

“Atalanta” by Betty Miles and Moving Past Patriarchy

After my presentation on “Post-Patriarchal Pandoras” (pegasus-reception.com/paper10), one of the audience members asked if I knew of other presentations of mythological figures in children’s literature which might be considered “post-patriarchal.” I said I didn’t—and, in fact, I had chosen to give a presentation on Victoria Turnbull’s *Pandora* and Joan Holub and Leslie Patricelli’s *Be Patient, Pandora!* because I found their post-patriarchal qualities very striking. But the question lingered in my mind well after the conference panel concluded, and it made me review the reading lists for past courses I’ve taught to see if anything on them might have slipped my mind. Betty Miles’ short story “Atalanta” jumped out at me—not as post-patriarchal exactly, but as a text clearly invested in both illustrating and enacting a break with patriarchy. (I see Holub and Patricelli’s *Please Share, Aphrodite!*, pegasus-reception.com/post3, as undertaking a similar, though not identical, move.)

Ovid provides us with an ancient account of Atlanta in his *Metamorphoses*. The story appears in book 10 and is presented as a cautionary tale told by the goddess Venus to the young mortal hunter Adonis. Atalanta, having been told by an oracle that she would “be deprived of” (Latin *carebis*) herself if she married, presents suitors with a challenge: she will marry the man who bests her in a race; losers will face death. A spectator at the race, Hippomenes, is smitten by the sight of Atalanta and enters the contest. While Atalanta laments Hippomenes’ decision, Hippomenes himself prays to Venus for aid. The goddess gives him three golden apples, which Hippomenes throws during the race to distract Atalanta and slow her down. Venus even adds weight to the third apple, ensuring Hippomenes’ victory. He and Atalanta are wed, but he runs afoul of the divine when he forgets to thank Venus. The goddess sparks such desire in him that

he has sex with Atalanta in the precinct of Cybele, and Cybele turns both Hippomenes and Atalanta into lions who pull Cybele's chariot. Atalanta is doubly "deprived of herself." She loses the power of self-determination as well as her human form.

Miles' "Atalanta" focuses on the race and Atalanta's movement away from patriarchal expectations. In Miles' version, so many young men are drawn to Atalanta because of her cleverness that her father, a king, is at a loss to choose a husband for her. Atalanta tells him that he needn't worry, for perhaps she won't marry at all. The king, "very ordinary...powerful and used to having his own way," (76) is discomfited and decides to hold a race to determine Atalanta's future husband. Atalanta reclaims some agency for herself by declaring that she will join the race and marry the winner if she loses. To prepare for the race, Atalanta trains each morning, as does Young John, a townsman who wants only to win the chance to talk with her, "[f]or surely," he said to himself, "it is not right for Atalanta's father to give her away to the winner of the race. Atalanta must choose the person she wants to marry, or whether she wishes to marry at all. Still, if I could only win the race, I would be free to speak to her, and ask for her friendship" (82). On the day of the race, their time spent training holds both Atalanta and John in good stead. They cross the finish-line at the same time, and though the king is willing to give Atalanta to John in marriage, both John and Atalanta disavow his authority. Instead, they spend the afternoon talking and forging a friendship. The next day, they each make their way separately out into the wider world.

Miles makes the king a representative of staid patriarchy in general. He is not vilified, but his comfort with the status quo puts him at odds with representatives of the younger generation, both Atalanta and John. Despite her father's attempts, Atalanta charts her own course, building and fixing things, looking through her telescope, and (eventually) exploring the

world. She is not distracted from following her desires, and in Miles' story there are no golden apples to lead Atalanta astray as she runs. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the three apples provided some rhythm to the race. Promoting a similar pacing, Miles presents three competitors; Atalanta passes the first two, but the third is John, with whom she ties. Atalanta and John's equality is affirmed not only by the story but also by the language used to tell it. Atalanta states that she "will run fast as the wind" (82), and John is described as "running like the wind" and "swift as the wind" (83). Contention and competition are replaced with togetherness and delight when "[s]miling with the pleasure of the race, Atalanta and Young John reached the finish line *together*, and *together* they broke through the golden ribbon" (83, emphasis mine). Their responses to the king echo one another when they each tell the patriarch that, despite his assumptions, they "could not possibly marry" (85).

Miles' story cultivates a fairytale atmosphere more than a mythological one. Indeed, Miles provides a fairytale frame for it, with "[o]nce upon a time" (76) at the outset and "happily ever after" at the close (85). Barbara Bascove's illustrations further the fairytale setting with their medieval feel. But Miles invokes fairytale in order to undo its stereotypical narrative dictates. Atalanta is capable, active, and independent, no passive princess, and she and John are living their happily-ever-afters separately. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Atalanta's experiences fulfill the oracle; in Miles' story Atalanta's decisions and persistence determine her path. And that path, we learn, is still unfolding and uncertain: "Perhaps some day [Atalanta and John] will be married, and perhaps they will not." (85). At the start of the story, Miles compresses the distance between fairytale time and the readers' present day by following "[o]nce upon a time" with "not long ago," and here—at the end—she gestures to an as-yet-undetermined future. Miles

thus imparts to her fairytale an air of contemporary relevance. What seems long ago or set in narrative stone is not.

Departing from traditional expectations is a large part of the project in Miles' "Atalanta," and we might fairly call it didactic in its modelling of emancipation, equality, and a departure from inherited paradigms. Atalanta is attractive because she is clever not beautiful, and she partakes of activities not stereotypically associated with women. Her various remarks to her father serve as a kind of script responding to patriarchal demands, and John espouses enlightened ideas about relations between the sexes. When Ovid's Venus tells the story of Atalanta to Adonis in the *Metamorphoses*, her intent is somewhat didactic. She explicitly aims to explain why Adonis should steer clear of wild animals, and she implicitly schools Adonis in her own power. Miles reworks the instructional nature of Atalanta's story, making it a lesson in gender equality and self-actualization.

Such a lesson fits the general goals of *Free to Be...You and Me*, the anthology in which Miles' "Atalanta" appears. *Free to Be...You and Me* was a project organized by Marlo Thomas in the early 1970s with the goal of providing empowering, non-sexist media for young people through cartoons, stories, songs, and, poems (see Kois in the bibliography below for a history of the endeavor). "Atalanta" is the only piece in this liberatory enterprise that reworks Classical material, and its conflation of myth and fairytale enables it to simultaneously reconfigure the canon and disrupt a popular narrative pattern in ten earnest pages. I can't help but compare it with Robert Munsch's *Paper Bag Princess*. Published in 1980, *The Paper Bag Princess* also tackles fairytale assumptions head-on, but it does so by flipping the gender hierarchy: Princess Elizabeth takes on the active role usually assigned to a prince, and Prince Ronald needs to be rescued. When Ronald scolds Elizabeth for her disheveled appearance—she just finished

fighting a dragon!—she declares him a “bum” and leaves him (23). There’s a kind of tidy satisfaction in Munsch’s topsy-turvy picturebook, but ultimately I find more potential promise in Miles’ strategy of not flipping a hierarchy but moving beyond it.

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