

The Myth of Baucis and Philemon: A New Reading of George Sand's *Indiana* (1832)

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Jean-Bernard Restout's 1769 painting, 'Baucis and Philemon Offering Hospitality to Jupiter and Mercury' (Courtesy of Le Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours).

The myth of Baucis and Philemon is 'one of the best-loved stories'¹ in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and has been appropriated and transmuted by a number of writers, including Goethe, Proust and Beckett.² The source of its attraction is its portrayal of a love which endures in old age until death, as embodied by the kind and virtuous couple in Ovid's story. The second important element in the myth is the utopian dénouement, which presents Baucis and Philemon harmoniously tending the gods' temple. In a tradition of mythology that often deals with aggression and conflict, this story stands out in having 'the sort of kindly warmth which some of Ovid's readers would like to find in more of his myths [...]'.³ However, the utopian space of the couple is envisaged as needing a third party to dynamise it, giving rise to the third key element in the myth, namely what the Greeks call *xenia*: entertaining the stranger who may turn out to be a god in disguise and who dispenses a

reward for hospitality.⁴ By offering shelter to the disguised Zeus and Hermes, Baucis and Philemon are rewarded with exemption from the flood that the gods unleash upon their inhospitable neighbours. They are also allowed to die at exactly the same moment.

My claim in this paper is that all of these mythological elements are present in George Sand's *Indiana*, a novel which both extends and complicates these three themes of the harmonious couple, utopia and *xenia*.

First of all, the virtuous couple in 'Baucis and Philemon' is paralleled in *Indiana*'s final solution, which presents a harmonious dyad. The novel tells the story of its eponymous heroine, a young, beautiful creole from the Île Bourbon married to the much older and brutish Colonel Delmare. The ill-matched couple live on a country estate in France—with Indiana's cousin Ralph. In spite of a number of tribulations, and the seductions of the aristocratic cad Raymon, the novel ends with Indiana and Ralph as the idealised couple, living in their 'Indian cottage' in a secluded part of the

1. M. Gamel, 'Baucis and Philemon: Paradigm or Paradox?', *Helios*, 11 (1984), p.117

2. See S. Agusta-Boularot, *Dictionnaire Culturel de la Mythologie Gréco-Romaine, Sous la Direction de René Martin* (Paris: Nathan, 1992), p.59

3. G.K. Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), p.197

4. See T. Hsiu-chih, 'The Stranger's Friendship on the Battlefield: The Performance of Xenia in the Iliad', *Humanitas Taiwanica*, 69 (2008), p.185-229

island of Bourbon. This utopian ending, which has earned Sand accusations of sinning against the norms of the nineteenth-century realist genre,⁵ is a further link to mythology, the domain of *invraisemblance*. Sand presents this utopian space as an open one, as Ralph and Indiana dedicate themselves to freeing slaves and caring for the poor. They also offer shelter to a young man, who turns out to be the story's narrator.

The question of hospitality is, in fact, present throughout the novel. Ralph, initially perceived as a rather colourless character, is accepted within the Delmare household and turns out to be a benign presence for Indiana, incessantly watching over her. By the end of the novel, he is revealed to be a god in disguise, the saviour who offers his pure and unconditional love to Indiana.

The Politics of the Ideal Harmonious Couple

The 'well-matched and worthy pair'⁶ in the Ovidian myth are a humble couple who have grown old together in a house which, though poor, constitutes a haven for them. This endorsement of simplicity is also present in the Sandian couple, who, isolated from civilisation, renounce pretentious ostentation and instead cherish 'the wit that comes from the heart'.⁷ Even though Ralph and Indiana are not depicted in their old age, we are told that this happy outcome is the result of a long process, a metamorphosis, whose duration is rendered ambiguous by the temporal indeterminacy and sense of timelessness that characterises utopia.⁸

A radical aspect of what Vareille terms Sand's 'anarchising utopia'⁹ is her depiction of equality within relationships. The *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* revolutionary credo was still far from being implemented within the politics of the married couple in 1832 France. Article 1124 of the Civil Code instituted by Napoleon assigned women the same legal status as children and the

5. See M. Hirsch, 'Questions à Indiana', *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 42:165 (1977), p.117

6. A.E. Watts, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid: An English Version* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1980), p.186

7. G. Sand, *Indiana*, trans. S. Raphael, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.265-266

8. Ralph highlights the difficulty of this psychological journey of opening oneself to the other: 'I had been excessively mistrustful of myself for thirty years and it wasn't in one day that I could have a firm hope of pleasing and being loved' (Sand, *Indiana*, p.269). This is a strangely ageless couple who tell us, 'All our days are the same; they are all calm and beautiful' (*ibid*).

9. K. Wingard Vareille, *Socialité, Sexualité et Les Impassés de l'Histoire : L'évolution de la Thématique Sandienne d'Indiana (1832) à Mauprat (1837)*, (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), p.69

insane.¹⁰ Interestingly, Sand goes beyond this patriarchal setup by positing as her ideal model of the couple a union which incorporates and synthesises different kinship ties. Hence, Ralph tells Indiana: 'Now it is I who am your brother, your husband, your lover for all eternity.'¹¹ This original configuration, rather than tapping into fears of incest, transfigures it into an egalitarian arrangement, a symbolic 'levelling out'¹² in which male and female coexist and fuse in a union which preserves their dignity. This notion of reuniting opposites finds a perfectly illustrative image in the Baucis and Philemon myth: the intertwining oak and linden trees, symbols of the duration of conjugal love, into which the old couple are transformed at the moment of their death.¹³ Similarly, in bringing together a creole woman and a morose Englishman, Sand reunites differing geographies and temperaments. The Île Bourbon setting further underscores this theme, since it is situated between Africa and the Far East, thus fusing characteristics of East and West. In fact, Sand, whose words 'have now and then a strange prophetic ring'¹⁴, seems to have designated this utopian setting with singular foresight, since the French Revolution of 1848 led to the island's change of name, to the highly apposite *La Réunion*.¹⁵

However, this *réunion* is portrayed by Sand to stand outside the possibilities offered by marriage, since Ralph and Indiana are presented as an unwedded childless couple. This is a radical reconfiguration of the family unit, a basic component of utopias. Such an outlook is consistent with Sand's belief that the institution of marriage is no longer sacred, and has been thoroughly perverted by patriarchy.¹⁶ It is thus unable to offer the equality and openness upon which the model polity is

10. D. Holmes, *French Women's Writing 1848-1994* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2000), p.6

11. Sand, *Indiana*, p.259

12. Wingard Vareille, p.421

13. F. Hageneder, *The Meaning of Trees: Botany, History, Healing, Lore* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005), p.172 & 206

14. A. Repplier, *Points of Friction* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p.243

15. Such creative imagination is what enables the poet to be what Hugo terms 'l'homme des utopies' (literally the man of utopias). See K. Biermann, 'George Sand et Victor Hugo: Deux Visions 'Parallèles' de la Révolution', in D. A. Powell (ed), *Le Siècle de George Sand*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p.30

16. Bénédict in Valentine, for instance, argues that 'il n'est point d'inconvenance plus monstrueuse, d'usage plus scandaleux que la publicité qu'on donne au mariage.' G. Sand, *Romans 1830* (Paris: Presse de la Cité, 1991), p. 289, and Lansac himself in *Valentine* feels that 'cette chaste et sainte institution du mariage s'était horriblement souillée', Sand, *Romans 1830*, p.344

predicated.

The Utopian Space as Open and Welcoming

The main characteristic of the utopian space investigated by both the Ovidian myth and Sand's novel is its open and welcoming nature. The harmony in the Baucis and Philemon household stems from its lack of social distinctions:

No master there, nor man, where only they
Were the whole house, to order and obey.¹⁷

In spite of their poverty, the couple welcomes the two weary travellers and offers what little they have. This is also true of Ralph and Indiana, since the gender equality they espouse extends to a wider egalitarian ethos, as exhibited in their slave-liberating enterprise. Also, their servants are considered friends: 'they share our joys, we tend their ills'.¹⁸ These benign practices, however, attract the onslaughts of the not-so-virtuous neighbours, who, as in Baucis and Philemon's story, are inhospitable. Indiana and Ralph are subject to malicious gossip by the envious inhabitants of the island.

Secondly, Ralph and Indiana offer shelter to a young man caught in a violent storm which evokes the mythic flood in the Baucis and Philemon story. Interestingly, this guest turns out to be the story's narrator, who appears out of nowhere, and is unconditionally welcomed: 'before I had opened my mouth to ask for shelter, the owner of the house had silently and solemnly made a welcoming gesture,'¹⁹ thus conforming to the ancient rule of hospitality that one must not ask for the identity of one's guest. Ralph and Indiana also impart their own story to their guest as a parting gift, thus giving the new arrival what Derrida calls 'all of one's home and oneself.'²⁰ The parting gift is a standard ritual in mythical practices of *xenia* where the relationship is a horizontal one.²¹

In allowing a third person to come in and dynamise the couple by supplying a differing perspective, Indiana and Ralph demonstrate Sand's ideal of the porosity of the home space, which should be engaged with otherness. This ideal corresponds closely to what Derrida calls the structure of thirdness (tertialité), which 'interrupts the

complacency of the duality'²² and 'intensifies and in a sense exalts'²³ the relationship of the couple. In highlighting the greater love of the couple, 'thirdness' constitutes an essential component of the utopian space, and is rewarded by divine protection. Ralph and Indiana's cottage, like that belonging to Baucis and Philemon, is exempted from the flood, 'protected by a rampart of cliffs leaning over it and serving as an umbrella.'²⁴

The Question of *Xenia*

This acceptance of thirdness leads us to examine the question of '*xenia*', the ethical code of hospitality, and its possible rewards or dangers. This benevolent practice was so important for the Greeks as to be protected by Zeus himself, referred to as Zeus Xeinius. *Xenia* was highly valued by the Ancient Greeks since 'traveling to various places by sea and meeting with people from different places' led them to cultivate 'a profound understanding and experience of being a stranger in a foreign land'.²⁵ The dynamics between guest and host have also been analysed by Derrida, who points out that the French word *hôte* can mean either guest or host. This polysemy perfectly encapsulates the dual roles of the fascinatingly ambiguous Ralph, first shown as a permanent guest within the Delmare household. His status depends on Delmare's finite and conditional hospitality, regulated by Ralph's ritualised oath (Greek: *orkos*) to always behave as a brother-in-law towards Indiana.²⁶ This highly controlled hospitality is highlighted by Delmare's portrayal as 'the conjugal Argus', who 'wearie[s] his eagle eye'²⁷ in attentive scrutiny of Ralph and Indiana. He requires several months of careful observation before according his trust. Delmare thus functions as a Kantian host who 'sets up his relationship to the one who is in his house as a matter of the law', so that the guest always 'remain(s) a foreigner'.²⁸

However, Ralph is no ordinary guest, since he turns out to be a god in disguise and the Messiah which Indiana has been waiting for all along. His full-length portrait in her room is an apt symbol

17. Watts, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid: An English Version*, p.184

18. Sand, *Indiana*, p.270

19. Sand, *Indiana*, p.263

20. J. Derrida and A. Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond trans.

R. Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.77

21. See J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), p.27

22. J. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. P. Brault & M. Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.32-33

23. H. de Vries, 'Derrida and Ethics: Hospitable Thought' in T. Cohen, *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.186

24. Sand, *Indiana*, p.263

25. Hsiu-chih, p.191

26. '...a sacred promise' from which he is liberated only by Delmare's death. See Sand, *Indiana*, p.255

27. Sand, *Indiana*, p.17

28. Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, p.71. The narrator in *Indiana* tells us that Delmare's 'only conscience was the law; his only morality was his right', Sand, *Indiana*, p.89

of his ubiquity and benign protection. Raymon is quick to seize upon the power of this male gaze, as he observes that: 'he watches over her, he protects her, he follows all her movements, she is his at any time.'²⁹ When in danger, Indiana instinctively flees to his portrait 'as if she had put herself under the protection of that solemn personage'.³⁰ In addition, he later rescues her from a suicidal impulse to plunge into the Seine. Other critics have pointed out the divine-like powers of this enigmatic character; Vareille tells us that 'he incessantly watches over her like an occult and tutelary divinity'³¹, a 'bon génie', while Haskett finds that Ralph 'proves to be a type of Christ, filling the roles of brother, friend, mentor and guardian angel, and becoming, when she is finally at death's door, her saviour.'³² His role in tempering domestic discords is unremitting and, even at night, 'the hidden influence'³³ is still at work.

The elaborately constructed disguise of this god-like presence, the 'triple wall of ice'³⁴ Ralph erects around himself, is shed only when they are at the brink of death, at the edge of the sublime, terrifying ravine. In this final epiphany, which parallels the gods' revelation of their identity in the Baucis and Philemon myth, an 'extraordinary change' takes 'place in Ralph's soul and appearance'³⁵, and 'the veil that concealed so much virtue, nobility and power fell away completely.'³⁶ In the final section, the narrator is 'overawed' by his first encounter with Ralph, leaving such 'an ineffaceable impression' as to appear to him in his dreams like an 'extraordinary destiny'.³⁷ In spite of his aura of grandeur, Ralph still proves to be an excellent practitioner of *xenia* in welcoming the narrator, as previously discussed.

However, this ideal example is contrasted by two bad practices, namely Delmare's aggressiveness towards trespassers, and Raymon's Ixion-like ingratitude towards his hosts. Opting for the double-edged practice of hospitality does not necessarily warrant a positive outcome since, as Derrida points out, 'for this relation to be what it is – a relation [...] and not any programmatic exchange of moves – there must be at least the

29. Sand, *Indiana*, p.68

30. Sand, *Indiana*, p.142

31. Wingard Vareille, p.60

32. K. Haskett, 'Spirituality and Feminism in George Sand's Indiana', *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages*, 9 (2008), p.54

33. Sand, *Indiana*, p.198

34. Sand, *Indiana*, p.255

35. Sand, *Indiana*, p.242

36. Sand, *Indiana*, p.246

37. Sand, *Indiana*, p.265

possibility that the relation to the other will pervert itself.'³⁸ Like Plato's word *pharmakon*, 'hospitality' is multivalent, causing 'oppositions to waver and oscillate.'³⁹ *Pharmakon*, while generally meaning 'drug', can refer to either a healing remedy or its exact opposite, a poison. In a similar manner, hospitality has the potential to be either galvanising or destructive.

Delmare's aggression is reflected in the opening of the novel in which, upon being told of the presence of an unknown man in his grounds, he threatens: 'I'll kill like a dog any man that I find prowling round my land at night'. Patriarchal laws are complicit with this policy: 'If you knew the law, Madame, you would know it authorizes me to do so'.⁴⁰ The law which Delmare follows is thus inimical to the law of hospitality which should gain precedence. Delmare's credo is '*Everyone for himself*'⁴¹, an outright denial of engagement with otherness. He incarnates Derrida's phallogocentric 'familial despot, the father, the spouse and the boss, the master of the house who lays down the laws of hospitality'⁴². He is the patriarch who controls access to the gothic castle, and whose domestic tyranny makes 'everybody tremble, wife, servants, horses and dogs.'⁴³ Delmare's inward-looking and possessive attitude results in Raymon's bloody injury, and another injury suffered by Indiana in a much later episode, in which he kicks her on the forehead with the heel of his boot. In each case, an unholy imprint is left by this inhospitable practice.⁴⁴

Hospitality can also degenerate into parasitism, through the guest which Derrida qualifies as 'wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest.'⁴⁵ Raymon indeed constitutes such a guest. He first infiltrates the Delmare grounds in order to carry out his secret liaison with Indiana's servant, and later even has carnal relations with her in Indiana's room, her 'inner sanctum',⁴⁶ on her white, virginal bed. This gross breach of hospitality rules is conceived in

38. T. Cohen, *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.188

39. W. Brogan, 'Plato's Pharmakon: Between Two Repetitions', in H.J. Silverman (ed), *Derrida and Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.9

40. Sand, *Indiana*, p.20

41. Sand, *Indiana*, p.87

42. Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, p.149

43. Sand, *Indiana*, p.15

44. The wife's status is analogous to that of a guest, for marriage and *xenia* were parallel social institutions. See P. Roth, 'The Theme of Corrupted Xenia in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*', *Mnemosyne*, XLVI:1, 1993, p.3

45. Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, p.61

46. Sand, *Indiana*, p.68

mythic terms. Raymon is explicitly compared to Ixion,⁴⁷ the archetypal transgressor of *xenia*, who after being invited by Zeus to the table of the gods, repays this hospitable gesture by growing lustful for Hera. Similarly, Raymon makes use of the Colonel's invitation in order to renew his seduction of Indiana. Poetic justice is served when Laure, the woman Raymon marries by the end of the novel, proves to be a phallic mother, whose exertion of dominance renders him a permanently inadequate guest within the house he had earlier transgressed.

Conclusion

The Baucis and Philemon myth, presented by Ovid as an edifying tale of piety and its reward, sets

47. Sand, *Indiana*, p.65

forth a number of topoi recurrently appropriated by a number of authors. In George Sand's fresh take on the classic story, its implications are politicised to offer an alternative to the failed patriarchal model of relationships. In rewarding the open and outward-looking couple, Sand is already anticipating her later endorsement of Pierre Leroux's humanitarian socialism and his view of triplicity, which she transposes onto the politics of the couple that goes beyond the dyad. La Réunion, as the chosen place of this harmonisation, reinforces the idea that diversity can still be united into a oneness of ethos.

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