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# "That's Purely Greek": Ethnicity and Gender in Ariadne Thompson's *The Octagonal Heart*[i]

ANCA-LUMINIŢA IANCU
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

**Abstract**
*The Octagonal Heart* (1956) depicts Ariadne Thompson's memories of the happy summers she spent as a child with her extended family in the octagonal house, Parnassus, a private residence near St. Louis, USA. A strong sense of Greekness permeates the intertwining layers of the memoir, the physical one (the house with its Greek-style decorated rooms arranged in an octagonal shape and its surroundings) and the emotional one (which captures the relationships among the family members and their reactions to significant moments in their lives). This essay proposes a close reading of the memoir with a view to examining how gender, ethnic expectations, and attitudes towards assimilation have impacted the hyphenated identities of three generations of women in Thompson's family.

**Keywords:** Ariadne Thompson, ethnicity, gender roles and expectations, acculturation, memoir, first- and second-generation Greek Americans

The ethnic-American literary landscape of the first half of the twentieth century was marked by two "waves" of immigrant women writers from Europe. Many writers of the first "wave" (in the 1910s and 1920s), such as Jewish-American Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, Rose Cohen, Elizabeth Stern, Elizabeth Hasanovitz, and Rebekah Kohut,[ii] to name only a few, were first-generation ethnic Americans who wrote about their gendered experience in autobiographical form, as a way of creating cultural and

emotional bridges between their early lives in their home countries and their experience as women immigrants in the United States.

In the 1950s and 60s, as a result of more permissive post-WWII social, economic and cultural contexts, a new generation of female ethnic authors of European descent managed to carve a lesser known, albeit distinct literary space for themselves. Thus, the more ethnically diverse second "wave" included such women writers as Polish-American Monica Krawczyk and Jean Karsavina, Armenian-American Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, Norwegian-American Borghild Dahl and Martha Ostenso, Jewish-American Rose Feld, Italian-American Julia Savarese and Mari Tomasi, and Greek-American Mary Vardoulakis, Roxanne Cotsakis, and Ariadne Thompson,[iii] among others. Born in the United States, these second-generation ethnic-American writers were more emotionally remote from their parents' first-hand immigration experience and lives in their European home countries. They might have grown up listening to their parents' ethnic stories, but they had also been exposed to a greater extent than their immigrant parents to the American way of life and culture.

In the introduction to one of the earliest anthologies of ethnic American literature, Robert Di Pietro and Edward Ifkovic observed that the main difference between first-generation and second-generation immigrant writers was that, in general, the former experienced deep nostalgia for the home country and suffered because they had lost a familiar way of life, while the latter underwent acute identity crises stemming from the perceived limitations imposed by the ethnic background and their desire to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the American social and cultural environment (12). Moreover, this generational difference was reflected not only in the choice of specific themes but also in that of genre. In the context of Italian-American literature, Rose Basile Green observes that, early on, ethnic writing was "expository" (frequently in the form of letters, diaries, or autobiographies), but "later writers moved from simply recording to interpreting their experiences" in "more creative materials" (111), a statement valid for first- and second-generation ethnic writing in general. Furthermore, looking at Italian-American writers in the 1940s and 1950s, Green points out that they "analytically focused on ethnic themes and backgrounds . . .

in their search for self-identity" (112), as they attempted to understand the impact of their families and backgrounds on their individual identities. Similarly, many women writers of the second European-American "wave" turned to fiction (novels and short stories) to make sense of their hyphenated ethnic-American identities, focusing on the generational conflicts between the parents' determination to prioritize the preservation of the ethnic identity and culture and their descendants' desire to assimilate into the American society and culture. This is also one of the leitmotifs of Thompson's 1956 memoir, *The Octagonal Heart*, in which she recalls the happy summers she spent as a child with her extended Greek-American family in the octagonal house, Parnassus, in the Webster Grove suburb of St. Louis, MO, during the first decades of the twentieth century.

In an entry on Greek Americans in *Multicultural America*, Theodora D. Patrona offers a brief overview of Greek immigration to the United States, explaining that "While initially Greeks were received often with skepticism and xenophobic reactions, their reception in American society was gradually altered. The Greek bravery shown at the Albanian front during World War II and in the Greek Resistance, along with the enlistment of several soldiers of Greek origin in the American army, placed the Greek American in a more favorable light" (1001). She further remarks that "the 1950s saw the coming of age of the American-born second generation. Their education and their upward mobility further improved the status of Greek Americans in American society" (1001),[iv] a social context that also encouraged the development of Greek-American literature at the time. In recent decades, there have been debates in the literary world regarding the status of Greek-American literature, as well as the criteria of including various authors of Greek origin in its canon.[v] Professor Alexander Karanikas, notable Greek-American academic, was among the first to mention Vardoulakis, Cotsakis, and Thompson as noteworthy mid-twentieth century women writers.[vi] Among the themes pervading Greek-American immigrant fiction, he mentioned "the diaspora, the odyssey, nostalgia for the lost homeland" ("Greek-American Literature" 73), as well as class mobility and the generational family conflicts arising from the differing attitudes towards Americanization (74).

Referring more specifically to the Greek immigrant literature in the second half of the twentieth century, Professor Yiorgos D. Kalogeras, eminent Greek-American scholar, points out in a chapter in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States* that, during the post-WWII era, "Greek immigrant writers have acquired greater visibility and a wider audience" as a result of either their decision to write in English or because they had their work translated from Greek into English (256). Kalogeras claims that "the definition of 'Greekness'," which was "the predominant issue and theme" in the work of early immigrant writers, together with the exploration of the "confluences and divergences between ethnic and gender issues," "have become even more prominent in the work of post-World War II Greek immigrant writers" (254).

Indeed, Vardoulakis, Cotsakis, and Thompson depicted in their fiction the struggles and tensions in Greek-American families in the rural and urban areas of the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, with class mobility as one of the underlying leitmotifs. In *Gold in the Streets* (1945), Vardoulakis described the challenges of acculturation experienced by poor, working-class first-generation Greek immigrants in Massachusetts, while, in *The Wing and the Thorn* (1952), Cotsakis captured a first-generation immigrant's process of upward mobility in Atlanta, GA, as well as his staunch resistance to assimilation in order to preserve his Greek identity at all costs. By contrast, in her memoir, Thompson describes the privileged life of her well-off Greek-American extended family on an estate near St. Louis, MO, but, similar to Vardoulakis' and Cotsakis' fiction, her story illustrates the family's desire to preserve the cultural heritage and to pass on the Greek spirit to their descendants.

In *Family Matters in Greek-American Literature*, Vicky Gatzouras Johnson analyzes Thompson's memoir as an ethnic bildungsroman. Comparing it with other Greek-American novels, she discusses how the ethnic family in *The Octagonal Heart* functions not only as "a source of Greek customs and myths" meant to "preserve cultural pride and values" (122), but also plays a significant role in the process of "identity construction" of the second-generation female members of Thompson's family, primarily in terms of gender and social class (154). In her article

"Mapping the Female Ethnic Self in the Family Battleground: *Vertigo* and the Greek American Novel," Patrona looks at "the dynamics shaping female character and agency in Italian American and Greek American cultures" (212), arguing that, despite their well-off social status, Thompson's female protagonists oscillate, to various degrees, "between patriarchal tradition and American assimilation of women" (219-220), with the first-generation immigrant women not quite ready to assert their own agency. My essay, then, proposes a close reading of the memoir with a view to examining the generational differences between the female members of Thompson's family (her mother, aunts, cousin, and one of her grandmothers), stemming from the ways in which the ethnic gender expectations and women's attitudes towards assimilation to the American way of life have shaped their identities as ethnic-American women, daughters, wives, and mothers.

At first glance, Thompson's[vii] memoir reads like a nostalgia trip, in which she fondly remembers the carefree summers spent at Parnassus with her extended family. In this pleasant, protected, and affluent ethnic environment, Thompson's process of identity formation as a second-generation Greek-American girl is influenced by various female role models in the family: her mother Penelope, her paternal grandmother (Grandmother Pasmezoglu), her aunt Elene (on her mother's side), her aunt Maritza (on her father's side), and her cousin Aphrodite (Elene's daughter). Their stories come together in the two intertwining layers of the memoir: the physical one, which revolves around the house itself, as an homage to the family's Greek heritage, and the emotional one, which focuses on family relationships and comprises the ethnic traditions, customs, values, gender roles and expectations, as well as important events that have marked the inhabitants of the house, captured by Thompson in chapters such as "En Famille," "The Decision," "The True Sign of Love," "First Love," "Last Love," "Greek Easter" or "Christmas at Parnassus."

As expected, the two layers are connected by a strong sense of Greekness. In his own memoir, *Opa! Stories and Traditions of a Greek-American Family*, Arthur C. Cosmas points out that "the Hellenic legacy and the concept of Greek pride apparently evolved from the sense of

'Greekness' or '*Hellenikon*,'" defined in antiquity by Herodotus as a "'shared identity based on common blood, language, cult, and way of life'" (11). Cosmas argues that, in time, Greekness has come to "imply a strong national identity with language, religion, democracy, personal honor, and responsibility representing core values," and suggests that the most important values of Greekness he grew up with in his own Greek-American family in the 1950s included "pride, language, national identity, a strong sense of family, honor, faith, community, hospitality, frugality, and endurance" (11-18), many of which are also illustrated in Thompson's memoir.

Parnassus, the octagonal house built by Thompson's uncle Demetrius Jannopoulo, symbolizes the extended family's sense of pride in their ethnic heritage and represents the focal point of the physical layer of the memoir. According to Amy Burger and Veronica Theodoro, "it was constructed in 1886 by Greek immigrant and successful local businessman Jannopoulo, who designed and built it in the shape of a Greek cross to honor his culture." The Greekness of the house resides in the architectural design, as Thomson explains: the four arms of the Greek cross "were enclosed in an octagonal shape," and "each arm extended from a huge center hall which followed the outer form of the house so that it, too, was octagonal in shape, the very heart of the house" (62). She further mentions that "the Greek cross, which formed the main body of the house, comprised four rooms on the first floor, each of which opened off the octagonal reception hall. The angles between consisted of pantry, porches, stairway and fireplace" (72). Jannopoulo offered the house to his wife, Elene, as a wedding gift in 1892, and she carefully chose the Greek-style decorations in the spacious rooms to also reflect the ethnic heritage of the family. Young Ariadne and her siblings, Artemis and Pericles, love roaming around the many rooms of the house, creating their own "secret places," such as "the Scary Place," "the Cool Place," and "the Listening Place." The house represents a haven of tranquility and harmony for the children, whose participation in the relaxed Greek-flavored family gatherings and the joyous celebrations in the ornate rooms of the house strengthens their sense of belonging to a loving and happy family.

The octagonal reception room, Ariadne's favorite room at Parnassus, which "seemed by its very architecture and construction to be the heart of the house" (75), connects the physical and the emotional layers of Thompson's memoir. Thus, while the physical space of the reception hall displays the concrete, material Greekness of the family, illustrated by the interior design choices, the emotional layer centers on the lives of the inhabitants of the house, capturing the Greek spirit of the family. It is the space where the members of the extended family often congregated to have coffee, play billiards, sing, play the piano, or have "heated disputes" on various topics (75), "*megalophonias*," debates which "arise out of nowhere, turn into vehement discussions and mean nothing" (76), but which, as Thompson points out, exemplify the "passionate nature of the Greeks, who are a demonstrative people, as emotional in argument as they are in love" (76). Consequently, the physical journey Thompson undertakes while exploring the "life" and secrets of the octagonal house is accompanied by an emotional journey of self-discovery, which prompts her, even at a young age, to think about what it means to be Greek *and* American growing up in a sheltered Greek-American environment. During this emotional journey in the octagonal house, Thompson's budding ethnic-American identity is shaped both by her close contact with her second-generation Greek-American cousins and by the interaction with her first-generation Greek-American parents, aunts, and uncles, as well as with her immigrant grandparents.[viii]

Therefore, given this multitude of generational influences, I argue that Thompson's emotional journey is made up of two interwoven threads (as a nod to her Greek namesake, Ariadne, and the myth of the labyrinth) that impact her own developing Greek-American identity. The first is a sturdy white-blue thread, which stands for the collective identity of the family, the Greekness (white and blue are the colors of the Greek flag) represented by the first-generation adults, who are determined to uphold the ethnic traditions, to foster pride in the ethnic heritage, and to pass on the ethnic culture to their descendants. The second thread, a red one, is represented by the individual story of Thompson's second-generation cousin, Aphrodite. The American-born second-generation Greek Americans in Thompson's memoir are divided by age into two groups: the

younger group – Ariadne and her siblings – and their older cousins who reside in the octagonal house – Demosthenes, Aristotle, Achilles, and Aphrodite. Ariadne and her siblings are too young to understand the importance of individual and collective ethnic identity; for them, the Greek heritage mostly revolves around the stories of Greek mythology told by their parents, being given a Greek name, celebrating holidays the Greek way, and attending Greek Orthodox church services at the weekends. On the other hand, their older cousins are navigating two cultures: the ethnic and the American one. For instance, their older male cousins might be encouraged at home to live up to the expectations of their Greek names; however, having also grown up in the American environment (schools, circle of friends, etc.), they may be more Americanized than their parents. Moreover, as in Greek families "in their teens, sons would be granted more independence, whereas daughters were much more restricted" (Moskos and Moskos 148), they enjoy more freedom as Greek-American young men. By contrast, their older female cousin Aphrodite is expected to obey the prescribed traditional gender roles of the ethnic culture, although she is reluctant to inhabit the ethnic persona of a Greek young woman who looks forward to the exclusive roles of wife to a Greek man and a stay-at-home mother of Greek children. Therefore, Aphrodite's gendered ethnic story meanders like a red thread both through Thompson's individual recollections and through the collective family narrative of Greekness. Through much of the memoir, this apparently thin red thread becomes a distinct strand, which constantly diverges from the thicker white-blue thread of the family. Yet the collective Greek thread also brings together four intertwining gendered stories of first-generation women that have shaped Aphrodite's individual identity, and possibly Thompson's, the stories of her aunts Maritza and Elene, of her mother Penelope, and her paternal grandmother.

Grandmother Pasmezoglu, known as Ma-Ma in the family, "the epitome of willful temperament," is, according to Thompson, a woman who "all her life had been used to having her own way through the power of money, the power of duty, and the power of her position in the family" (99). She reluctantly emigrated with her family to the United States after they lost their prosperous business at home. As a first-generation

immigrant, emotionally closest to her home country and proud of her Greek heritage, her grandmother had no intention of adapting to the American environment. Determined to preserve the Greek culture at all costs and to "protect it" from any American influence, once settled in St. Louis, she chose not to learn English and tried to limit her social contact with Americans as much as possible, regarding them as "brash foreigner who lacked the refinements of ancient civilizations" (100). Grandmother Pasmezoglu constantly complained about her disadvantaged position in the United States (she was no longer the wealthy woman who had enjoyed a plentiful life before emigration), and, while she did her best to isolate herself from any American influence, she set out to wield her power in her own family, attempting to control the lives of her three sons and her daughter. According to Sam J. Tsemberis and Spyros D. Orfanos in "Greek Families," "the traditional Greek mother is entrusted with the care of the children and the maintenance of the Greek language, customs, and values in the family" (520). Given her privileged position as "the matriarch" of the family, her grandmother feels entitled to run her eldest son's family, and, assuming that she is going to be obeyed unconditionally, she takes full advantage of another ethnic Greek expectation, a "generalized respect for elders ingrained in both Greek and Greek American cultural norms" (Moskos and Moskos 149). In this context, Thompson suggests that Grandmother Pasmezoglu was a "trying" mother-in-law to Penelope, whom she blamed for being too Americanized. As such, her grandmother considered that Thompson's mother did not conform to the ethnic expectations of a wife and mother responsible for the preservation and passing on of the Greek values and culture. Despite attempts to teach the Greek language to the younger generation, Ariadne and her siblings did not speak or understand it. As a result, they felt rather uncomfortable in their grandmother's presence because of her "temper" and her "devotion" (102), an attitude interpreted by their grandmother as "cold and unaffectionate" (102), yet another example of her daughter-in-law's attempts to turn her grandchildren against her. Still, despite her mother-in-law's intolerant attitude, out of respect for her age, Penelope did her best to conform to her wishes and suggestions because "while Grandmother was present, Grandmother was in command" (101).

However, the woman whose life her grandmother controls the most is her daughter, Maritza, whose first-generation Greek-American white-blue-thread story is closest to her own. Peter C. Moskos and Charles C. Moskos explain in their comprehensive volume *Greek-Americans: Struggle and Success* that "in America as in Greece, filial loyalty is especially stressed"[ix] and "It is commonly held among Greek Americans that children are much more likely to look after aged parents – including letting their parents move in with them – than is the usual practice in American society" (149). Grandmother Pasmezoglu expects filial loyalty from all her children, assuming they must always be ready and willing to prioritize her wellbeing above their own, but she places the highest demands on Maritza, based on the Greek belief that one of the main responsibilities of a daughter, as a homemaker, is to care for her aged parents. Maritza does her best to behave like an obedient daughter; thus, her life seems constrained by the constant duty to tend to her mother's every wish and whim, thereby leaving almost no room for any individual interests. Aware of Maritza's complicated situation, Thompson describes her as "docile and subservient, as might be expected, a shadowy figure in the background of her mother's dynamic personality" (103). Thompson recalls that, when her father's family was invited to the octagonal house on different occasions, Maritza "was never present without her mother," "alert to the tiniest flicker of pain, a look of discomfort" (103), always in a hurry to alleviate her mother's state of distress the best she could. In Thompson's opinion, marriage might have been her aunt's only escape from her dominating mother, but Grandmother Pasmezoglu found fault with every suitor that proposed to Maritza, pretending that "only royalty was good enough for her daughter, and that seemed to settle the matter" (103). As a result of this convenient "settlement" for her mother, Maritza could not get married until she was in her fifties, a decision she took "in an unprecedented burst of independence" (103), after her mother died.

To a certain extent, the white-and-blue-thread stories of Elene and Penelope, first-generation Greek-Americans like Maritza, are similar, at least in terms of their attitudes as dutiful daughters. Panagiotis Phiambolis, Ariadne's maternal grandfather, emigrated to the United States, initially to set up a Greek Orthodox church in Chicago, IL, and then he moved to St.

Louis, for the same reason. One of his main preoccupations as a first-generation immigrant was to make sure that the Greek heritage would be preserved and passed on, so he wanted to find the most eligible Greek suitors for his daughters, respectful men, who would be able provide them with financially comfortable lives in the United States. Therefore, he was as selective as Maritza's mother regarding the expected qualities of his daughters' suitors, but his goal was not to drive them away, as Grandmother Pasmezoglu had done, but, in Elene's case, to find the best Greek-American man, who could offer her a plentiful life and a respectable social status. As expected from a dutiful daughter, Elene complied with her father's choice and agreed to an arranged marriage to Demetrius Jannopoulo, who was thirty years her senior, but "a man of wealth and position and devout religious faith" (61), and the Greek consul in St. Louis at the time. Thompson does not mention specifically whether her parents' marriage was also arranged, but one might speculate that, since her parents had become acquainted at Parnassus, and her father succeeded her uncle as the next Greek consul in St. Louis, the marriage could have been arranged by her uncle with her maternal grandfather's approval. After all, Hector Pasmezoglu, her father, belonged to a respectable Greek family and had excellent prospects. Moreover, Elene, as the eldest daughter, also fulfilled her expected filial duty towards her father, as he lived with her family in the octagonal house, and, although he was not as demanding as Maritza's mother, he was treated with great respect as the spiritual leader of the house, both because of his religious occupation[x] and his age. Therefore, one might argue that, depending on their parents' demands, Maritza, Elene, and Penelope had conformed to the expectations placed on Greek daughters.

As far as their roles as Greek-American women, wives and mothers are concerned, Elene's and Penelope's stories are slightly different, depending on which parts of their hyphenated Greek-American identity they chose to uphold. In a similar vein to Tsemberis and Orfanos, Jane Jurgens explains in her entry on Greek Americans that "Since the earliest period of settlement in the United States, the burden of preserving Greek culture and tradition has been the responsibility of women. Women among the first and second generations of immigrants became the

traditional keepers of songs, dances, and other folk customs" (739). In Thompson's family, both sisters try to maintain the Greek traditions, but, in Elene's case, the Greek side of her hyphenated identity takes precedence over the American one. A staunch supporter of anything Greek, she does her best to preserve and pass on the Greek heritage, often helped by her father in her ethnic endeavor.

The most obvious outer sign of Greekness that reflects Elene's identity as ethnic woman and wife is, as mentioned before, the interior Greek "look" of the four-story octagonal house. Thus, the Greek-inspired architecture of the house was complemented by the choice of exquisite furniture, art objects and books, reflecting Elene's taste and personality, as well as her constant preoccupation to showcase the most refined artifacts illustrative of the family's Greek heritage. As the mistress of the house, she was determined "to preserve a culture purely Hellenic in her home" (63), which she perceived as one of the most important responsibilities of an ethnic woman, wife, and mother.

To young Ariadne, the entire estate and the octagonal house appear like a fairy-tale realm, an idyllic place, and, due to her aunt's assiduous efforts, Parnassus seems to live up to its mythological definition as the House of the Muses, filled with poetry, music, and learning. It is here that Ariadne is reminded of her ethnic heritage one afternoon, when, admiring the breathtaking view from the cupola on the top floor of the house, she thinks about her Greek upbringing: "We had never read American nursery rhymes, but instead were given books of Greek mythology, and I felt truly that I was a goddess atop Mount Olympus, monitoring the destiny of the mere mortals beneath" (17). Then, turning her gaze to the garden, Ariadne sees the two sisters, Elene and Penelope, wearing classical flowy Greek dresses, reclining in hammocks, "drinking coffee, and talking in Greek" (18), like two Greek muses, apparently in perfect harmony, carefree and content with their lives. Her first-generation aunt might feel content because she has managed to reconcile two important aspects of her identity: gender and ethnicity. The wealth and social position gained as a result of the arranged marriage (which, in time, has proven satisfactory) have allowed her to create a Greek "paradise" at Parnassus, an ethnic haven of comfort and tranquility for her family. In this "Hellenic"[xi] space,

similar to the Greek muses, Elene and Penelope might want to inspire their second-generation offspring to follow their example and find satisfaction in being Greek.

Yet, Elene's relentless ambition, to be "as Greek as the first stone Pyrrha threw behind her from which, according to mythology, sprang the Hellenic race" (63) often sets her "at odds with her children" and even with her husband, who, Thompson suggests, "earnestly attempted to blend Greek culture with an American flavor" (63). Thus, one of the key elements that differentiates the stories of the two sisters is their acceptance of or resistance to assimilation/Americanization. Thompson argues that her mother was more open and accepting of the "American ways," as demonstrated by her interest in "women's rights" (86). "Mama was a strange admixture of loving wife and mother, dutiful to a fault, and an ardent champion of women's rights," Thompson remarks (86). However, Penelope is a passionate supporter of such issues as "the Vote, Birth Control, Bobbed Hair and Equality in Business" only in the safe spaces of the family, for the sake of "win[ning] an intellectual victory" (86). Thompson implies that Penelope's interest in "women's rights" is purely theoretical because, when she "was not championing something at the dinner table, she was busily living a very happy and *prudent* life" (86; emphasis added). One explanation might be that Penelope was not ready to express or defend such ideas in public so as not to transgress the traditional Greek expectations for submissive wives, whose main area of "expertise" as homemakers should have concerned only issues pertaining to the domestic spaces of the family.

However, in these spaces, Penelope finds herself "at odds" both with her sister and with her husband, who do not agree with her two "intellectual goals for women," "Freedom to Come and Go and Pin Money" (87). Elene considers that they trespass the expected roles of an ethnic woman, while Hector believes that they go against the traditional gender roles in the family. Penelope kept taking up these two issues close to her heart during family gatherings because both "goals" might have been related to her own situation, as she contemplated a potential career as an opera singer. Such discussions, possibly stemming from the American part of her hyphenated identity, reflected, even if only in theory, her

concerns about the constraining traditional gender roles in the family. After all, in Greek culture, "it is expected that interpersonal conflicts will be resolved without discussion, usually through the wife's submission to the husband's wishes" (Tsemberis and Orfanos 519). Moreover, as a rule, "husbands insisted on their moral authority over their spouses" (Moskos and Moskos 147), a prescribed role internalized and proudly upheld by Penelope's husband. He feels that his support for "women's rights," especially the right to a career outside the home would "infringe" upon his authority, undermining his role as head of the household and sole financial provider in the family, as well as the social standing of the family given his position as Greek consul.[xii] Therefore, as head of the family, he allowed his wife, on occasion, to sing with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, but he was adamant that she should not accept any money for her singing; that is why, he did not agree, under any circumstances, that she should sign a contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Penelope's insistence that "every woman ought to Earn a Little Pin Money of Her Own" received her husband's invariable response that "no Wife of His would go out and earn her living" (87). Moreover, her declaration that "a woman should have Freedom to Come and Go," was always shrugged off by her husband, who declared that he did not want his wife "to go gallivanting around the country living in hotels and leaving *his* babies in the care of servants while she accepted pay for a God-given talent" (87, emphasis added). Thompson suggests that her mother might not have pursued a career in the end, but perhaps she simply wanted some freedom of choice. It could also have been the reason why, despite her husband's generous financial support and "a nominal amount of freedom" (87), Penelope felt that she had to stand up for "these goals," at least in principle; "Women were not meant to be bound in chains" (87), she kept reminding her husband after such heated discussions.

Moreover, Penelope does not receive any moral support from her sister either, mainly because Elene "did not approve" (88) of any discussions about her sister's "favorite family topics – a womans [sic] right to wear rouge, to drive an automobile (sometimes she was even impetuous enough to include puffing a cigarette), to earn a living" (88). Elene might have disagreed with these "women's rights" because she felt

that they were frivolous, too American, and "infringed" upon the expectations for respectable Greek women, wives, and especially mothers, who were supposed to represent dignified role models for their own daughters in the process of passing on the ethnic values and traditional gender roles. Thompson describes how, in order to distance herself even more from Elene's inflexible attitude, her mother "would announce, as a final thrust, that she intended to have *her* daughters equip themselves for independence" (88). To substantiate Penelope's claim, Thompson adds that they did grow up "equipped to earn a little pin money now and then" (88), she as a writer and her sister Artemis as a painter.

Penelope and Elene also differ in certain respects regarding their perceived duties as ethnic mothers, possibly for the same reason, their attitudes towards Americanization. At a surface level, though, they have one aspect in common, naming their children after Greek personalities or gods, a common first- and second-generation Greek-American cultural practice. For instance, during Thompson's emotional journey, one way of putting into practice the knowledge acquired from the stories of Greek mythology, was, for her and her siblings, to decipher the relationship between her cousins' first names and their Greek namesakes, and, in the process, to become more familiar with the ethnic culture and aware of the importance of their ethnic heritage. Thus, Demosthenes was "imaginative and gentle;" he loved nature and filled Ariadne and her siblings' lives "with a kind of mysterious excitement," but he was also a passionate inventor of all sorts of contraptions which fascinated his younger cousins (21-22). Aristotle, "the Seeker After Truth" (30), studied law, and, always in search of evidence, accompanied the "verdicts" he gave over any disputes among his younger cousins with Greek explanations, much to his mother's delight and contentment (33). While Ariadne and her siblings did not find any concrete evidence of the connection between Achilles and his famous Greek namesake (48), she strongly believed that her cousin Aphrodite was "the most beautiful and fascinating creature on earth" (42), worthy of her illustrious name.

Yet, the main difference between Elene and Penelope resides in the way they choose to raise their daughters. Thus, Aphrodite's red-thread story reveals the differing gender expectations between Elene, the first-

generation mother, and Aphrodite, her second-generation daughter. As a young girl, Ariadne was fascinated with her cousin Aphrodite, whom she looked up to as a potential role model. Possibly as a nod to the origin of her cousin's name, the chapter dedicated to her is aptly entitled "The Goddess of Washington University," and it focuses on the generational differences between Aphrodite, Elene, and Penelope in terms of upholding or questioning the established gender roles in the Greek culture. Thompson juxtaposes the laid-back atmosphere at family gatherings in the garden during summer evenings, which filled her heart with happiness and joy, with the late-night hushed exchanges she overheard between Aphrodite and her best friend Jenny Brentwood, conversations which filled her heart with sadness at her cousin's apparently unsolvable ethnic dilemmas. Faced with her mother's refusal to allow her any independence regarding her dating life, despite being twenty-two years old, Aphrodite confides her emotional struggles to Jenny, a young American woman like her, who functions as a sympathetic listener, but who does not seem to have experienced the same emotional turmoil caused by the strict gender expectations of an ethnic-American family. Aphrodite is frustrated because she is not allowed to meet any young men unchaperoned, and, even worse, if she chooses to marry, it has to be a Greek man, as her mother keeps reminding her. Because of her mother's adamant attitude in the matter of marriage, Aphrodite, like many Greek daughters, must have felt "the pressure to remain part of the community, obey parents' rules, and be 'good Greek girls' who marry 'well' and bear children" (Jurgens 739). Such expectations, in turn, often lead to tensions and conflicts between "family loyalty and self-realization, between duty to parents and community and the pursuit of the 'American way of life'," as "many Greek American girls are given less freedom than their male counterparts and tend to remain close to their mothers even after marriage" (Jurgens 739). To marry "well" does not have the same connotation for Elene and Aphrodite. To Aphrodite it means to marry a man of her choice, whom she loves, while for Elene it can only be marriage to a Greek man, perhaps an arranged marriage like hers, expressed in the invariable ethnic explanation she offers her daughter on every occasion: "You *are* Greek and you will be happiest *married to a Greek*" (60, emphasis added).

Aphrodite tries to understand her mother's position as a committed supporter of the ethnic traditions and heritage, but she also wants the freedom to choose for herself. "Girls didn't have any independence in Greece," Aphrodite explains to Jenny, emphasizing the fact that even if her mother might agree eventually, her strict grandfather would not, as he himself had chosen Elene's husband. Jenny, as a detached outsider, sympathizes with her friend, and her constant exclamation "That's purely Greek" during Aphrodite's heartfelt confessions might point to the difference between Greek and American cultural practices regarding dating, marriage options, and young women's freedom to choose their own paths in life. However, Aphrodite complains only about her mother's "purely Greek" attitude, emphasizing the fact that her father is, as she puts it, "much more American in his ideas" (41). Her explanation that "he's in business, you know, and he sees life" might also express her belief that, due to more frequent contact with Americans, her father might be more accepting of the American lifestyle and "ideas" (41).

Furthermore, the red thread of Aphrodite's story includes not only her wish to choose her own husband but also her ardent desire to become a doctor, both of which go against her mother's perception of traditional Greek gender roles in the family. As expected, her parents are on opposite sides in this matter, too, her father being a supporter of education (regardless of gender), while her mother considers it "immoral" for a young woman (41). As Jurgens points out, for women, "[t]he pursuit of education and a career is secondary and may even be perceived as 'un-Greek' or unwomanly" (739). Aphrodite is irritated by her mother's conflation of her daughter's wish to pursue a degree with meeting young men on her own and finally marrying a non-Greek American, the worst-case scenario a dedicated Greek-American mother like Elene can imagine. Aphrodite is also deeply unhappy and dissatisfied because she feels that, by birth, she has been assigned a collective Greek female identity which does not allow her any individual freedom of choice, whether of a career or a marriage partner. However, in spite of her mother's inflexible attitude towards both matters, she is determined not to inhabit the persona of the submissive homemaker her mother envisions for her: "Well, Mama thinks I ought to sit home and play the piano and paint and sew and wait for

some nice Greek man to come along and marry me. She doesn’t think it’s ladylike to do anything else” (42). She is definitely not willing to follow in her mother’s footsteps, however plentiful and comfortable Elene’s life might have been: “She says she was sitting home painting and sewing when Papa came along, and she’s had a beautiful life” (42). Luckily, Aphrodite has found a female ally in Penelope, who, in her niece’s opinion, is “strict but she has modern ideas” (41) (for instance, she agrees that Aphrodite should be allowed to go out alone with a young man). Aphrodite believes that her aunt’s more open-minded attitude stems both from her age (ten years younger than Elene) and from the fact that she emigrated at a young age. As a result of less contact with the home culture and more contact with the American one, Penelope might have become more accepting of the American lifestyle. At the same time, Penelope’s own longing for more freedom of choice as a woman and a wife, even only in theory, might also have prompted her to side with her niece in these matters.

The conversations between various female and male members of the family on different ethnic topics, especially Aphrodite’s confessions about her fraught ethnic struggles, made young Ariadne reflect on the importance of the ethnic background and its impact on the expected gender roles of second-generation Greek-American daughters and budding young women like herself. One early morning, still trying to make sense of the importance of marrying a Greek, young Ariadne confesses to Aphrodite that she is determined to follow in her footsteps, that is, to marry an American, despite fierce opposition from her family: “I’m going to marry an American doctor, like you, and if anybody tries to stop me, I’ll run away. They’ll come and get me and lock me in a tower, but I’ll escape and then I’m going to sail away and live with the doctor in a foreign land” (206). Even at a young age, she seems to understand how important freedom of choice is for women when she adds that “if he does anything I don’t like, I’ll run away again and go and live in Chicago” (206), generously offering this alternative as a solution to Aphrodite’s problem. In the same chapter, “Last Love,” Thompson mentions that Aphrodite did not run away in order to marry an American; her red-thread story ended happily as she was allowed both to study medicine (thanks to

the support of an open-minded Greek-American bishop) and to marry a fellow student, “a handsome and honorable” young man (207), though a non-Greek American. The octagonal house, unfortunately, “burned to the ground in 1920, leaving only the 18-inch stone foundation and checkered marble tile porch floor” (Burger and Theodoro). Wistfully, Thompson describes the tragic event in the last chapter, “The Ashes of Parnassus,” mentioning in the epilogue that the new house built “on the old foundation” (219)[xiii] after a few years could not replace the original, spacious house that had welcomed them in its own Greek “heart,” the octagonal reception hall.

Still, as Thompson concludes, the cheerful summers spent in the octagonal house with the extended family left lasting memories in the hearts of its inhabitants. Her physical journey may have ended at Parnassus when it was engulfed by flames; however, the joys and sorrows experienced with the family members there have become an integral part of her emotional journey towards adulthood. Thus, her own gendered quest to reconcile the ethnic and American sides of her identity became intertwined with Aphrodite’s red-thread story and the white-blue-thread stories of her mother, aunts, and grandmother, to form a red-white-blue Greek-American thread, meant to create a strong link between generations, and, perhaps, to guide other Greek-American women through the labyrinths of their own ethnic lives. At the same time, Thompson added her own literary ethnic thread to the legacy left by her European-American predecessors, further enriching the American cultural landscape of the mid-twentieth century.

**Notes:**

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[ii] Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912); Elizabeth Stern, *My Mother and I* (1917); Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (1918); Elizabeth Hasanovitz, *One of Them: Chapters from a Passionate Autobiography* (1918); Anzia Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts* (1920), *Children of Loneliness* (1922), *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), *Bread Givers* (1925); Rebekah Kohut, *My Portion: An Autobiography* (1927).

[iii] Jean Karsavina, *Tree by the Water* (1948); Monica Krawczyk, *If the Branch Blossoms and Other Stories* (1950); Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, *A Houseful of Love* (1957); Martha Ostenso, *O River, Remember* (1943); Borghild Dahl, *Homecoming* (1953); Rose C. Feld, *Sophie Halenczik, American* (1943); Julia Savarese, *The Weak and the Strong* (1952); Mari Tomasi, *Like Lesser Gods* (1949); Mary Vardoulakis, *Gold in the Streets* (1945); Roxanne Cotsakis, *The Wing and the Thorn* (1952); Ariadne Thompson, *The Octagonal Heart* (1956).
[iv] For more information on Greek Americans, immigration, acculturation, assimilation in the past and the present, see Ingram.
[v] For more on Greek-American literature, see Karanikas, "Greek-American Literature" and Thassou.
[vi] See Karanikas, *Hellenes and Hellions* and "Greek-American Literature."
[vii] I am going to use the author's first name, Ariadne, when I refer to her as a child who spent her summers in the octagonal house in the first decades of the twentieth century, and her last name, Thompson, when I refer to her older self, the author who wrote the memoir in 1956.
[viii] According to eminent sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut's categorization of immigrant generations, based on "differences in nativity (of self and parents) and age at arrival," Thompson's grandparents, who emigrated to the United States as adults, would be first-generation immigrants; Thompson's parents, aunts, and uncles would be the "'one-and-a-half' or '1.5' generation," as they emigrated with their parents at younger ages, while Thompson, her siblings, and her cousins would belong to the "'second' generation of native-born persons of foreign parentage" (983), as they were born in the United States of Greek-American parents.
However, to simplify matters for the purposes of this essay, I refer to Thompson's parents, aunts, and uncles not as 1.5-generation immigrants but as first-generation Greek Americans and to Thompson, her siblings, and her cousins as second-generation Greek Americans, while her grandparents are still referred to as first-generation immigrants.
[ix] For more on filial obligation and caring about aging parents in Greek culture, see Costantakos.
[x] For more information on the importance of the Greek Orthodox church, see Moskos and Moskos and Kunkelman.
[xi] "Hellenic" space might be interpreted in this case both as a Greek-flavored space and as an adjective derived from Helen, the American version of Elene's name, that is, a space created by Helen, the Greek.
[xii] For more on gender expectations in Greek culture, see Orfanos and Tsemberis and Orfanos.
[xiii] According to Burger and Theodoro, a new house was built on the same site in 1926.

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