

## Classical learning as liberator and destroyer in Phoebe Wynne's *Madam*

Phoebe Wynne's recent novel *Madam* (published in February 2021) shares a significant number of tropes with Donna Tartt's more famous 1992 novel *The Secret History*. Both are mystery novels of a sort, and both of them centre on Classics teachers and their students. Tartt focuses on Greek language and literature and Wynne on Latin and Greek tragedy in translation, but common to both books is the connection between exempla from Classical literature and an appallingly damaging action carried out by students influenced by those exempla.

Although both novels connect classical learning with destruction, the portrayal of classical studies is significantly different in each. Tartt portrays Classics as the province of wealthy, snobbish students who consider themselves an elite on their college campus and despise anyone outside their circle, and it is their belief in their own superiority that leads her Classics majors to commit the act of murder that ultimately destroys them. By contrast, Phoebe Wynne portrays classical learning through an explicitly feminist lens as a positive means of liberation through self-knowledge, and connection and empathy with the struggles of the women of the ancient world.

Wynne's heroine Rose Christie teaches at Caldonbrae, an elite girls' boarding school on a rugged peninsula in Scotland. At first, she is delighted to have made what seems to be a huge advance in her career, but she quickly becomes aware that the school is not what its prospectus claims it to be. Not only are her students not as academically-focused as she had been led to believe, but the staff are personally dysfunctional in all sorts of ways. Moreover, her predecessor was sacked in circumstances that no one will explain, but the dismissal was clearly connected with a troubled member of the sixth form called Bethany who alternates between engagement

with, and hatred for, the new teacher. When Bethany falsely accuses her of physical assault, Rose repeatedly attempts to prove her innocence in a Kafka-esque school bureaucracy, in which her efforts to clear her name are consistently rebuffed by the school's administration.

Over the course of the novel, Rose is gradually brought to understand how toxic Caldonbrae is to the young women whom she is attempting to educate. Single-sex girls' schools are typically known for producing intellectually independent, career-minded alumnae. The mission of Caldonbrae is very different, and Rose makes every effort to get her students to reject that mission through exposing them to narratives of women in Greco-Roman mythology and history. Each story is both a literal lesson to Rose's students as part of their curriculum and an exemplum that has a particular relevance to their situation at Caldonbrae. Thus at various points in the novel, the Caldonbrae narrative is intersected with stories of Antigone, Agrippina, Lucretia, Daphne, Medea, Boudicca, Medusa, and above all Dido. All these stories are framed as examples of women disadvantaged by male power structures who attempt to resist them.

Whereas Tartt's students reprise one traditional image of Classics, as an exclusive, conservative discipline, Wynne's heroine Rose fights against the deadening social conservatism of Caldonbrae and uses her classical women to inspire her students to escape the fate their school is grooming them for. While at first they are deeply resistant to Rose's feminism, a combination of Rose herself and the captivating stories from the ancient world that she tells gradually gets under their skin. As the novel progresses, they both acknowledge the value of the knowledge that she is giving them, and seek to give practical application to their new knowledge.

Tragically, however, that practical application brings horrific destruction with it for most of the school, and we are left to consider the ambiguity of what Rose has taught them. These

stories have liberated some, but they destroy many more. A similar ambiguity is central to Euripidean tragedy itself. In *Medea*, the heroine suffers injustice because she is a woman, and yet the steps she takes to right the wrongs done her are untenable. In *Bacchae*, Dionysus brings beauty and liberation, but also destruction and suffering. The Phaedra of Euripides' *Hippolytus* is "honorable" (47) at the outset of the play, but the demands of the Hippolytus myth mean that she can never escape her destiny of destroying Hippolytus. By analogy, *The Secret History* portrays Classics as a damaging discipline through its sinister professor Julian Morrow. In contrast, Rose the Classics teacher in *Madam* is brave and admirable, yet her teaching brings even more disastrous effects than those in *The Secret History*.

#### Bibliography

Tartt, D. (1992) *The Secret History*. New York, NY: Knopf.

Wynne, P. (2021) *Madam*. New York, NY: St Martin's Press.