

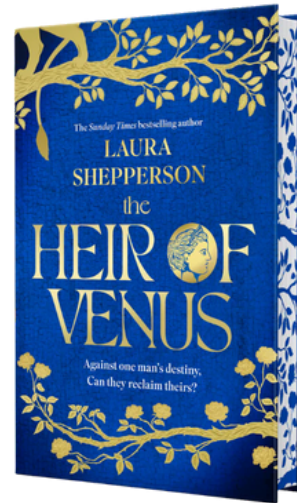
Book Review: *The Heir of Venus* by Laura Shepperson

Several months ago, I swore I was done reading feminist retellings of Greek myths. Not because I was disappointed by what I read – the opposite, in fact. The last few years have seen writers breathe new life into the women of Greek mythology and allow their narratives to take centre stage, something long denied to them in the original stories.

However, although a certain amount of righteous feminism can alter the perspective with which we view a woman's story, it cannot change the tragic end that often befalls the women in these tales, ranging from enslavement, to murder, to being turned into a river just to escape a lecherous god. Frankly, I grew exhausted from reading books wherein no amount of hoping against hope would alter the ending, or bring vengeance upon the patriarchy that inflicted it. I needed a break, and I was ready to take one.

Enter *The Heir of Venus*.

This book quite literally fell into my lap, when my sister offered it to me one day as a gift. I didn't want to be rude, so I said nothing of the recent vow I had made. The blurb informed me that the book retold the stories of Creusa, Dido and Lavinia, three women that, at one point or another, fall in love with or marry the Trojan hero Aeneas. This reassured me somewhat; their respective stories are in the 'less horrifying' category of



Greek myths – by that, I mean only two of them die, and no one gets enslaved. Goals, right? I figured I would be able to tolerate one final lap around the proverbial 'Trojan war retelling' sun before I parked my chariot for good.

The Heir of Venus was not without its faults. At times, I thought the depiction of Dido seemed shallow, especially in comparison to her Trojan and Latin counterparts. Plot-wise, Dido played a central role in the novel, yet the author, Laura Shepperson, does little to demonstrate the nuances to Dido's decision-making, particularly when she allows herself to go from powerful and benevolent queen to weeping scorned lover. I think the narrative would have benefitted from some further explanation as to how Dido managed to fall so far, either by exploring her thoughts more deeply, or stating explicitly that some godly involvement was afoot.



That being said, this novel also surprised and delighted me in a way that other feminist retellings have thus far not been able to do. I found particularly pertinent Shepperson's dedication to showcasing how, even when the future appears set in stone, each woman has the potential to control elements of her destiny. Defeat, in other words, only comes when Creusa, Dido or Lavinia allow themselves to *be* defeated.

Such is what famously happens to Dido, when Aeneas leaves in pursuit of his Aphrodite-ordained fate: founding the city of Rome. Devastated by the loss of her lover, Dido drives a sword through her heart, putting an end to the prosperous queendom she was building. The implication from Shepperson is that, while Aeneas may have been destined to abandon Dido, she was not destined to die. Instead, she made the mistake of believing that the forces around her were more than she was able to bear and, as a result, allowed them to defeat her before they could truly begin to try.

The same cannot be said for Aeneas' oft-forgotten first wife, Creusa, and his final wife, Lavinia. Although both women's destinies are more fixed than Dido's – Creusa is fated to die in the sack of Troy, while Lavinia is promised to Aeneas by both Aphrodite and her father – they still manage to assert power and push against the boundaries of the life dictated to them. In refusing to lie down and accept that the power of prophecy is greater than their own agency, both characters prove themselves stronger than Aeneas, the supposed hero of the story, who allows himself to be pushed and pulled in whatever direction the gods desire.

There is something inherently reassuring in reading a novel like this now. As a journalist who is reading and writing the news every day, I am often reminded of how there are bigger forces than myself at work, which play havoc with people's lives and make the individual's ability to control their future seem miniscule in comparison. Shepperson reminds us that while this may be the case, the only universe in which it certainly *is* true is one where we throw in the towel without even attempting to wield our own destiny. The world, regardless of whether it is mythological, ancient or modern, can place overwhelming and often exhausting demands on a person's shoulders. Yet as Lavinia learns, although the moments of peace may be short-lived, the opportunities that come from continued perseverance will, with any luck, rise to equal the ones that do not.

Overall Rating: ★★★★★