

# The Third Book

ARB Fiction

Panagiotis Kechagias

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This is the square and the building it serves is black and from above the glorious midday sunlight falls in long beams like wooden staves driven into the ground. I stand outside the entrance. The square is built in such a way that its four sides slope gently downwards to a wide flat surface at its center. The building is made of marble and granite and slate, all black and shining darkly. I am here. The double gates stand open. The air inside is cool and inviting. I am here, in the island of Myrmidon, in the Mandragora Archipelago, because I have to know.

This is a library, one that claims to house a single book. Inside the gates, I know, there are only two chambers, one inside the other; the external chamber has four sides, and the inner one has twelve. Every reader before me has passed under the same three arches, all unadorned: the entrance to the building, the entrance to the external chamber, and the entrance to the inner chamber, where the third book of Homer lies open on a lectern. There's no one standing between me and the book, no one that will block my path.

I am certain of what will happen, but still I have to know, because otherwise the world is just a contrivance.

Most scholars agree: the third book holds the keys to all the symbols of beauty  
(or only the one)

and we know that the book is unguarded. Anyone can go in, open the pages, and start reading. But once the reader finishes a line, a rhapsody, or the whole book—no one knows what the trigger is—the guardians appear, and their form, or rather the components of their form are, like the best of poems, unclear, and the ways they succeed at their duty are, like the best of poems, unknown. It is said they are only visible to torchlight reflected on disks of gold. As soon as they appear the latest reader is dragged outside to the square where new crowds are already gathered to witness his execution—but I must know. The book is comprised of nine thousand, nine hundred, and ninety-nine rhapsodies, each composed of an indeterminate number of lines that all together form the root of every subsequent poem. Some say that the Iliad is only an appendix to the third book, or that the Odyssey is merely a brief commentary to the real work that is now waiting for me a few steps inside the building. Others claim that the Iliad is merely the shadow of the Myriad thrown by a bonfire on a cave wall, while others waste their lives trying to prove the opposite.

The historians of the past have written that the book was first stored in an almost endless proliferation of clay tablets tightly shelved in an asymmetrical and prism-like arrangement of mad carpentry so massive as to require the total space formerly occupied by two neighboring empires, perpetually at war or mutually exclusive. To some ancient commentators this first depository looked like the indecent evolution of an ark's insides. From clay tablets his hidden masterpiece was carved on oak boards, and then on pages of crude bamboo and woven reed. Then, the unknown stories afflicting unrevealed heroes were copied onto pages stitched from materials more exotic and ever thinner. Through the centuries the completion of each new copy was celebrated with the destruction of the previous one, and the end result, this black cube, resembles the serene death throes of a final archive.

A growing cadre of researchers believes that the Myriad is an exhaustive catalogue of Troy and all its copies, every impregnable place made vulnerable by pride. Then there are those that try to prove that it is the exhaustive

catalogue of Greece and all its colonies, the territories that have embarked on a quest that lead them away from themselves. And then there are the few who have written that the Myriad is an exhaustive catalogue of the entire world, this chariot that drags its dead in circles around a pit of fire. Most, unlike me, will never undertake the arduous journey that would bring them here, where I stand outside the gates.

But I must know where beauty is hiding in the world—is it in the convulsions of a single braid, or in the flash of a green and scornful eye? Is it in the dip at the peak of the curve of a full and perfect lip? Is it hiding in the sail's gravid curve or perched on the bow of a ship lost in a catalogue of ships? Can it be found in the grace of a hand whose wrist is encased in circles of gold studded with rubies, pointing out from the tops of the walls the leaders of the Greek army? Or is it waiting in the maternal lament for every fallen soldier undocumented in the books that we know and study? But I must know, even if the knowledge lasts only for that brief and dragged gallop from the inner chamber, through the outer, and then down the wide and gleaming steps to the center of the square where the scaffold awaits, and the crowd, and the sun that threads its gaze past eight minutes of icy nothingness and into the eye of this needle, the noose hanging over the trapdoor. But I must know, even if it's hiding in the brief crack of the neck that will vacate my body once and for all from the question it can't stop asking itself.

I remember, once, when I was young or little, I was sitting at a table waiting for dinner to be served. In front of me was a round white plate, empty, and at each of what we call its sides

(even though it has none)

lay the fork, the knife, the little spoon, and if I bent forward just a bit, on the fourth side my face was reflected on the table's black lacquered surface. Off to the side the second glass was joined with the first at the base resting on the table, the wine it held miraculously suspended over a distant ceiling that had become the depths. I felt the high chair pressing at my back. My hands were resting on my thighs hidden under the table. I remember how, suddenly, I felt a movement in my palm where until then there had been none. I pulled my hand and found within it another, soft and small and goldly ringed, the palm as round and white as porcelain, a hand which proved to be the first prelude of beauty, and at the same time its coda, and I remember how right from the start it looked like a noose through which I could exercise my right to see, as one looks through jewels re-ground to lenses—like the Roman emperors did, and before them the Greeks—a woman or a girl now lost inside a catalogue of women.

Panagiotis Kechagias is a writer, editor and translator based in Athens, Greece. His first book, *Final Warning* (Antipodes, 2016), was shortlisted for the Greek National Book Award, the Balkanika Prize, the Anagnostis Prize, and the Klepsydra Prize.

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