*20.1)—as the leader of the people, planning to destroy Olympus. Finally, Caeneus is a transgender man trapped in the norms of his Amazon-society, the members of which murdered him after he transitioned. The Greco-Roman Caeneus relies on Poseidon to make him male and then becomes an epic-style hyper-masculine hero (Ov. *Met.*12.429-535); yet, *Kaos's* Caeneus has the agency to transform his own body (O'Neill 2024) after being pushed out of his societal group, without, however, turning into a stereotypical male hero who serves the patriarchal networks. Instead, he stays in the Underworld to expose and reverse Zeus's soul-consumption scheme that sustains his power.

Examining in parallel the nature and actions of their renewed selves, I suggest that the three characters form a line of empowered individuals who can contest the “cosmic order” that Zeus embodies (Allan 2006) both in the storyworld and the Greco-Roman mythological universe; and I further contend that they achieve that through the bonds they form (or re-form) with other gendered-othered figures in the storyworld. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's (1993) and Gail Schwab's (2010) understanding of the critical role of female genealogies and relations among women in reconsidering the male-centered “cosmic order” and subverting the patriarchal power structures, I argue that the destabilization of the Olympian patriarchy that becomes evident in the last episode emerges as the result of a “utopia of relationships” (Schwab 2010), the

re-built or newly-built relationships among the gendered-Others of the storyworld (re-connection between protagonists and their mothers, Eurydice-Cassandra agreement, Ariadne-Andromache alliance.) Finally, I conclude that Covell, a self-proclaimed Greek-myth nerd (Hudspeth 2024) built a storyworld that twisted familiar Greco-Roman myths to challenge the traditional male-hero narratives and male-centered societal structures, inviting the audience to reflect on the norms and power dynamics of their society.

Bibliography

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