

*The Snake-Haired Muse: James K. Baxter and
Classical Myth*

edited by Geoffrey Miles, John Davidson and Paul Millar
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Reviewed by Alistair Fox

James K. Baxter occupies a peculiar place in New Zealand's literary history, as one of the most highly regarded poets – a national icon – who is also one of the least well understood. Some even find him an embarrassment. Curnow set the tone in his famous 'Introduction' to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1960) in regretting the 'odd minglings' in Baxter's poetry 'of a modern New Zealand vision, complex and ambiguous, and a throwback to the make-believe art of earlier generations', which Curnow considered mere 'literary tissue' that muffled the sound of an authentic New Zealand voice (pp.61-62). This discomfort with Baxter's indifference to Curnow's dictum that 'genuine' New Zealand poetry needed to depict a reality that was 'local and special' (p.17) has meant that in many accounts Baxter has been presented as someone who does not really fit. This is nowhere more apparent than in his copious use of classical myth – the subject of this new book – which commentators have found, as Geoffrey Miles outlines in his excellent introduction, to be alienating, artificial, pretentious, and ultimately phoney. *The Snake-Haired Muse* aims to put all that to rights, by showing not only the sheer scale and depth of Baxter's engagement with classical myth, but also how central it was to his very mode of thinking and feeling – in short, its centrality to his vision of the world and his personal experience, as well as to his practice as a poet. As such, this book offers the most substantial scholarly consideration of Baxter's poetic and dramatic oeuvre that has yet been published, and will constitute a permanent resource and point of reference for all studies of Baxter in the future. My guess is that it will also lead to a comprehensive reappraisal of Baxter as a poet, which is certainly one of the book's aims.

The Snake-Haired Muse consists of several chapters (by Miles and Paul Millar) that outline the general significance of myth to Baxter and the evolution of his handling of it in his earlier career, and then a series of chapters (by Davidson and Miles) arranged thematically that explore Baxter's use of myth in specific poems and plays. In particular, these chapters focus on his representations of the feminine, in both its idealized forms (Venus in her positive aspects) and fearful manifestations (variously, Circe, Medusa, Hekate, Cybele, Gea, and the Furies); of three heroes (Hercules, Theseus, and Odysseus) as 'figures of the self'; of Bacchus/Dionysus as a figure of his personal difficulties relating to the expectations of society that both liberates

and enslaves; and of Hades as a metaphor for life in its grim aspects, and of disturbing psychological and spiritual realities. The argumentative part of the book concludes with speculations by Millar on the implications of the study for a reappraisal of Baxter's place in New Zealand literature, and the work as a whole ends with an encyclopedic catalogue of the mythological figures and myths to which Baxter refers, along with specific references that enable the reader to locate them in his oeuvre.

What, then, emerges from this meticulous and scholarly study? First, because the authors have taken into consideration Baxter's entire output, of which his published canon is only about a third, they demonstrate conclusively that Baxter's engagement with myth was far more extensive than most readers will have known. Moreover, contrary to a common assumption, it was not merely an early-career affectation, but remained strong throughout his life. Second, his use of myth was far from being merely decorative. Instead, it emerges as a strategy, for Baxter, whereby he sought to make a pattern out of the chaos of his experience by drawing upon the signifying potential of what Vincent O'Sullivan has described as 'permanent figures in human imagination' (p.22). The copious instances of classical allusion discussed by the authors shows Baxter recurrently placing mythological figures into the New Zealand landscape, or into various personal and social contexts, in order to generate a paradoxical, dislocating cultural hybridity that figures the tensions in the poet's experience of the world. The effect is to establish an ironic discordance that powerfully registers Baxter's own problems with maternal attachment, sex, and guilt associated with aspects of his self that he loathed as well as loved. As John Davidson demonstrates, in three chapters that, for this reader, collectively constitute the most insightful criticism of Baxter's poetry yet published, Baxter's use of myth enabled him to capture the polyvalent dimensions of his conflicted experience, by exploiting the contrarious, double-sided aspects of these classical figures – for example, Venus, who can associate both to the idealized feminine embodied in 'Our Lady', or to the destructive infernal feminine, or Dionysus, who can associate both to the underworld and death, or to Christ. Far from attesting to a loss of 'contact with base', as Curnow and some later detractors of Baxter would have it, the poet's harnessing of myth in order to gain affective and intellectual access to these polyvalent, problematic dimensions of experience show him attaining a degree of authenticity that other poets might do well to envy, and which helps explain why his poetry persists in retaining its place in the national imaginary, to a degree that no other New Zealand poet has achieved.

Millar is thus surely right in his belief that a fuller understanding of the importance of classical myth to Baxter's way of thinking, and in his work

as a whole, should lead to a reappraisal of his significance within the New Zealand literary tradition. The Baxter that emerges from this study was far more deeply imbued with the European tradition as a living imaginative reality right up until his death, rather than someone, as is commonly supposed, who ‘saw the light’ by discarding the trappings of that tradition in order to write the *Jerusalem Sonnets*, which are taken as an entry into proper authenticity.

The Snake-Haired Muse also suggests, to me, that once Baxter’s place in New Zealand poetry has been properly established, that, in turn, is likely to contribute to a still larger undertaking: the ongoing task of revising the *mythos* of New Zealand’s cultural evolution established by the ‘cultural nationalists’ of the 1930s. It is becoming increasingly apparent that this *mythos* – of an abrupt new departure into genuine New Zealandness when poets and painters threw off ‘colonial’ influences from Europe in order to express a reality that was ‘local and special’ – is unsatisfactory as an explanation of this country’s cultural history. Despite a growing number of scholarly cautions, that *mythos* is still very much with us: it receives an emphatic re-articulation in Francis Pound’s *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity 1930-1970* (2009), and provides the framework for the overview offered in the new account of this country’s cinematic history published by Te Papa, *New Zealand Film: An Illustrated History* (2011). The evidence provided by Baxter’s practice as revealed in *The Snake-Haired Muse*, a landmark book, should deepen one’s reservations about this *mythos*: after all, what is the use of an explanatory myth that is not able to account for the country’s most famous poet?

*A Simple Nullity? The Wi Parata Case in
New Zealand Law and History*

by David V. Williams. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2011
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Reviewed by Alex Frame

Professor David Williams has a well-established place among the leading contributors to ‘Treaty jurisprudence’ – as legal thinking on and around the Treaty of Waitangi of 1840 has come to be called. The early period of that movement as it gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by what I have called the ‘pathological view’¹ of race relations in New Zealand, which pictured an unremitting oppression of helpless Maori ‘victims’ by greedy European colonizers with a cunning master plan.

More recently, however, a more nuanced and complex view has begun to emerge, in which motives and strategies on all sides are shown to be more