

Clare Pollard is a British poet, novelist, and playwright. Her novel *Delphi*, published in 2022, sets its story of pandemic lockdowns in London amid a framework of classical myth and ancient prophecy. In 2013, she published *Ovid's Heroines*, her translation of the *Heroides*. Mythological characters and motifs also inform poems such as 'Cassandra in Mycenae' (Changeling, 2011).

This interview with Joanna Paul took place in London in July 2023.

<https://www5.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2023/pollard>

Joanna Paul: I'd like to start by asking how you came to this kind of material? What's your route towards being a writer for whom classical material, broadly conceived, is present and important?

Clare Pollard: I think, like many people, I read myths as a child. I've always liked folklore and fairy tales, those old tales – there's something about them. I think they're the great theme of all my writing, in a way. My next two books, actually, one's about Arthurian myth, a children's book, and my next adult book, a novel, is about the salons where they told fairy tales.

JP: Both interesting next steps along that road!

CP: Yeah, so I'm interested in these stories that we tell ourselves as a society and the stories that somehow last and mean something different for each generation – I find that really fascinating. But I suppose if we're talking about specifically the classics, the Greeks – I did English literature at Cambridge, and we did a tragedy paper, and it's the one paper that I really, really loved and remember vividly, and I think has impacted the whole destiny of my life! I'm sort of obsessed with tragedy, and, as a storyteller, the tragic arc. I don't think we tell very many tragedies any more and yet I think we live at a very tragic moment. It's not so much the death at the end that I'm interested in as that moment of recognition, that moment when you realise what you've done – there's something that obsesses me about that. So I absolutely loved the tragedy paper, and I suppose my obsession with the Greeks always comes from that position; and it was really the plays, you know Euripides and stuff, where my obsession began.

JP: Yes – there's something about tragedy which always feels like one of those things that's so quintessentially Greek. Even though the tragic form unfolds and people do different things with it, it seems so characteristic of what we think we know about Greek culture, right? So if you then follow that through you can't help but become immersed in all of those other aspects of ancient cultures.

CP: I think I'm really interested in storytelling as well, and there's something just so clean about tragedy – the form of it and the unity, and the structure of it – that slightly obsesses me too. Because I'm a poet as well, I like form, and so there's something about the shape it takes.

JP: That all comes through really strongly in *Delphi* – there are quite a few bits where your narrator talks about Aristotelian senses of what tragedy should be, such as the recognition point; or you talk about the unity of place and time, how everything plays out in this quite claustrophobic spot. So that leads on to my next question: how did you end up with a novel which brings together that tragic form with the pandemic? It works brilliantly, but there's much more to it than the obvious clichés of the tragedy of the pandemic. What was working in your head to bring those two things together?

CP: I guess it's quite a long journey to get there so it might make more sense to talk about Ovid's *Heroides* first, because that came first! My *Ovid's Heroines* came out in 2013. When I was a teenager I loved Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*, which I thought was just such a great idea. I'd written my second book, and had tried to copy her; I did a lot of poems in the voices of mistresses through history, so I'd always been very interested in that. My friend, the poet Matthew Hollis, when we were on holiday in Athens, told me about this book [Ovid's *Heroides*] and said it might be of interest to me - and I just couldn't believe I hadn't heard of it before. Because of course I'd read the *Metamorphoses*, everyone's seen Ted Hughes's version of that – but I was reading [the *Heroides*] with this sense of being absolutely gobsmacked: that there was this book, and the voices of the women of myth, I mean, it couldn't be more my thing! It was like one of those gifts of fate. I couldn't believe that this book existed and I hadn't heard of it before. And so I went and found various dusty translations which weren't terribly good. In the end I found Harold Isbell's [Penguin translation], which is better, I think. Actually, some of the introductions [to Ovid], they were even moaning about the book.

JP: Yes, in your introduction you quote a bit from Brooks Otis's *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (1970).

CP: Yes, 'the wearisome complaint of the bereft maiden, the monotonous iteration of her woes,' and Harold Jacobson [in *Ovid's Heroides*, 1974] moans about the 'grating and carping women'. Even the people translating it didn't seem to think it was a very good book and I just couldn't believe that they were overlooking what was so clearly in front of their eyes! But my entry point was of course the tragic heroines, because I adore tragedy, and so when I saw Phaedra and Medea I said, 'ah, OK, I've got to have a go at this'. Phaedra was

the first one I did, who has always fascinated me. And I realised quite quickly that I wanted to perform them as well – they're truly dramatic. As a bit of a frustrated actress, this was my chance to be Medea! So I started with those two and I started by trying to make them performable, really dramatic, which I thought had been lost in a lot of the translations.

JP: It's really interesting what you say about how Ovid has such a profile that things like the *Metamorphoses* are so well-known, and yet things like the *Heroides* – when I did Classical Civilisation as an undergraduate, I don't think I encountered the *Heroides* at all, whereas now, it's an increasingly prominent text, certainly in teaching materials I've been involved with. So I wonder if it's one of those texts that has had to be rehabilitated a bit?

CP: Yeah, it's almost like a text that's been failed by its translators. I feel like every text needs to be translated afresh by each generation, made new – and you just feel that it's somehow beyond the reach of some of these men to do a good translation. Of course, Ovid himself was a man, but he was a man who was somehow able to write as a woman, which I think is really interesting. He did have this empathy and he did have this gender fluidity about his writing.

JP: There's nothing else quite like Ovid in terms of that kaleidoscope of voices, is there?

CP: I mean, it's absolutely fascinating that he chose to write a whole book of dramatic monologues all in the voice of women – what a thing to do! A crazy thing to do, in a way.

JP: So, sticking with that world of myth that you're giving new voice to, with a set of poems like that: I'm really struck by how, over the past 5 to 10 years, there's been this explosion of novels which offer feminist retellings of myth. Personally, I have quite mixed feelings about it: inevitably, some are better than others, while at the same time they are evidence of this abiding interest and perhaps relevance of myth today. So I think one of the reasons I really love *Delphi* is that it's inhabiting that same territory in some ways, in that it's suffused with mythic figures and narratives – but it's not doing that thing of trying to give a new voice to a mythological character.

CP: Well, I don't think a lot of those voices are new, because Ovid already did it. And I think that it's a bit funny, this feminist reclaiming, when it was already there – you could argue that it's easy to write feminist retellings of the Greek myths because they're full of strong women, so it's not like some kind of radical vision...

JP: That's a good point – there's so much material just crying out to have that slight polish put on it.

CP: Even in the tragedies – it's not like Medea doesn't get her say. They're full of strong women who actually get to tell their side of the story.

JP: Of course, in *Delphi* it's also about so much more than just myth; it's also about the Delphic scaffolding, the prophecies and all of that Greek cultural material – which to my mind makes it a much richer engagement with antiquity and what it can or can't do for us. Was this something you were consciously trying to map out in that way?

CP: Yes, I suppose I like every book to be different and to be new, and I felt I wasn't done with classics and Greek myth because it still fascinates me – but I wanted a different angle on it. I already felt there were too many of those novels in the voices of Greek mythical characters. And at first I wasn't sure what the book was, I just became very interested in oracles and the idea of prophecy. My Dad always said he was a psychic – I talk about this in [Fierce Bad Rabbits](#) – so I've always done tarot, I've always been interested in that. So I began by, as the woman in the book does, researching oracles and prophecies. And I wasn't sure if it was going to be a poetry book, or a non-fiction book – I wasn't sure what it was going to be. Then the pandemic hit and my project stalled but I realised I wanted to write something about the pandemic, because that's just my nature, I always write about now – and I wanted to capture it. And, I don't know, the two things just came together! One day I had this thought that a lot of my friends were having a terrible time in lockdown – grandparents dying, suicidal, marriages breaking up – and I had this thought that everyone was having their own little Greek tragedy in their house; the unity of place... we didn't see it, but behind everyone's shut doors, there were all these little tragedies going on. I think that's when it clicked, these two threads in my thinking, and I thought, 'oh, maybe that's a novel'. The one-line pitch to my agent and my publishers was 'a Greek tragedy set in lockdown', and I guess that was where the two things came together.

JP: It's so much more than just a tragedy set in lockdown. The prophecy motif is obviously really important as an organising structure and as a plot device that's so important to tragedy – in the Greek tragedies it moves plots on and makes people behave in certain ways – but I'm fascinated by the role it plays for your narrator. There's almost this feeling of grasping, of wanting prophecy to exist and to offer something when maybe it doesn't, or can't? Did that have particular resonance in terms of the pandemic?

CP: I became aware that every day we were all sat round the TV watching prophecies: they were saying x amount of people would die if we didn't do y – but you know, all these charts, they were just prophecies; it was just another form of soothsaying. I think the novel is also about screens and living our life on the internet, and a lot of what we call surveillance capitalism is basically in the prophecy business. What they sell is predictions about how you'll behave, by clicking on adverts and so on. In Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* [2018], she basically says that's what they're in, the prophecy business, the herding business, trying to get people to behave in herds, in certain ways. I found the book really fascinating. So much of modern life is actually based on prophecies. We dress it up, but that's what dominates things – that's what Dominic Cummings [senior adviser to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in 2019-20] is, he's like a super-predictor, that's his whole shtick!

JP: What I really got from being plunged back into that world of 2020, 2021, from the perspective of being a few years on, is this feeling that, yes, they were issuing prophecies, and nobody knew at all whether what was being foretold would actually happen. But the *way* in which it was being done didn't admit any of that uncertainty, did it? It was about these experts and politicians trying to give a sense of certainty or reassurance. And shining that light back on 2020, on the pandemic, is useful for stripping back some of those rhetorical tricks and that really close connection between the prophecy and the politics. We see it crop up in quite a few of the examples of ancient prophecies that you recount in *Delphi*, with people like Croesus, who's trying to get support for a decision that's probably already been made. He goes to Delphi and then says, 'this is what they told us and we're going to interpret it in this way' – even though it's a complete shot in the dark.

CP: Yes, and these prophecies that were often issued were almost like riddles; you could read them both ways and always say you were right. I feel like Boris Johnson was just saying riddles in the end, you know, like 'You'll be well if you go to a pub but only in groups of 4 people and order a pasty with it', like some ancient superstition! I'm fascinated by the Delphic oracle as well, I think she's a really interesting figure, just because there's this sort of radical unknown about her – you can't tell if she was one of the most powerful women in the world or this completely abused vessel, it almost depends which angle you're coming at her from.

JP: That makes me think that, actually, where you do touch on the Sibyl in *Delphi*, it's another example of trying to give a voice to an ancient woman – and not a mythological character, but a real historical woman, or a succession of real historical women who had to go and sit in a temple on some uncomfortable bit of furniture and breathe in god knows what. There's such a void around that

character and I liked the way that *Delphi* tries to rectify that, particularly in the chapter where the narrator has a dream and feels like she's speaking her words.

CP: Yes, it's that question of whose words *is* she speaking? I think now, in this time of conspiracy theories, a lot of us wonder, are these people really powerful or is someone puppeting them behind the scenes? Whose agenda is this really? There's a sort of inability to trust the words. Like, the whole world would go to Delphi to listen to her, she changed the course of history, and yet at the same time she's often saying nothing at all, really – and is she even saying it? It's being translated, but who's translating it? Words are being put in her mouth; and anyway, it's supposed to be the gods speaking through her, so they're not even her own words at all. So there's all these layers of uncertainty about messaging, about what we're told, about authority.

JP: And of course so much of it we can then only access through the Herodotuses and the Plutarchs and these men writing the stuff down.

CP: I think that's one of the problems about the modern world, the complete lack of – people want an authority figure they can trust and believe the words of and there is almost ... it just dissolves into air.

JP: Thinking about the prophecy side of things a bit more, it's a flippant question, but from all the prophetic methods that you use to structure every chapter, I wondered if you had a favourite?

CP: I'm not going to pretend I'm some kind of expert! I just found some lists of prophecies on Wikipedia. I was going to include it as a kind of a found poem and then I realised that I had quite a lot of them in the book already, so I started naming chapters after them. It suits me to have a form, I guess, I found that was quite helpful. So I just had to go through the chapters and try to find an appropriate prophecy ... but then sometimes I would have to [make them up].

JP: It's interesting how, of that sheer array of methods that people are trying to use to access some knowledge, it's the ancient ones that stand out as being particularly unusual! Related to that, I'm always keen to know how people view this relationship between ancient and modern: essentially, whether you think there's a continuum between the ancient world and today, or whether there's a gulf. When you're reading about all of this stuff like telling the future by looking at frogs, or hairs, or whatever, it can put the ancient world in an unfamiliar, alien place. So I'm always interested to know, from people working creatively with this material, whether you have a sense of being driven or pulled towards one end of that spectrum or the other? Is there a sense of connection or continuity, or not?

CP: I think we're just as crazy as them! I mean, when you start falling down these conspiracy theory holes online it's no different from someone trying to predict the future from frogs, really; it's connection-making that's got out of control, seeing connections when they're not there – that's what's happening now, more and more. Really quite sensible people are getting pulled into these things, because the internet's very good at making connections that aren't there. That's all seeing the future with frogs is.

JP: So it's a kind of continuity of behaviour or a human impulse to make sense of something by arranging the world in a certain way?

CP: I think there's a chapter where I go into that – the idea that in the future if we are living in VR [Virtual Reality], we will essentially be living in a world where everything is connected, where everything is a symbol – everything will be a sign. But, you know, it's natural for humans to read the world that way, we always have. These things are not connected but maybe one day we will live in a virtual reality where they will be. It's normal for humans to read the world like a text, looking for meaning.

JP: So is there a similar idea underpinning what the stories of myth do for you as well? I was really struck by the little moments where you use mythological motifs and characters to make a point – for example, when your narrator talks about the rallies after the murder of Sarah Everard in 2021, and describes the police pinning a masked Antigone to the floor. I thought that was such an evocative image, a really powerful symbol of that mythological character and her activism that resonated with me. But equally there are lots of people who would say that the idea that myth speaks to us today because of this universalism and continuity of human emotion and behaviour is fundamentally faulty – because these myths were born out of a world very, very different to our own.

CP: No, I don't think it is faulty. All these stories really are about relationships, whether that's a relationship between a child and a parent, or lovers. And all relationships are political, really, because all relationships are about power, and I think those stories will always continue to have resonance as long as there are daughters and mothers.

JP: I think there's a feeling sometimes, from an academic perspective, that we're on the wrong track if we see a universal connection – and I understand the intellectual rationale for that argument – but also it seems to fly in the face of the fact that we keep coming back to these stories and finding new things in them.

CP: Yes, it's like Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter to appease Artemis – well, we have honour killings in this country; and if we look at what is happening with climate change, people are basically sacrificing their children's futures for their short-term gain. We might not want to recognise that that's happening, but it is.

JP: Actually, I think using those mythological patterns is a good way of confronting some of that discomfort and finding ways to bring it out into the open.

CP: Well, then Medea is an interesting one, because if you hold that up as one of these archetypes, as these essential stories, *is* it really something that happens very much? It's quite unusual – and I think that's interesting. Does the story of Medea appeal to us because it's a truth about human nature or is actually Medea so shocking because it doesn't ring true? That it is outside the human experience?

JP: Maybe it's sometimes a case of taking something that is recognisable as a more widely felt human emotion or a relationship experience – jealousy and abandonment, in the case of Medea – and then showing the extreme outcome of that; so that people can think, well, at least I'd never do that! I'd like to ask another question about your use of these ancient themes and motifs. The likely starting point for most of your readership is that they might not know much about Delphi, or myth. Does it matter if you have a reader who isn't familiar with what Delphi or oracles or the mythological references mean?

CP: No, I don't think so. Hopefully it's a book that's quite generous and welcoming to the reader and that leads them through all those things and describes what they are. The narrator is supposed to be writing a non-fiction book about these things and it's almost like we're reading extracts from her book. I mean, it did start almost as a non-fiction book, so it started with me, it's almost fragments of my own work in progress. But hopefully it explains these things quite clearly – it's quite a good beginner's guide to prophecy in ancient Greece! I like clarity, I'm a communicator. I want the reader to go away feeling they've learned something. Because I like to take that from a book – to have been made to think and to learn some stuff.

JP: I was struck by the bit at the beginning where your narrator talks about how she's working on this project which is a kind of classical receptions project about prophecy and how it's represented in the modern day – I've definitely never read a novel where the protagonist does what I do! I always think of it as so niche but then actually it made sense to me within the context of what you're

doing – that when we think about classical reception, it is very much about trying to understand what that bridge between the past and present is and how you communicate it and how you interpret it. So I can see how that chimes with what you were also trying to do, taking the fruits of your research and showing how it has a resonance for the modern world – that is also what scholars of classical reception are always picking at.

CP: Yes, unofficially I do your job as well! I only really came across classical reception studies because, after the Ovid translation, the classics community were very kind and supportive. I was quite worried, not being a classicist, that I'd made loads of errors – but everyone's been nice about it and I got invited to conferences and was like, ooh, classical reception, now that's something I can get behind!

JP: I have another question about engagement with classical material and what that means for most people. Towards the end of *Delphi*, the narrator talks about her job and the challenges of how it's playing out in the pandemic and she says 'our definition of 'Classics' is pretty abhorrent' (p. 105) The idea that there's something fundamentally abhorrent about the discipline, and particularly in relation to its context in institutions which are very white, middle class spaces – I think that will resonate with a lot of people.

CP: I suppose it's a lot to do with Latin and how that's been a language of the ruling class and a boy's club code for many, many years, which is generally not taught in state schools. I would never have thought of applying to do Classics at university – I guess that's a lot of the problem: how do you get it into state schools and sixth forms?

JP: There is a huge amount of activity around trying to make the study of the ancient world much more accessible. What's your take on how much energy people should put into that?

CP: It's also an image problem because Latin has become this boy's club code which isn't helped by people like [Jacob] Rees-Mogg [Conservative politician], ruining the image of Classics every time he quotes it. And I suppose as soon as you say 'the Classics' you put this line around the Romans and the Greeks and don't think about how they were involved with other cultures and so on, and this overlap – perhaps that's something that Classics could look at as well.

JP: It's interesting to hear your take on it because in many ways, the view from inside the academic discipline looks quite different. I think there is a sense of Classics being overshadowed by this long history of how it has been taught and particularly the fetishization of the languages, which means that in many

institutions there's a lot of energy around trying to move away from this – and yet it's a persistent image problem. There's a set of assumptions around studying this material, which is still largely fixed by traditional institutions – and trying to get out from under that is difficult.

CP: In my Arthurian children's book, the twist is that the Knights of the Round Table are actually the bad guys because they're colonialists, they're like a Bullingdon Club. It's the kids below stairs who have to get the Holy Grail before them – but I have the Knights quoting Latin to each other because they're close to the Roman invasion. So even then I'm positing it as the language of exclusion, the boy's club language. It's got deep roots.

JP: To what extent does your work with classical material connect with to your interest in children's literature? Would you ever consider doing versions of myths for children?

CP: I think too many people are doing it. I'd want to find a different angle, like I have with the Arthurian myths - that's what's exciting, when you find a new angle. I guess, just putting it out there for the universe to hear, one thing that would take me back to the Greek myths again for sure is that I'd love to do a version of a tragedy for the stage!

JP: Do you have a particular one in mind?

CP: No. Just, for me that's where it started, so it would be coming full circle. Otherwise, it does just feel like these myths are a little bit overexposed.

JP: Because as you said right at the beginning, you have this driving interest in the sorts of stories cultures tell themselves to make sense of things, whether that's this sort of myth or Arthurian legend or fairy tales or whatever?

CP: Yes, for fairy tales it's all that thing of happy ever after and marriage that I'm digging into.

JP: That to me does seem equally valuable, and even if those sorts of stories are doing slightly different jobs, they're all tools that a culture has. There's nothing that means we have to promote Greece and Rome as being somehow more valuable or culturally superior or more meaningful – even though unfortunately what *has* underpinned a lot of engagement with classical material for two millennia is the idea that what's in here is 'the best'.

CP: Yes, the best of us, the pinnacle of civilisation.

JP: Which is really problematic – there’s room for it all. When you talk about writing for the stage, do you see a different potential in that kind of medium, for playing with these sorts of myths and stories? Or is it just the formal challenge?

CP: I just love writing! I don’t really have a genre, I love them all. But there is something about tragedy: the fact that in two hours, you can tell the whole story. I like that you can have it in one sitting, and I like a novel you can read in one sitting. I like art as a total experience. The thing with a poem is you can hold a whole poem in your head; novels I find harder because I can’t really tell if it’s any good until I sit down and read it in a single sitting. You give yourself over to the piece of art.

JP: Is there something in that immediacy of connection with an audience? That’s something I find really fascinating about people engaging with ancient literature. Often I don’t think people readily realise how much of ancient literature was designed to be performed and recited and heard – engaged with in a non-literary way.

CP: Yes, that was what I was trying to tease out with the *Heroides*. I thought these were so dramatic. They’re like Shakespearean soliloquies. I think they’re just as sophisticated – they’re actually people making up their minds in the same way as in a soliloquy – thinking out loud.

JP: It’s been so fascinating to hear your thoughts on all of this. I’ve really enjoyed the opportunity to talk to you about it. Thank you very much!