Undutiful Daughters by S.L. Ager

The social structure in ancient Greece expected females to give way to males, and the young to give way to their elders. There was therefore no worse breach of social *mores* and no worse sense of betrayal than when a male parent was faced with the rebellion of his female child. Since one of the functions of myth is to explore social and psychological anxieties, it should come as no surprise that there are numerous examples in Greek myth of undutiful daughters. These daughters betray their fathers in various ways, generally for the love of another man, and in the end always suffer for it.

There is an underlying tension about women's loyalties in these myths. When a woman leaves her birth family and joins her husband's family, where will those loyalties be directed? A patriarchal society like ancient Greece was deeply troubled by such issues. One solution was to marry one's daughters to a close relative, such as a first cousin (in Athens, it was even legal for a half-sister and half-brother to marry one another, provided that their common parent was the father). But the daughters in these myths have appropriated to themselves the right to choose their lovers, an unthinkable transgression. Marriage choice was the prerogative of the father. These loves cannot therefore be allowed to prosper, and every one of them ends in disaster. Myths about undutiful daughters serve both to explore these fears and tensions, and to validate the existing patriarchal structure by demonstrating how calamitous rebellion against it can be.

Comaetho was the daughter of Pterelaüs, king of the Taphians and grandson of Poseidon. The god had given Pterelaüs a single golden hair–as long as that hair was attached to his head, Pterelaüs would never die. When Amphitryon of Thebes mounted an expedition against the Taphians, Comaetho fell in love with him, and plucked the golden hair from her father's head. The king died and Amphitryon was victorious. Far from returning her affection or feeling gratitude to Comaetho for her convenient betrayal of her father, Amphitryon killed her for her treachery. Comaetho's story is very similar to that of another perfidious daughter, Scylla. Scylla (not the famous monster of the same name) was the daughter of King Nisus of Megara, whose land was under siege by Minos of Crete. Scylla fell in love with Minos, and helped him to victory by clipping from her sleeping father's head the lock of purple hair on which the safety of the kingdom depended. But when she tried to accompany Minos as he sailed away to Crete, he flung her from his ship. The unhappy Scylla was transformed into a sea-bird, while her father Nisus was changed into an osprey, endlessly pursuing her. The didactic element in these myths is clear: girls, don't choose a mate against your father's wishes–it never works out.

Neither Minos nor Amphitryon appears to have felt any sense of gratitude, let alone fondness, for these lovelorn maidens. But even when the conquering hero returns the love his adversary's daughter has for him, the relationship is off to an ominous start if it begins with the princess betraying her own father. The hero Pelops fell in love with Hippodameia, the daughter of King Oenomaüs of Pisa. Oenomaüs selfishly kept his daughter from marrying any of her many suitors by challenging each of them to a chariot race; none of the suitors was able to win, as the king himself had divine horses, and a magical spear, with which he stabbed each suitor in the back as he overtook him. But when Pelops arrived to pay his suit to Hippodameia, she returned his love, and conspired with him. They bribed the king's charioteer to replace the bronze linchpin of his chariot with one made of wax. In the heat of the race, as Oenomaüs was about to stab Pelops in the back, his wheel came off, the king was tangled in the reins, and was dragged to death by his own horses. As for Hippodameia and Pelops, they were able to run off and get married, and live happily (evidently) for many years. But Greek myth, as a determinant of social morality, could not allow this relationship to prosper for ever. Hippodameia bore Pelops two sons, Atreus and Thyestes, but Pelops had another son, Chrysippus, by a nymph. Out of jealousy, according to one version of the myth, Hippodameia either killed Chrysippus herself, or convinced her sons to kill their half-brother. As a result, the wrathful Pelops drove his remaining sons out of the kingdom with a curse on their heads, and killed Hippodameia.

The crimes of these girls consist not only in betraying their fathers, but also in taking an active role in shaping their own futures. Greek society expected women to be passive and to accept the male decisions that determined their lives. Young women could not be allowed to make their own choices, and had to be shown that such a course of action would ultimately lead to disaster. Disaster was certainly the experience of Comaetho, of Scylla, and, in the end, of Hippodameia. Disaster also

strikes two other undutiful daughters in Greek myth – the most famous of all – but in their case, they do not come to a bad end. It is probably because Medea and Ariadne were in origin goddess figures, who have been transmuted in myth into human women, that they survive the central tragedies of their stories.

Medea and Ariadne are in fact first cousins, both of them grandchildren of Helios, the god of the sun. Their aunt is Circe the enchantress, and Medea has certainly also inherited sorcerous powers herself. Ariadne is less obviously magical, but she does have one or two tricks up her sleeve. The daughter of Minos, she is the one who, out of love, helps the hero Theseus when he comes to Crete to slay the Minotaur, by giving him a magical ball of thread that will lead him through the Labyrinth where the monster is kept. Having thus betrayed her father's interests, if not his throne or his life, she flees with Theseus and his companions. But when they stop overnight on the island of Naxos on the way to Athens, Theseus sails away without Ariadne the next morning. Forgetful? Or perhaps taking a hint from Ariadne's treatment of her father – after all, how will a woman like this obey and be loyal to her husband when she has already demonstrated her willingness to rebel against male authority figures? Nevertheless, it would seem that Ariadne's divine roots are sufficient to prevent her from being treated in myth as another Scylla or Comaetho. Left alone and sorrowing on the island of Naxos, Ariadne becomes the target of another, more stable affection. The god Dionysos comes to her and makes her his bride.

As for Medea, just as her powers are far greater than Ariadne's, so too her tragedy is much bloodier. She is the daughter of Aeëtes, king of Colchis and keeper of the golden fleece. When Jason and the Argonauts arrive in Colchis to claim this magical talisman, Aeëtes sets Jason an impossible task: to yoke a pair of fire-breathing bulls, to sow the ground with dragon's teeth, and to fight a crop of armed warriors sprung from this sowing. Jason is ready to despair, but fortunately Aeëtes' daughter has fallen in love with him, and is prepared for anything. She gives him an ointment to protect him from the bulls' fiery breath, and advice on how to cope with the earthborn warriors. She then makes it possible for him to steal the golden fleece itself from her father, by charming to sleep the dragon that guards it. Without her, Jason could never have accomplished any of his heroic tasks, and he does feel a measure of gratitude and affection for her, unlike Amphitryon or Minos. He takes her with him when he flees from Colchis, and after many adventures, the two of them end up in Corinth. But after living there for many years, and having children together, Medea and Jason's relationship founders, just as do those of all the other undutiful daughters. Jason's true love–ambition–reasserts itself, and he marries the daughter of Corinth's king. In her outrage, Medea brings Jason's whole world crashing down. She murders his new bride and the bride's father, and then, in an act of ultimate fury, she slaughters her own children. Medea, however, like Ariadne, survives her tragedy. She escapes from Corinth in the chariot of the sun-god, and finds refuge in Athens and, ultimately, back in Asia. She is too powerful a figure to be brought down by a mere mortal such as Jason, a man who is a questionable hero at the best of times.

One of the things all these maidens do is compromise the hero's heroism. Jason is the most extreme example of a hero who is literally helpless without his maiden by his side. This is only one of the reasons why myth in a patriarchal society cannot allow these relationships to be trouble-free. A child's betrayal of its parents, a woman's betrayal of a man, inappropriately aggressive feminine behaviour, uneasiness about women's loyalties–all of these are factors that shape the unhappy course of these myths.