Why Could You Not Just Stay Silent?: Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking in Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad and Madeline Miller's Circe

Eikelenboom, Suzette Hannah

Leiden University

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Suzette Eikelenboom – S2260158

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First reader: Prof.dr. P.T.M.G. Liebregts

Second reader: dr. M. Newton

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Table of contents

A vision from enchanted realms unknown:
Twin powers male and female, joined in one.
Life's potencies my magic art foreshows;
A miracle conjoined of Moon and Sun

The breasts of Venus and the loins of Pan,
The antique world knew thee for Goddess-God.
Mystery manifest of woman-man,
Round thee of old the sacred dance we trod.

Perfect thy beauty of the sexes both.
Through cloudy incense-smoke, the deep eyes gaze;
So that we kneel in worship, nothing loth
To do thy will in rites unto thy praise.

Doreen Valiente, *Hermaphrodite Panthea*

Introduction

Mythology is often considered to consist of archetypal and universally applicable stories about the nature of the universe and human life. As a result, this has often led to the notion that myth is stagnant and unchangeable precisely because of its universality and timelessness. However, like all storytelling, myths evolve and adapt. For centuries, male authors employing a male perspective and gaze have dominated the narratives of classical myths, often resulting in a sexual objectification of female characters, while female authors have continually been marginalised. However, feminist revisionist mythmaking began to rise in the twentieth century, illustrating that myths are not inherently stagnant stories but ever-developing.

Starting as a niche trend in the early 2000s, feminist retellings of classical myths are becoming increasingly popular. A swift look at recent book releases exposes the increasingly rapid popularity of this genre. Published in 2018, Madeline Miller's *Circe* ranked #1 on the New York Times Best Seller List and was associated by media with the MeToo Movement (Charles, Washington Post). By making Circe the focal point, Miller discarded the idea that Circe's and her powers' sole purpose is to aid the main male characters: "Circe as a character is the embodiment of male anxiety about female power" (Alter, NY Times). Witches like Circe but also monsters such as Medusa have been objects in myth to tell stories from a male perspective: "[P]oets from Ovid to Petrarch to Percy Shelley have tapped their signifying potential and figural resonance on behalf of a set of concerns relating to the male poet and his art. … [M]yth subsumes femininity into linguistic or figural obstacles to the male speaking subject" (Morse 177). Revising Greek mythology by emphasising female characters has sparked popularity, especially since the going viral of the MeToo Movement in 2017 in collision with fourth-wave feminism. Alongside Madeline Miller, authors such as Nathalie Haynes, Pat Barker, Jennifer Saint, Margaret Atwood, and Margaret George have turned toward feminist revisionist mythmaking. Alicia Ostriker argues that "the core of revisionist

mythmaking … lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (73). Thus, "revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and social and literary conventions supporting them" (Ostriker 73-74). Feminist revisionist mythmaking seeks to push back against the archetypical ideas associated with myth, especially focusing on woman and telling their side of the story.

This thesis will focus on *The Odyssey* by Homer and will critically analyse how the role of women is revised and represented in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018). It will do so by using Ostriker's definition of feminist revisionist mythmaking and understanding and applying Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of Medusa* to Penelope and Circe. This thesis will first give a background of myth and *The Odyssey*, followed by a literature review of women in *The Odyssey*. Before engaging directly with the texts themselves, some groundwork is required. The theoretical framework that will contextualise the body of this thesis consists of an introduction to adapting mythology and feminist revisionist mythmaking. From there, an analysis of the women of *The Penelopiad* and *Circe* will be given. As this thesis will argue, both *The Penelopiad* and *Circe* present women as well-rounded characters who possess multifaceted character traits and therefore are complex characters. By exposing their battles with patriarchal structures among other things, both Circe and Penelope who have been long-silenced women speak to women who are still subjected to similar social issues that still exist today. By focussing upon women's presence in a literary canon that historically seen has been dominated by the male gaze, Atwood and Miller emphasize that these women have survived despite this male-focused dominance and that it is never too late for them to speak up.

Chapter 1: Background and Theoretical Framework

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still" –

Emily Dickinson, *They shut me up in prose*

This chapter will introduce myth and *The Odyssey*, after which it will zoom in on the role of women in *The Odyssey*. Although *The Odyssey* may seem to be centred around male characters at first glance, the epic brims with female characters and their vital roles. Lastly, this chapter will illustrate the theoretical background of this thesis and formulate a theoretical framework.

What is Myth? An Introduction to Myth and *The Odyssey*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines myth (n.) as a "traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon" (Myth, OED)[1]. Mythology, then, does not by definition identify itself as Greek mythology. Indeed, mythology traces itself back to different cultures and histories, such as Roman, Norse, Japanese, Anglo-Saxon, and Chinese. Many myths are ancient and exist in different versions, leading to different interpretations of these myths. It should be noted that the definition of myth used in this thesis is a pragmatic product of its contemporary construction in the twenty-first century. Therefore, there does not exist definitive interpretations of myths; overall, myths are not facts since their meanings cannot be definitively confirmed by a body of proven documentation. The antiquity of myth can result, among other things, in the absence of an author, such as in Chinese mythology. However, even in the cases of an established author,

[1] This thesis uses myth and mythology interchangeably for conciseness.

such as Homer or Hesiod, it turns out that these authors were probably building upon an even older body of stories:

> [T]he Greek texts of Homer and Hesiod, not to mention other lost epic poems from archaic Greece … form a significant and still-growing body of texts. They share not only themes, scenes, and often enough structures, but also, on a more elementary level, the fact that behind these written texts there must be a vast continent of formalized oral storytelling—an insight less important because, in the understanding of many scholars since Heyne and Herder, myth is a mainly oral phenomenon then, because oral transmission between the cultures and language groups best explains the wide diffusion of and the somewhat fuzzy correspondences between these stories. (Graf 47)

Ultimately, myth is a product of a myriad of diverging values and opinions, and has even been defined by Ivan Strenksi as "everything and nothing at the same time" (1). However, the primary characteristic that this thesis works with is that myth is a story.

Homeric poems, then, reflect a blend of practices that existed in different historical time periods. Indeed, as Emily Wilson comments, "the poems seem to have no interest in conveying an accurate, realistic account of the culture in which they were produced" (14). Instead, "they combine elements of a fictionalized, heroicized past with details of the more recent or contemporary world" (Wilson 14). At this point, it is helpful to distinguish between the definitions of historical, mythological, and legendary. History sets itself apart in that it deals with actual events that have happened to real people (History, OED). Mythology, on the other hand, deals with stories. It often includes supernatural elements and is concerned with aetiology and morality. Legend (n.) fits in between these two and is defined by the OED as "[a] traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but not authenticated; a fable, a myth" (Legend, OED). Legends often use historical events as a basis for a narrative mingled with mythic elements. *The Odyssey* itself is a curious blend of legend and myth. It is a myth in the

sense that it plays with supernatural elements and narratives. However, it is also legend in the sense that Odysseus himself is legendary; some historical accounts mention him (Strabo; Elder) and archaeological hints to his past existence (Butler 2018; Bassett). However, most details about him in *The Odyssey* are likely invented by Homer himself.

The Odyssey is commonly dated back by scholars to the eighth century BCE, since "[i]n the middle of the eighth century BCE, the inhabitants of Greece began to adopt a modified version of the Phoenician alphabet to write down their language" (Wilson 13), yet scholarly discussion about its composer remains. It remains unclear whether he was an individual or (part of) a group of poets; whether he came from Chios or Smyrna; whether he was blind or not; whether he wrote both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (Wilson 7-8). Samuel Butler was the first to argue that Homer might actually have been female. Nevertheless, despite this uncertainty, scholars generally agree that *The Odyssey*, along with *The Iliad*, emerged from oral tradition (Wilson 7). As such, these epics most likely did not fully spring from the mind of one individual composer (Wilson 8). However, since works such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* generally and collectively were attributed to Homer by the ancient world, we will continue to use the name 'Homer' in this thesis.

The Role of Women in Homer's *The Odyssey*

The functionalist school of thought within the study of mythology argues that every myth has a function, i.e. myth can set down behavioural and social norms and clearly illustrates the (harmful) consequences when the proper behavioural and social norms are not taught. Furthermore, since "[m]yths are stories stamped large with social approval" (Burridge 250), the longer tropes within myths remain unchanged, the more they will be perceived as truth (Burridge 250). Moreover, "having achieved objectivity or truth in a myth, a statement may persist in the myth long after those who retail or who listen to the story say they discount its

validity for the present. Then the statement becomes a historical truth" (Burridge 250). The longer a myth with a certain narrative upholds and survives throughout history, the more commonly its underlying message will be regarded as truth. The underlying message can then become internalised. All of this considered, it is therefore essential to re-envision myths and to shift away from the androcentric gaze.

When looking at the spectrum of characters, *The Odyssey* is full of women. Indeed, "[i]f we include the goddesses and semidivine women, the *Odyssey* presents a great panorama of womanhood" (Graham 3). Wilson states that "[t]he Homeric poems themselves are rich sources of information about Mediterranean society in the eighth century BCE" (37), yet "both are highly artificial literary texts, and both were presumably created primarily by and for men" (37). *The Iliad* illustrates that women were considered mere objects: prizes for praised warriors, housewives who cleaned and bore babies, only to hurl them off city walls, and slaves (Wilson 37-38). *The Odyssey* brings nuance to this image since it covers a larger scale of scenarios, i.e. it takes the reader or listener to multiple places in the Mycenaean area, in particular during peacetime: "[M]ostly places where women or goddesses have a defined position and a voice" (Wilson 38). Compared to *The Iliad*, which is principally male-dominated, women appear more frequently and constantly throughout *The Odyssey*. It was Samuel Butler in the nineteenth century who even suggested that a female author might have written *The Odyssey* simply because of the rich presence of female characters:

> What, let me ask, is the most unerring test of female authorship? Surely a preponderance of female interest, and a fuller knowledge of those things which a woman generally has to deal with, than of those that fall more commonly within the province of man. People always write by preference of what they know best, and they know best what they most are, and have most to do with. This extends to ways of thought and to character, even

> more than to action. If man thinks the noblest study for mankind to be man, woman not less certainly believes it to be woman. (Butler 1922, 105)

This idea, however, has never taken widespread authority among scholars.

Anne Haward states that the role of women was significant within the household and that one of her most important roles had to do with weaving (Haward). *The Odyssey* itself underscores this idea in Book One when Telemachus tells his mother Penelope:

> Go in and do your work.
> Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves
> to do their chores as well. It is for men
> to talk, especially me. I am the master. (Homer 1.356-59)[2]

It should be noted that since "[e]ach depiction or description of a female in the Odyssey is aimed either at the external audience of the poem or at some internal audience of one or more characters as well as the external audience" (Schein 17), no description or representation of women in *The Odyssey* is fully authoritative. Indeed,

> the multiplicity and complexity of females represented as making decisions, taking actions, and telling stories challenge listeners and readers to shape views of Odysseus' distinctive heroic identity, evaluate his authority as a narrator, and consider how his interactions with females help constitute both his identity and his authority, even while these representations make problematic any particular interpretation of the hero, the females, and the poem. (Schein 17)

Since myths and stories were commonly composed and narrated (professionally) by men, the representation of women in myth is relatively untrustworthy.

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[2] Since this thesis' focus is on feminist revisionist mythmaking, it uses the translation of *The Odyssey* by Emily Wilson, the first woman to have translated *The Odyssey* into English.

Hannah Rosenfelder argues that the function of women in *The Odyssey* is primarily to act as obstacles for men. The Sirens, for example, "form part of a chain of women, nymphs, and goddesses who, with their power to charm and seduce, threaten the hero's all-important home-coming to Ithaca, following the war at Troy" (21). Thus, the Sirens' song "[threatens] male action and purpose" (Rosenfelder 21). More importantly, "there is danger on a poetic level as well: the Sirens' song threatens to destroy another song, the very song in which it appears, the song of the Odyssey, Odysseus', and so Homer's, song" (Rosenfelder 21).

Adrien Kelly focuses on the role of Nausicaa in *The Odyssey* and proposes that there are "three types of figure with which Nausicaa may be compared, and the poet uses all three models" (9), namely the rape victim, the helper, or the monster figure. Kelly moves on to argue that the narrative does not follow through to make Nausicaa a rape victim since "the poet does not take the narrative very far down this path at the moment of [Nausicaa and Odysseus'] initial meeting, as he immediately tells us that Odysseus was debating within himself whether to stand away from her, or grasp her by the knees. So the rape option is downplayed" (9). However, she could still either be a helper or a monster. As a helper, she would belong to a set of "characters who assist those they meet outside settlements" (Kelly 9). As a monster or temptress, she would belong to a set of characters who are "there to destroy the hero and keep him from returning home or reaching his goal" (Kelly 9). Kelly, then, provides us with different views of how we can look at women in *The Odyssey*, namely as obstacles, collaborators/helpers, or victims.

Penelope Murray suggests that Penelope is as much the hero of *The Odyssey* as Odysseus. Indeed, she is at the centre stage of the entire epic: "Throughout Odysseus' wanderings it is she who remains firmly at the centre of the epic, and it is she who symbolizes the goal for which Odysseus constantly strives: his home-coming" (1). Ultimately, Murray argues, "[t]radition has made Penelope the paradigm of the loyal wife but for Homer she is the equal focus and hero of the poem" (Murray 4). Regardless of how and by whom the ancient

epic is written, Murray thus offers an alternative perspective on the poem by taking a comparatively minor character and pivoting the narrative around her. This, too, is the central aim of both Madeline Miller and Margaret Atwood in their novels *Circe* and *The Penelopiad*.

Even though *The Odyssey* brims with female characters, the epic is most plausibly a "product of archaic male imaginations, questioning and defending the inequalities of male dominance within the status quo" (Wilson 38). Furthermore, it regularly poses a dichotomy of women either being angels or monsters. Agamemnon, murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, warns Odysseus in the Underworld: "So you must never treat your wife too well. / Do not let her know everything you know. / Tell her some things, hide others" (Homer 11.441-43), suggesting that Penelope might also have a murderous monster hiding within her. This illustrates that "[t]he poem meditates on what women might be capable of, and the degree to which their potential can or should be suppressed" (Wilson 38). The plethora of female characters in *The Odyssey* is plagued by a male anxiety for female allure.

Theoretical Framework

Adaption in general involves processes of transcoding, creating, and reception, and can be described as "[a]n acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other works or works" (Hutcheon 2013, 8), "[a] creative *and* interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging" (Hutcheon 2013, 8), and "[a]n extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (Hutcheon 2013, 8). Adapting a work means revising and engaging with the source text, and thus an adaptation is "its own palimpsestic thing" (Hutcheon 2013, 9).

The adaptation of myth, even if the myth itself is an adaptation, undergoes reviewing, recreation, and reception. Adapting myth facilitates, on the one hand, "a means for contemporary authors to carry out self-conscious investigations into the artistic process" (Sanders 65). On the other hand, myth also deals with themes that resonate within

contemporary society, which the adaptor then adapts into literary works: “Myth extracts events from an everyday context into the world of gods and the supernatural, the extraordinary in the fullest sense of that term” (Sanders 65). Contrary to common belief, contemporary adaptions of myths do not deny contemporary social issues. Indeed, as Sanders puts it, “myth is deployed to discuss the most familiar of subjects: families; love; fathers and daughters” (65). While contemporary adaptations of myth allow for escapism, among others, it also allows for a discussion on issues in (contemporary) society that simultaneously resonate with myth: “Mythic paradigms provide the reader or spectator with a series of familiar reference points and a set of expectations which the novelist, artist, director, playwright, composer, or poet can rely upon as an instructive shorthand, while simultaneously exploiting, twisting, and relocating them in newly creative ways, and in newly resonant contexts” (Sanders 81). Often, adaptations of myths are set in a classical environment while simultaneously addressing and speaking to issues that still resonate within contemporary society.

Adaptations that discuss societal issues require political awareness on the receiving end of the reader. For some texts, this requires the reader to consider the social and political background of the author. However, for novels such as Miller’s *Circe* and Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, the texts themselves make the social and political viewpoint relatively clear. Both authors adapt myths by employing feminist revisionist mythmaking strategies. Ultimately, as Sanders notes, “the old story becomes … a very new one, told—and read—for the first time” (81).

On Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking

If myth is essential to analyse for feminists because of its inherent patriarchal beliefs, then we must first establish what feminism(s) is and what it aims to do. According to Chris Beasley, feminism is difficult to define (ix), much like myth is difficult to define. For readability purposes, this thesis will work with the definition that feminism is an imperfect but functional

group of movements with a common purpose, namely establishing equality between all sexes[3]. If feminism aims to establish equality between all sexes, one might wonder why the phrase "human rights" is not used instead. Although feminism is a sub-movement of the human rights movement, "to choose to use the vague expression *human rights* is to deny specific problem of gender" (Adichie 30). Furthermore, substituting feminism with human rights,

> would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women. That the problem was not about being human, but specifically about being a female human. For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group. It is only fair that the solution to the problem acknowledges that. (Adichie 30)

In a male-dominated world primarily constructed for the male sex, feminism aims to deconstruct the pillars of sexism and systemic inequalities that the female sex faces on a daily basis. To reach this goal, the emancipation of those suppressed by such constraining social constructs is necessary. Hélène Cixous writes:

> Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.
>
> The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer

[3] The discussion of feminism is not intended to demonise men and paint women as martyrs. It is intended to understand the gender roles in our society so that we can use that information to make positive changes. Indeed, to blame men is to overtly misunderstand the bigger picture. Limitations of this discussion include all people who are non-binary or otherwise gender non-conforming.

> upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. (875)

Cixous argues thus that women put themselves into the texts by revising and rewriting texts. In 1972, Adrienne Rich defined the importance of revision as:

> Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructive of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore afresh. (18)

Social change is possible through self-knowledge and revision, or as Rich puts it: "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (19). However, revision brims with complications. One such complication may be that language as a means to revise is dismissed because language may be inherently charged with patriarchal values. In that sense, it cannot be used as a helpful vehicle for systemic change. Opposite this view is Alicia Ostriker's idea of a *langage des femmes*, a language system that is a "mother-tongue" (Ostriker 70) inherent to the female sex. However, while such a language may be valuable, its function in society leaves question marks since its usage might only segregate the speaker from society.

Some scholars (Daly; Estés; Blackie) underscore the idea that myth is not solely patriarchal. Indeed, Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor argue for the idea that matriarchal cultures with mother goddesses are at the root of all cultures and religions. However, since no apparent

mother goddess is present in both *The Penelopiad* and *Circe*, this thesis will continue with the idea that mythology indeed contains patriarchal values, despite the fact that matriarchal religions and cultures may have preceded Greco-Roman mythology. We cannot detect these cultures and religions in Greco-Roman myth with a supporting body of proven documentation.

In order to revise and rewrite myth, there must be openings to engage with a closed and received literary canon from antiquity. Roland Barthes notes that there is a lack of "fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely" (106). Eventually, "there always remains, around the final meaning, a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating: the meaning can almost always be interpreted" (Barthes 119). With this in mind, we can determine that even when dealing with a closed literary canon, there always remain openings, i.e. halos of virtualities, that allow for active participation in and engagement with the canon. The halo of virtualities can be used to reinterpret myths. This space for different interpretations and meanings may encourage revision and rewritings. It is important to note that these adaptations, or re-written myths, have the possibility to make cultural change happen:

> Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. (Ostriker 72)

After all, "[m]yth belongs to "high" culture and is handed "down" through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority" (Ostriker 72). Altering myths, or letting the voices of those who play minor (and silent) roles be heard, are additions that will be handed down generation by generation, ultimately resulting in systemic and cultural change. Indeed, as Ostriker argues, feminist revisionist mythmakings "are corrections; they are representations

of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases, they are instructions of survival" (73).

Ostriker suggests that the female revisionist poets of classical mythology do not set themselves apart from the male poet because of *langage des femmes*, which she defines as a "subterranean current below the surface structure of male-oriented language, a specifically "mother tongue"" (69) of women, but rather "a vigorous and various invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meanings for "male" and "female" are themselves preserved" (71). One of the main aims of feminist revisionist mythmaking is, among other things, to define the female self (Ostriker 70). This attempt to redefine women in literature consequently aims to redefine our culture. To redefine culture is not necessarily to overhaul the foundation on which it has been built and start from the ground up, but to let the voices of those who have been silenced for centuries be heard. This is precisely what the female voices in revisionist mythmaking are doing: to tell the stories from the women's points of view. After all, "it is thanks to myth we believe that woman must be either "angel" or "monster"" (Ostriker 71).

Feminist revisionist mythmaking in its simplest form, its bare essence, Ostriker argues, "consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (73-74). These defiance strategies might be in the form of bringing a voice to previously suppressed female characters and demonstrating their independence, while reversal strategies might be in the form of role-reversing.

Furthermore, Ostriker argues that feminist revisionist mythmaking preoccupies itself with "female-female relationships and the relation of the female of suppressed dimensions of her own identity" (74). This asks for a focus on relationships between mothers, daughters, and sisters and deals with the birth of oneself, thus creating an agency of the female identity.

Ostriker argues that these strategies are "aspects of an attempt by women to retrieve, from the myth of the abstract father god who creates the universe *ab nihilo*, the figure on which he was originally based, the female creatrix" (75). The creatrix is what "[f]emale attributes of flesh and spirit that traditional culture sets asunder, female writers commonly reunite" (Ostriker 76). The creatrix encompasses both the aggression and virtue in the woman and therefore defies the idea that active, strong women are associated with evil while virtuous women are associated with passivity (Ostriker 76). Boundaries are broken: there is the possibility of embracing the wholeness of each characteristic in each woman in opposition to stereotyping.

In opposition to the creatix is the destroyer, or the woman figure that is demonic and/or monstrous, characterised by passivity: when "we find images of compelling dread, there we also find images of muteness, blindness, paralysis, the condition of being manipulated" (Ostriker 77). Often, these destroyers represent the evil magic of female sexuality, paired with inactivity and powerlessness: "[T]he female power to do evil is a direct function of her powerlessness to do anything else" (Ostriker 78).

Although Ostriker discusses feminist revisionist mythmaking within the context of female poets, this thesis will apply her theory to feminist revisionist mythmaking within the context of female revisionist novelists. As Ostriker argues, "[i]f male poets write large, thoughtful poems while women poets write petite, emotional poems, the existence of book-length mythological poems by women on a literary landscape itself signifies trespass" (78). Thus, literary, mythological novels, considering their length, too are significant. Feminist revisionist mythmaking not only changes how we view gender in contemporary literature but also changes our culture.

Chapter 2: "Don't Follow My Example": Another Penelope

In the pathway of the sun,
In the footsteps of the breeze,
Where the world and sky are one,
He shall ride the silver seas,
He shall cut the glittering wave.
I shall sit at home, and rock;
Rise, to heed a neighbor's knock;
Brew my tea, and snip my thread;
Bleach the linen for my bed.
They will call him brave.

Dorothy Parker, *Penelope*

Homer's Penelope has been revised in twentieth-century poetry (Parker; Pastan; Pollitt) as well as in feminist scholarship (Kundmueller; Cox; Clayton), which have given us a more versatile Penelope instead of approaching her as the woman known for her cleverness, faithful waiting, and fidelity to her husband. Modern reinventions of Penelope often focus on her psychology and inner life (Van Zyl Smith 393). In this way, "[w]riters over the centuries have found inspiration in trying to supplement the hidden side of the mysteriously dutiful and tractable Penelope created by Homer" (Van Zyl Smith 395). With her novel *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood contributes to this discussion by giving Penelope a voice of her own.

Gabrielle Neethling writes that Atwood is "preoccupied with the female condition—with the search for authenticity, for a voice to express this identity and for an understanding of the relationship of the female to the patriarchal order" (116). Preoccupied with this female condition, Atwood has made an profound attempt at reinterpreting Penelope as she reflects on her position as a faithfully waiting wife at home. Homer first introduces Penelope in *The Odyssey* in Book One when she tries to stop the bard Phemius from singing a song about the homecoming of the Greeks from Troy because it distresses her:

> Stop this upsetting song that always breaks
>
> my heart, so I can hardly bear my grief.

> I miss him all the time—that man, my husband,
>
> whose story is so famous throughout Greece. (Homer 1.341-44)

In contrast to Homer, Atwood creates a Penelope who is not characterised by passivity since Penelope is the first-person narrator, alongside the maids, of the entire novel. Therefore, the reader has access to her desires and regrets, which contrasts with the faithful Penelope of Homer: "It is specifically these fantasies, regrets, and critiques expressed by Penelope … that make for a more intricate and multi-faceted character in Atwood" (Neethling 117). This chapter will look at Penelope's voice, virtue and reputation, the relationship between Helen and Penelope in the context of narrative justice, and the narratives of the twelve maids.

Receiving the Female Voice

Margaret Atwood mentions in her foreword to *The Penelopiad* that "two questions … must pose themselves after a close reading of *The Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" (xix). By making Penelope the narrator and focussing on her voice, Atwood aims to engage with a story that has been (re)told many times and aspires to retell it while taking a female perspective.

Responding to what has already been told, asks the contemporary audience and author to not only observe the classical past but also to participate in it (Hauser 110). Thus, Atwood does not only respond to a closed and received literary canon but also engages with it by rewriting parts of it. This participation becomes clear when Atwood introduces her heroine from the Underworld—"Now that I'm dead I know everything" (1)—a place that immediately underscores where Penelope's confidence to speak up stems from: "[T]his Penelope comes to the conclusion that patience has been the most effective weapon in her armoury: now that all the others 'have run out of air' and the stakes have been lowered since the main protagonists are dead, at last she has a chance to tell her side of the story" (Zajko 195). Not only are all the

main protagonists dead, but Penelope herself is also dead, now residing in the Underworld where she has acquired a state of "bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness" (Atwood 1) and where she has been "listening at windows or opening other people's letters" (Atwood 1). It is the Underworld from which she, in hindsight, retells her side of *The Odyssey*, even though she notes that "[d]eath is much too high a price to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity" (Atwood 1). Atwood reinterprets Penelope as a woman who is not passive but in power and control, especially of her own narrative. Penelope is aware of her past reputation when she notes, "I was smart, though. … That seems to be what I was known for: being smart. That, and my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and my discretion" (Atwood 21). Thus, Penelope can self-reflect and acknowledge that the time has come for her to tell her side of the story.

Atwood can engage and participate in this classical literary canon because she lets Penelope speak in hindsight from the Underworld. Carolyn Heilbrun argues that in this sense, Penelope is not faced with two possible stories—that is, either being the faithful wife or the seductress wife that tempts the suitors (Zeitlin 206)—but with an additional third story, namely of "how a woman may manage her own destiny when he has not plot, no narrative, no tale to guide her" (Heilbrun 108). This allows for another voice to retell Penelope's story, in this case a narrative told by Penelope herself. This notion of an open reinterpretation is underscored by Isobel Hurst, who notes that "[g]iving a voice to a mythical character who is silent or who says little in the original text is a strategy frequently used by women poets who are attempting to deconstruct the old myths which exclude them and construct new ones" (279). With Ostriker's theory on feminist revisionist mythmaking in mind, Atwood uses a role-reversing strategy with which she brings Penelope centre stage and gives Odysseus a supporting, minor role.

By having Penelope narrate her side of the story from the Underworld, Atwood expresses her position of being on the receiving end of *The Odyssey* (Hauser 118). As a dead woman, Penelope starts her story at the end, and her purpose is quite clear: "Now that all the

others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making" (Atwood 3). With this statement, Penelope demonstrates that she is conscious of the fact that she is not only responding to *The Odyssey* in hindsight but also to Odyssean receptions (Hauser 112). Penelope becomes not only a feminist main character but also a "revisionist narratologist" (Hauser 116) who, because the ending is already pre-determined, can comment on the plot, events, characters, and narrative. Indeed, she expresses her dislike that she has been set as an example, as Vanda Zajko puts it, "to coerce other women into toeing the wifely line" (195):

> [Odysseus] was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters. Even I believed him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar, I just didn't think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me. Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation—almost the compulsion—to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, the singers, the yarn-spinners. *Don't follow my example*, I want to scream in your ears—yes, yours! But when I try to scream, I sound like an owl. (Atwood 2)

Having struggled with a reputation that Homer has canonised, Penelope now aims to give an account of the events that are true according to her, allowing her to incorporate "whatever details of the earlier versions she chooses and similarly [rejecting] any particulars which do not flatter her or suit her purposes" (Zajko 195). Atwood thus engages with, participates in, and responds to *The Odyssey*, but perhaps even more important to note is that Penelope, in the above quote, refers to an "official version" of *The Odyssey* that "gained ground". Even though, as discussed in the theoretical framework, *The Odyssey* is widely acknowledged to have

stemmed from oral tradition and therefore has a multiform textual history (Hauser 114), Atwood presents *The Odyssey* as a "certain, fixed, finished entity" (Hauser 114). This poses a dichotomy between the classical fixed text and the new revised version by Penelope. Penelope's narration from the Underworld, which takes place after the canonisation of the classical texts, represents Atwood's post-classical reception and redefinition of *The Odyssey* (Hauser 113). Furthermore, the main characteristic which has defined Penelope throughout history and to which Atwood has dedicated a whole chapter—"xii: waiting"—becomes a "metaliterary symbol of the gap between the original text and the current reinterpretation" (Hauser 114).

Atwood thus responds to an "official version" of *The Odyssey*, which leads to a scenario of classical reception that Emily Hauser calls a "post-script—something written after the fact" (115). Therefore, the framework Atwood works with is a fixed framework. Heilbrun has already suggested that such an official version can be revised by transforming myths to "make new lives" (109). Hauser proposes we look at the "reassessment of the perceived 'fixity' of the original text" (115). The inconsistencies in Homer's Penelope, as noted by scholars[4], makes her a suitable character for revision. Atwood herself writes: "The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies" (Atwood xix). These inconsistencies—which are referred to by Lorna Hardwick as "faultlines" (49)—to her character create an opening for different interpretations of Penelope and therefore "receivers of the *Odyssey* can write the possibility of different endings, different plots" (Hauser 116).

Hauser writes that "Atwood's novelistic reworking of the Odyssey provides an overt engagement with the potential for identifying and working across faultlines in the Odyssean narrative through alternative female viewpoints from the start" (116). The title *The Penelopiad*

[4] Inconsistencies in Penelope's character are, for example, her faithfulness to Odysseus and seeing through his disguise as a beggar while simultaneously pretending that she does not see through the disguise of her husband. See also Hardwick 2007.

alludes to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* "whereby 'Penelopiad' clearly indicates that the story pertains to Penelope and gives her a prominent role" (Rousselot 131), or to use Hauser's terms, *The Penelopiad* is Penelope's "'herstory' of the Odyssey" (116). Atwood creates space for a new Penelope to tell her story by subverting the idea of a pre-fixed plot with a pre-determined ending. Penelope, who cleverly states that she knows everything now that she is dead, undermines herself by following this line with, "This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true" (Atwood 1). This underscores the idea that Penelope herself is, even in death, not an omniscient being. Furthermore, it illustrates that "by espousing Penelope's view, … by refusing her full knowledge of the plot and by exploiting those apparent inconsistencies in the Odyssean narrative … a space is created in which a new Penelope can be formed" (Hauser 117). In creating a contrast between the opening statement and the sentence that follows, Atwood creates a complex modern Penelope who, to some extent, embraces her contradictions in *The Odyssey*. Atwood's Penelope is a character who to some degree embodies Homer's Penelope, who "is looking back on the *Odyssey* with perfect knowledge of a complete and canonised text" (Hauser 117). At the same time, she is a modern character who struggles with a lack of knowledge and "[exploits] difficulties within the text" (Hauser 117). Thus, *The Penelopiad* picks up on the "complexities of the inconsistencies between Penelope and Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, and turns these into two competing voices, each of which undermines the other" (Hauser 123). These inconsistencies in the Odyssean narrative may be identified as halos of virtualities (Barthes 119), which emphasise that there is space around the narrative for reinterpretation and revision. Thus, the halo of virtualities in Homer's *The Odyssey* allow space for reinterpretation and rewriting, granting room for the voice of a modern Penelope.

As illustrated above, Atwood has created a powerful Penelope who narrates the novel. Atwood employs a role-reversal strategy (Ostriker 74) by centring *The Penelopiad* on Penelope

instead of Odysseus. This role-reversal strategy is enhanced not only because Penelope is the focal point, but she is also the narrator of the story. By narrating *The Odyssey* from her point of view, Penelope is given independence and narrative agency. Hauser writes that "[f]iction in the female voice has taken it upon itself to use its narrative agency, its powers of voice-assimilation and the manipulation of the instability of the textual tradition and the faultlines across which reception is enacted to explore the ambivalences and complexities of Penelope's character—and in doing so, it opens up new insights into our reading of the *Odyssey*" (123). Atwood's receiving text presents Penelope as a character with incomplete knowledge and who is not fully aware of what the ending might be, even though she narrates the story after her death. In this sense, Penelope has a powerful narrative agency because her lack of knowledge suggests that she can shape her own story.

Reinterpreting *The Odyssey* in Two Ways

The section above has described how Atwood has received Penelope's voice. She sees identities of individuals as continuing and open-ended developments which are explorative and versatile. As noted above, while writing *The Penelopiad*, Atwood dealt with two questions: "what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" (xix).

What Was Penelope Really Up To?

Virtue and Reputation

Throughout history, Penelope has been depicted as the ideal wife: "In literature and art, Penelope has been idealized for millennia for her patience, endurance and loyalty during the twenty years while her husband is away. She raises their child alone, she does her best to maintain his kingdom, and she doesn't remarry, even when everyone thinks he must be dead" (Haynes 265). The maids in Atwood's version, however, have "another story" (Atwood 147) to tell. They claim throughout the novel that it was Penelope who asked them to spy on the

suitors with whatever means, which ultimately led to their deaths, and that Eurycleia and Penelope "stop[ped] their mouths by sending them to Hades" (Atwood 151) while Penelope "in fame a model and wife will rest" (Atwood 151). This "fame" is an allusion to Agamemnon's speech in Book Twenty-Four, in which he refers to Penelope as "a wife of virtue" (Homer 24.195) and therefore "[h]er fame will live forever" (Homer 24.197-98), using the ancient Greek word *kleos* [fame]. In *The Odyssey*, Agamemnon's eulogy to Penelope illustrates the stark dichotomy of seeing women as either immaculate angels or seductive monsters, which Atwood quotes as her first epigraph:

> … Shrewd Odysseus! … You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius' daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope. (Atwood ix)

This epigraph illustrates that Agamemnon's contrasting Penelope with Clytaimnestra defines Penelope's *kleos* in *The Odyssey*. Penelope's virtuous reputation does not only contribute to her own *kleos*, but also to that of her husband: "Penelope is the key not only to the *nostos* [*homecoming*] but also to the *kleos* of Odysseus. … Odysseus gets the best *kleos* through his wife. Through Penelope, he has a genuine *nostos*, while Agamemnon gets a false one and Achilles, none at all" (Nagy 64). The one-sided portrait of Penelope being a solely virtuous woman because she is prohibits herself from intimately engaging with men and raises her son alone is contradictory since her actions change depending on her situation and to whom she is speaking (Haynes 266). Odysseus's unreliability reflects off Penelope. Due to this slyness, "we find ourselves trying to unpick how much Penelope knows or guesses about him, when and whether she is being sincere or ironic" (Haynes 266). Atwood plays with this idea since her Penelope does not only accuse her husband of being a liar, but she accuses herself of lying too:

"The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said" (Atwood 173). Perhaps, Haynes notes, "she is like him, as prone to dishonesty as he is" (266). When considering female renown associated with disrepute, "Penelope's *dolos* ("trickiness") and *metis* ("wiliness"), like those of Odysseus, contribute to her *kleos*, and this represents a revision of the notion of *kleos* as we find it in the *Iliad* and as it is generally understood in the tradition" (Katz 21).

This thesis has previously demonstrated that Atwood's Penelope possesses narrative agency. Atwood shifts the focal point from a male protagonist to a female protagonist, which has "vividly realized [a] female community that was barely acknowledged by Homer" (Howells 70). Atwood does not present her heroine as a woman whose main characteristic is her virtue. Instead, although Penelope retells and re-affirms essential parts of *The Odyssey*, her first-person narration morphs her into an unreliable narrator, making her a multifaceted character. Penelope herself is unsure of her memories: "Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better" (Atwood 8). When Penelope remarks halfway through her narrative, "Where was I?" (Atwood 24), the reader is tempted to believe that her memory is dubious and thus unreliable. Furthermore, Penelope's narration is often cynical. Instead of focusing on women's bodies and their exterior looks, Atwood makes Penelope constantly comment upon Odysseus's looks: five times throughout the novel, she tells the reader of his "short legs" (31; 33; 38; 123; 148). Nischik notes that "Penelope's unimpressed, irreverent attitudes are conveyed in colloquial, humorous, witty, also blunt language that subverts the Homeric epic, elevated style" (263). This role-reversing strategy underpins an ironic attitude towards how women in myth are objectified. Additionally, as mentioned above, the second line contradicts the opening line of *The Penelopiad*. This underscores that the opening line—"Now that I am dead I know everything" (Atwood 1)—needs to be interpreted as ironic and "indirectly also targets the traditional view that myths tell of fundamental, 'timeless' truths"

(Nischik 263). Atwood subverts the idea that myths are universal and timeless. The unreliability of Penelope as a narrator forms her into a rounder character who is flawed and full of doubt.

Penelope's narrative agency is especially fruitful in dialogue with myths known for their relatively static view on gender (Nischik 262). It demonstrates that Atwood does not present her heroine as a woman whose only characteristic is being a virtuous wife. The maids point out that Penelope was not so virtuous after all:

> Word has it that Penelope the Prissy
>
> Was—when it came to sex—no shrinking sissy!
>
> Some said with Amphinomus she was sleeping.
>
> Masking her lust with gales of moans and weeping;
>
> Others, that each and every brisk contender
>
> By turns did have the fortune to upend her,
>
> By which promiscuous acts the goat-god Pan
>
> Was then conceived, or so the fable ran.
>
> The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain –
>
> But let us take a peek behind the curtain! (Atwood 147-148)

Even though *The Penelopiad* does not clear up the question of what Penelope was really up to, it does propose that there are different sides to Penelope's character than solely her *kleos* of being a virtuous wife. Illuminating sides of Penelope, such as judging the bodies of men, female rivalry (as will be discussed below), and cynical narratives, subvert the *kleos* that has been attributed to Penelope throughout history. The novel also notes Penelope's awareness of her *kleos* that has been transmitted through poetry and ultimately illustrates that she regrets upholding that reputation.

Female Rivalry

In reflecting on traditional binary gender politics, Atwood focuses her novel on female rivalry, which most prominently comes to the fore in the rivalry between Penelope and Helen. Although Homer's *The Odyssey* grants Helen hardly any space, Atwood's Penelope involves her in the story as one of the main characters. Zajko notes that "Penelope's jealousy of Helen is one of the dynamics that drives forward the narrative" (206). Penelope illustrates the friction between the two cousins in the Underworld, where she speaks of magicians by whom she never got much summoned (Atwood 20). Instead, they "insisted on seeing Helen" (Atwood 20). While Penelope regards her maids as sisters (Kapuscinski 3), she considers her cousin Helen the most significant disturbance in her life—literally noted down by Penelope as "Helen Ruins My Life". Atwood uses Penelope to rewrite *The Odyssey* from a feminist perspective and to expose the damaging patriarchal constructs in Homer's society that drive women away from sisterhood and toward rivalry.

Kapuscinski writes that Penelope's sense of justice is a "necessarily synthesised one" (3). Since Penelope narrates her story somewhat two decades after the events of *The Odyssey* have taken place, she has a dual sense of what justice is: "*The Penelopiad* spans the two very different historical times of the ancient past and the modern day present, thus indicating how Penelope has been inculcated with two disparate notions of justice" (Kapuscinski 3). Justice in contemporary society is mostly defined as "a morally appropriate distribution of social benefits and burdens, rewards and punishments, status and voice" (Kiss 487). Additionally, "[f]eminism's most basic contribution to understandings of justice has been to show that the status of women raises issues of justice in the first place" (487). This differs with the definition of justice in ancient Greece, where "justice was predominantly a masculine realm wherein little consideration was given to a proportionate graduation of penalties, and typically brutal punitive acts were ultimately determined by the offended party" (Kapuscinski 4). Furthermore, crimes

were much more personal as they were defined by the traditional norms of households instead of the state (Tetlow 27), which could result in blood feuds. For Penelope, having lived through two decades of justice politics and having repeatedly refused to drink from the Lethe (Atwood 188), justice is a combination of these definitions. In chapter v, Penelope notes that Helen was never punished for her actions:

> Helen was never punished, not one bit. Why not, I'd like to know? Other people got strangled by sea serpents and drowned in storms and turned into spiders and shot with arrows for much smaller crimes. Eating the wrong cows. Boasting. That sort of thing. You'd think Helen might have got a good whipping at the very least, after all the harm and suffering she caused to countless other people. But she didn't. (Atwood 22)

Penelope does not hold Helen accountable for physical violence that has been done to others in her name but for indirect violence that scoots around physical violence and "exist in an indirect relationship to the resultant harm" (Kapuscinski 4). Penelope deems the difference in treatment between her and her cousin unfair. She refers to Helen as a "man-eater" (Atwood 29), "cousin Helen, Helen the lovely, Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes" (Atwood 131), the woman who "took it into her head to run off with Paris, lighting the fires of war and bringing desolation to my house" (Atwood 172) and who had "driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames" (Atwood 21-22). The descriptions of her cousin when Penelope calls her "radian" (Atwood 37) or "ambitious" (Atwood 76) have a sarcastic undertone to them—her blunt language undermines the formal style of *The Odyssey*. Throughout the novel, she insists upon Helen's guilt: "Atwood's Penelope highlights how Helen's ruminations and stories of war clearly evince her indirect violence as not only purposeful, but also pleasureable" (Kapuscinski 4). While Penelope is bitter toward Helen, Helen is also bitter toward Penelope: both women make it one of their main aims to downplay each other.

Penelope's judgemental attitude towards Helen creates a more multifaceted Penelope than Homer's Penelope since this attitude foreground Penelope's less likeable characteristics. Atwood's Penelope is complex, bitter, and judgemental. Her blunt narrative style subverts not only her own virtuous reputation but also Helen's highly esteemed sexual reputation. Helen's reputation as innocent and naïve is undermined when the reader is shown a different side of her. For instance, Helen is interested in comparing with Penelope how many men have died for either of them:

> 'So you're washing their blood off your hands,' I said. 'Figuratively speaking, of course. Making up for all those mangled corpses. I hadn't realised you were capable of guilt.'
>
> This bothered her. She gave a tiny frown. 'Tell me, little duck—how many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?' (Atwood 155)

Helen, as seen by Penelope, is "highly sensitive and responsive to the presence of others" (Kapuscinski 8), and thus, Helen is never depicted as being alone but always "followed by her customary horde of male spirits" (Atwood 153). Since her flock of men always surrounds Helen, "Penelope's effort to correct Helen's public image is a 'morally appropriate', and thus modernistic, approach to justice that combines with elements of ancient judicial structures to produce a mode of justice that retributes Helen for her violent transgressions and, perhaps most significantly, prevents the recurrence of such wrongs in the future" (Kapuscinksi 8). This revision of Helen as a woman who is to blame illustrates that Penelope is influenced by modern retributive justice.

Penelope stresses "the injustice of Helen's actions and her transgressive sexuality, and displays deep envy and resentment of Helen" (Neethling 126), thus suggesting regret over her past passivity and reputation as a faithful wife. She acknowledges that she has contributed to this image of herself: "*Don't follow my example*, I want to scream in your ears—yes, yours!"

(Atwood 2). As a woman in Homeric society, Penelope did as she was told: "I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang his praises. I didn't contradict, I didn't ask awkward questions, I didn't dig deep" (Atwood 3). As a woman recounting her story from the Underworld, however, she is aware that judging Helen makes her a contradictory character, and as such, she breaks the dichotomy of women being solely angels or monsters. By bringing the rivalry between Penelope and Helen to the forefront of the novel and depicting Helen as a versatile character, Atwood uses Penelope to revise both cousins from a feminist perspective.

What Led to the Hanging of the Maids?

The hanging of the maids in *The Odyssey*—also quoted by Atwood in the epigraph—is generally given four fleeting lines:

> [J]ust so the girls, their heads all in a row,
> were strung up with the noose around their necks
> to make their death an agony. They gasped,
> feet twitching for a while, but not for long. (Homer 22.471-74)

In *The Odyssey*, Telemachus insists that the maids must die: "I refuse to grant these girls / a clean death, since they poured down shame on me / and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors" (Homer 22.463-65). Atwood's *The Penelopiad* takes a different approach to the hanging of the maids and the role of the maids throughout the story. While in *The Odyssey* the maids play a marginal role and are granted no lines, Atwood makes them narrators of the story and thus positions them as focal points of the story. Indeed, Penelope's narrative chapters are eleven times interrupted by the maids. Throughout these interruptions, the maids comment upon what Penelope has narrated. There is, then, narrative interplay present between Penelope and the twelve maids. Although the maids plague Odysseus like ghosts—"You should have buried us properly. You should have poured wine over us. You should have prayed for our

forgiveness" (Atwood 192)—they also make sarcastic remarks regarding Penelope and they blame her for their deaths.

Atwood's *Penelopiad* implies that it was Penelope who suggested the maids should spy on the suitors, even if that meant sleeping with them. Penelope chooses the twelve maids at first to help her un-weave her shroud and eventually to spy on the suitors: "I told my twelve young maids—the loveliest, the most beguiling—to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent" (Atwood 115). She acknowledges that this plan ended in disaster for most of the maids—"Several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist" (Atwood 115)—and that, since Odysseus had not given permission, these acts "amounted to thievery" (Atwood 116). This "thievery" eventually leads to the death of the twelve maids. Within the context of the death of the maids, Atwood again plays with the rivalry between women. After Eurycleia betrays the twelve maids when she points them out to Odysseus, Penelope suspects that Eurycleia was aware of her agreement with the maids to spy on the suitors: "What if she singled them out and had them killed out of resentment at being excluded and the desire to retain her inside position with Odysseus?" (Atwood 161). Penelope's virtue is subverted by the maids, who, according to the maids, is to blame for the deaths of the twelve maids; Eurycleia's good will is undermined when Penelope suspects her conspiring against the maids. There is no such thing as a solely angelic or monstrous woman in Atwood's version since the women of *The Penelopiad* are not one-dimensional characters with either monstrous or angelic traits but are multifaceted characters. They have their own agendas and interests, struggle with doubt and trust, and are not necessarily always likeable.

The twelve maids point to the symbolism of their deaths in chapter xxiv, "The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture", in which they "politely counter an impertinent male listener in their audience" (Nischik 266). At the end of their lecture, the maids appeal to the theory of

cognitive dissonance, defined as “the discomfort that arises when a person recognizes that he or she makes choices and/or holds beliefs that are inconsistent with each other” (Chang 268): “Point being that you don’t have to get too worked up about us, dear educated minds. You don’t have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice. That might be too upsetting. Just discard the sordid part. Consider us pure symbol. We’re no more real than money” (Atwood 168). As Rousselot notes, this chapter “implies that the execution of the maids may have marked the end of a matriarchal society that had usurped power during the king’s absence” (141). While the men were away at war and subsequently wandering the Aegean Sea, the women stayed at home and, to use Atwood’s words, established a “matrilineal moon-cult” (Atwood 165) in which women have power and empower each other. This so to say women’s culture is then overthrown by the homecoming of the men, which is in this chapter illustrated by a male judge.

The chapters that are narrated by the maids are each headlined with “The Chorus Line”, which “[links] modern musical theatre with the ancient Greek chorus” (Nischik 265). These headlines are followed by genre-defining subheadings, such as ballad, love song, rhyme, or popular tune. Chapter xxvi, titled "The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids”, is the one that stands out most from all the maids’ chapters. This prolepsis of videotaping lets the ancient myth collide with the modern world. In this chapter, Odysseus is accused of “multiple murders” (Atwood 175). Although the attorney for the defence initially only focuses on the murder of the suitors, Atwood lets the twelve maids speak up for themselves to the judge, bringing to the fore that their deaths have been forgotten(Atwood 177). Atwood strongly suggests that even in a twenty-first-century court of justice, the twelve maids would have been granted no justice: “It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career. Also I do not wish to be guilty of an anachronism. Therefore I must dismiss the case” (Atwood 182).

However, having brought the twelve maids agency and voices of their own, Atwood lets them take matters into their own hands by allowing them to "invoke the law of blood guilt" (Atwood 183). Additionally, it is not Penelope but the twelve maids who narrate the last chapter of the novel and thus have the last word. Similar to Penelope utilising female rivalry to recast *The Odyssey* from a female perspective, the maids use narrative justice to recast *The Odyssey* from a female perspective.

Chapter 3: "I Will Not be Silenced on My Own Island": Another Circe

> She draws the birds from the trees,
> they would say, she tames the hungry.
> Circe,
> all animals adore you,
> you are all things to each
> in the tutelary garden, at the continuous
> feast.
>
> Suniti Namjoshi, *Homage to Circe*

Contrary to Penelope, Circe is a mythological figure who embodies the idea of the destroyer that represents the evil magic of female sexuality. Indeed, Odysseus refers to Circe as a "beautiful, dreadful goddess" (Homer 10.136). Circe is one of the most fascinating mythological women in Greek myth. Throughout history characterised as a substantial threat to men, since the twentieth-century she has been reinvented in poetry by poets (Namjoshi; Atwood; Duff; H.D.; Webster) who have attempted to give her a voice of her own by reframing her through a feminist framework. Madeline Miller's *Circe* is a fictional autobiography of the mythical witch that not only retells parts of *The Odyssey* but spans across Circe's entire immortal life.

In reflection on her novel, Miller states that "[Circe]'s so often portrayed as villainous, but once she and Odysseus come to an understanding, she ends up being one of the most helpful deities he encounters. I always thought she got a bad rap. Who was she really?" (Smith 50). Driven by this question, Miller set out to write her novel from the perspective of Circe herself to explore her as a multifaceted character. Circe's "bad rep" as an ominous character comes to the fore in *The Odyss*ey when Odysseus recounts that he and his men,

> reached Aeaea,
>
> home of the beautiful, dreadful goddess Circe,
>
> who speaks in human languages—the sister

> of Aeetes whose mind is set on ruin. (Homer 10.136-38)

Circe as presented in *The Odyssey* is a character who throughout history would attain the reputation of being one of the first witches in Western literature: she is a single woman who lives alone on an island; she is enclosed by nature; she uses that what natures provides her to work her magic; she bends nature to her will; she uses her womanly awareness to tempt men. Circe is a woman whose lifestyle, namely being autonomous, authorative, and finding magic in nature, does not conform with the patriarchal society to which she is subjected. Her depiction, then, is that of a dangerous woman. As misunderstood woman by those who reign the society she inhabits, she is the central figure in Miller's reconstruction of *The Odyssey*. Miller's reframing of Circe is a feminist one: Circe is not only the focal point but also the first-person narrator, complete with backstory from birth to the (potential) end of her immortal life. By revising a minor female character complete with her own history and a voice as a tool to speak up for herself, Miller's *Circe* can be seen as a "herstory", the idea that the woman "[puts] herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 875). This chapter will discuss Circe's voice as a tool for reclaiming narrative power and autonomy, time and change, sisterhood, and the rape of Circe.

Receiving a Voice: The Witch of Aiaia Speaks

In a 2019 interview, Miller noted that, "In the *Odyssey*, Circe is very clearly the incarnation of male anxiety about female power—the fear is that if women have power, men are getting turned into pigs" (Wiener). In this sense, Circe is depicted as a fallen woman turned free who inspires anxiety in men because she cannot be constrained by patriarchal powers. According to Miller, this representation of witches still reverberates today: "The word 'witch' is still used today as a slur against women with an amount of power that makes society nervous" (Wiener). This difference in treatment between free women and men is depicted in *Circe* when Circe's brother

Aeëtes, who is also a scorer and possesses the same powers as Circe, is made a highly esteemed king of Colchis, while Circe, for possessing the same powers, is exiled to Aiaia. Miller aims to rectify this issue by making Circe participate in a canonised literary work.

Circe, as a narrator, is aware of the later literary canonisation of *The Odyssey*. Circe responds to Odyssean receptions when she notes:

> Later, years later, I would hear a song made of our meeting. The boy who sang it was unskilled, missing notes more often than he hit, yet the sweet music of the verses shone through his mangling. I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. (Miller 181)

Unlike Penelope, Circe does not directly refer to an "official version" of *The Odyssey*, but she does imply that the canonised version of *The Odyssey* has reached her ears. In this sense, Circe is able to respond to Odyssean receptions and reflect upon herself since she "understands why she is made into who she is in the *Odyssey*" (Devi 276). Miller liberates Circe from the trap that is this prefixed narrative. Circe's autonomy over her own narrative comes to the fore when she reflects upon the actions performed by her in Homer's version of *The Odyssey* and elaborates on them. Miller's Circe is not tricked by Odysseus and does not beg him for mercy. Instead, "[she] encounter Odysseus as a man equalling her cleverness who intrigues her. They come to an understanding and he never draws his sword against her" (Devi 276). Thus, Miller's Circe is a woman who is sexually aware and seeks sexual pleasure while also maintaining her independences regardless of the situation she is in (Morillo 18). Circe's cleverness is displayed when she shows awareness of the patriarchal society she lives in, understanding fully well how this episode will be written down: "Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep" (Miller 181). Her participation in a closed male-dominated literary canon becomes clear, when near the end of the novel the past-tense narrative shifts to a present-tense narrative, encapsulating the hundreds of years that have

passed in her lifetime. During these years, she as a woman has been canonised in *The Odyssey*, her story having become a fixed entity. As the narrator of her autobiography, Circe tells her story in hindsight and thus is able to respond to her representation in *The Odyssey*. Here we again find what Hauser calls a "post-script" (115). Her narrative, then, can "be understood as part of a postmodern attempt to revitalise the epic tradition through novelization and parody" (Macmillen 37). Miller notes that while writing her novel she was "pushing back against the material, stripping out Odysseus' voice, and giving Circe the chance to speak instead" (Wiener), hinting at what Ostriker calls "hit-and-run attacks" (73) that challenge "familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (74). Circe's awareness of a prefixed text but still participating in and engaging with this text is what Cixous calls the act of putting "[woman] into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (875). Miller is using Circe's voice as a tool to reclaim a multifaceted representation of Circe in *The Odyssey*.

Gaining a voice that eventually is able to respond and engage with a prefixed text is a theme that develops throughout the novel. The self-reflection Circe attains as a woman is not one she is born with but needs to obtain herself. Miller's Circe has, like Homer's, the voice of a human: to gods, her voice has a "thin sound" (Miller 4) that sounds "like a gull crying" (Miller 81). This ridiculing of the female voice is "precisely the patriarchy which attempts to silence all these female voices" (Morillo 14). Although Circe's voice does not "sound pleasing to others" (Miller 81), her human-like voice is what brings her closer towards humans, as Miller herself comments:

> [W]hat does it mean to speak like a mortal? ... [I]t suggested that she was a character who was caught between worlds. She was a god, but also in some way not like a god. This is the story of a woman finding her power and, as part of that, finding her voice. She starts out really unable to say what she thinks and by the end of the book, she's

> able to live life on her terms and say what she thinks and what she feels. So, voice also played into the evolution of the character. (VanRy)

Circe's relationship with humans distinguishes her from other gods and turns out to be a turning point for her at the end of the novel when she chooses to become mortal. In feminist writing, voice has "something to do with individual style, with innovation, it [has] even more to do with expression of identity—and just artistic identity, but gendered identity, too" (Moore 12-13). Circe's voice "identifies with assertion of female struggle and power" (Devi 277). Circe's voice is directly related to her power as a witch (Devi 277). Her self-development and reclaiming of her voice is central in the novel, since that is how she develops and gains power as a witch and as a woman.

Spending her childhood in a palace where patriarchy reigns heavily, Circe is a quiet girl most of her childhood while following her father "at his heels" (Miller 5). She keeps "silent so they would not notice and send me away" (Miller 13). When women are appointed the role of the subjugated, they find themselves in "[a] position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority" (Belenky 15). As an infant and in her childhood years, Circe lacks identity: "When I was born, the name for what I was did not exist" (Miller 1). This idea of not naming things or beings, or as a woman not being able to name things or beings, is according to Ester Díaz Morillo a way of the patriarchy to silence female voices: "Ridiculing female voices is one of them, as well as taking women's claim to name things, for names are powerful" (14). Confronted with not knowing what she inherently is, Circe spends her younger years aimlessly wandering her father's halls. Her whole childhood is characterised by silence, which re-surfaces when her brother Aeëtes leaves: "I was a child again, … my throat scraping with loneliness" (Miller 29). While her voice later on in the novel is a powerfully present, at the start of the novel it is painfully absent.

Before developing autonomy of voice throughout the novel, Circe is tortured by her own silence. This silence does not solely span across her childhood but across her adulthood, too. Indeed, Circe silences herself. When meeting the mortal Glaucos on shore, Circe realises she has suppressed her voice for too long and thus her desperation for someone to talk surfaces. She tells Glaucos about her uncle Prometheus. While watching his horrified reaction as he asks for her actual age, she silences herself by saying that she was joking and that she "never met him, I only wished to" (Miller 35). This literal silencing of her voice mirrors the silencing of her identity (Thomas 5). The lie she tells Glaucos functions to hide her divinity and thus identity rather than shield her like some of her lies later in the novel do (Thomas 5). Circe voluntarily submits herself to being silent when she tells the reader that "I never spoke of my uncle again" (Miller 35) in order to keep the friendship of a mortal. Before discovering her own voice and identity, loneliness and separation from the world are her greatest fears.

Besides silencing herself, Circe is also silenced by others. Since until later in the novel she does not fully attain authorative powers over her voice, her attempts to distance herself from being silent fail, and she is opposed when she confesses to her father that she has transformed Glaucos into a god and Scylla into a monster (Thomas 5). When Helios declares that she will be exiled to a desert island to spend the rest of eternity, she finds that she "wanted to cry out, to plead, but my breath would not catch. My voice, ever thin, was gone" (Miller 63). Having literally lost her voice, she counts on her brother to speak for her: "Aeëtes will speak for me, I thought" (Miller 63), only to find out that he will not. This is a pivotal point in the novel, since as children, Circe was protective of her brother Aeëtes. However, when Aeëtes refuses to speak up for her when she is being exiled to Aiaia, Circe realises that she and her brother have grown apart and that essentially she has no one left in her father's household whom she has a bond with and who will protect her if it comes to it. This is one of the first realisations that she needs to find her own voice.

It is Aiaia that produces an environment in which Circe is eventually able to find her voice. However, finding the autonomy of a voice is not a process without ups and downs. Even on her own island, she finds herself silenced after men invade her island and rape her: "I opened my mouth to cry out the spell, but he jammed his arm against my windpipe and the sound was choked off. I could not speak" (Miller 164). Only later, when Circe feels "a space open" (Miller 165), she "drew breath, and spoke my word" (Miller 165), casting a spell upon the men that transforms them into pigs. Again, we find voice being the pivotal tool for power. It is only with her voice that Circe can cast a spell and overpower the men who have invaded her home. In turn, her rapist "screamed, and his men screamed with him" (Miller 165). Effectively, this screaming "serves as poetic justice; even though the [sailors] still have their voices, they are as useless as Circe's was" (Thomas 6). Homer's *The Odyssey* never explains what Circe's motivations are for turning men into pigs. However, in this scene, Miller does provide the reader with the background information that explains the unjust situation Circe has been put in that led her to be a prey for men, which eventually motivates her to turn men into pigs. Additionally, being able to cast spells becomes a tool of power for Circe. Especially since this is done with the use of her voice, casting spells is a significant contributor to the development of her voice which in turns contributes to the development of Circe as a woman.

Although Circe silences herself and is silenced by others throughout the novel, she learns to develop her voice and gain autonomy over it. Near the end of the novel, Circe is a self-asserted woman who is not afraid to question the world around her. Indeed, "[i]n accepting and empowering herself with her own flaws, she wields power over any God" (Devi 278). She for instance wields power over the god Hermes when he comes to her island and asks to come inside her house and she firmly refuses him:

"Daughter of Helios. May I come in?"

"No."

> [Hermes] lifted an eyebrow. “I have a message that concerns one of your guests.”
>
> I felt a grating fear along my ribs, but I kept my voice flat. “They can hear you where you stand.” (Miller 297)

During this same scene, she also unashamedly lies to him, this time not to hide who she is but to offer Penelope and Telemachus, mother and son, the time and space for a conversation (Thomas 20). A testimony to her authority and personal growth comes to the fore when she tells her son: “[M]y spells are governed by my will” (Miller 299), again indicating to the casting of spells and the development of her voice are inherently connected. Thomas notes that “[j]ust like the spells themselves, Circe’s voice functions as both an offensive weapon and defensive weapon” (21).

Circe’s voice as authoritative and fully her own is at its peak when she challenges her father, the sun god Helios, on Aiaia. Helios coming to her island is significant in itself, since Circe notes that he “was not a god to be summoned” (Miller 311). However, Circe, by using her own voice, notably a human-like voice, is able to summon him to Aiaia. She asserts that he speaks to Zeus and terminates her banishment. When her father asks why he would do that, she is not intimidated and her voice does not leave her like at the start of the novel. Instead, she notes that “[t]here were many answers I might have given” (Miller 311), and eventually she tells him, “Because I am your daughter and would be free” (Miller 311). Circe is aware of the power of her voice even when she confesses that she spoke to Prometheus when he was punished in her father’s hall (Miller 312). Although she has grown in her witchcraft, it is not the magic and spells that frees her from the island but rather her voice (Thomas 21). She uses her voice to blackmail her father and eventually tells him, “I will do as I please, and when you count your children, leave me out” (Miller 313). Again, “[p]oetic justice shines as Circe uses her voice to sever the family ties that had bound her in Silence” (Thomas 21).

The second-last line of the novel—"I have a mortal's voice, let me have the rest" (Miller 333)—returns to the importance of voice throughout the novel. This line confirms that Circe's voice did not need to change for her to accept herself. In fact, she still has "a mortal's voice", and in the end, she accomplishes in making the connection between embracing the voice that is inherently hers and the future she envisions for herself, willing to face any challenges that she will face to achieve that future.

Magic and Growth

Circe's world is, as Anna Rivers notes, "one in which nature is controlled by powerful deities which are either masculine or seeking approval from masculine systems" (19). The relationship between deities and the natural world is established early in the novel when her father Helios takes her to see his herd on Thrinakia, where his other nymph daughters confuse the names of the sacred cows. Helios eventually points out,

> "What is this? A scab upon Pretty?"
>
> Immediately my sisters were falling over themselves. "What scab? Oh, it cannot be! Oh, wicked Pretty, to have hurt yourself. Oh, wicked thing, that hurt you!"
>
> I leaned close to see. It was a very small scab, smaller than my smallest fingernail, but my father was frowning. "You will fix it by tomorrow." (Miller 8)

Initially this may seem like Helios and his daughters are concerned about the wellbeing of Pretty. However, Pretty's name itself suggests that Helios cares more about the beauty and immaculacy of the cows that he regards his property. This illustrates that the deities see the world in a utilitarian respect: the world and her resources are something to be exploited (Rivers 19).

Circe displays a different relationship to the natural world: she draws a power from the earth and learns to work with an herb called moly (Rivers 20). Time teaches her that she can

"bend the world to [her] will, as a bow is bent for an arrow" (Miller 73). Catherine Macmillan notes that "[w]hile, … biographical time tends to focus on moments of crisis and rebirth, which certainly occur in *Circe*, it also arguably resembles a *Bildungsroman*, in that it also focuses on the more gradual process of growth and development that occurs throughout Circe's long life" (37). Rivers adds that "[p]olitically, [Circe] develops from being a minor character subordinated to the narrative discourse of a male hero whose quest is to re-establish civilized human hegemony, into a symbol for feminist reclamation through a participatory and symbiotic relationship with her environment—this is the nature of her magic" (18-19). Circe's magic, then, is the greatest source of her development and growth throughout the novel. The space that provides this development is the island Aiaia, which, in first instance, is a space that is supposed to penalise her: "That is what exile meant: no one was coming, no one ever would" (Miller 70-71). However, Circe soon learns to appreciate the entire island, instead of seeing it as a punishment:

> I learned to braid my hair back, so it would not catch on every twig, and how to tie my skirts at the knee to keep the burrs off. I learned to recognize the different blooming vines and gaudy roses, to spot the shining dragonflies and coiling snakes. I climbed the peaks where the cypresses speared black into the sky, then clambered down to the orchards and vineyards where purple grapes grew thick as coral. I walked the hills, the buzzing meadows of thyme and lilac, and set my footprints across the yellow beaches. I searched out every cove and grotto, found the gentle bays, the harbor safe for ships. I heard the wolves howl, and the frogs cry from their mud. I stroked the glossy brown scorpions who braved me with their tails. Their poison was barely a pinch. I was drunk, as the wine and nectar in my father's halls had never made me. No wonder I have been so slow, I thought. All this while, I have been a weaver without wool, a ship without the sea. Yet now look where I sail. (Miller 71)

With time, as Circe learns to make potions and develop her witchcraft, which happens for her through gardening (Rivers 18), and by embracing herself as a witch every day a bit more, she becomes more powerful. Eventually, this leads to self-assertion:

> Had I really spent ten thousand years ducking like a mouse? I understood now Aeëtes' boldness, how he had stood before our father like a towering peak. When I did my magics, I felt that same span and heft. I tracked my father's burning chariot across the sky. Well? What do you have to say to me? You threw me to the crows, but it turns out I prefer them to you. … Does no one have the courage? Will no one dare to face me? (Miller 76-77)

Circe "teaches herself magic through gardening" (Rivers 20): "Witchcraft is nothing but such drudgery. Each herb must be found in its den, harvested at its time, grubbed up from the dirt, culled and stripped, washed and prepared. It must be handled this way, then that, to find out where its power lies. Day upon patient day, you must throw out your errors and begin again" (Miller 72-73). Through practicing in witchcraft, "Circe acquires the power to resist the dominant discourse of the gods and actively intervene in their narrative" (Rivers 20). Circe does so by protecting her son from the goddess Athena: "If ever [Athena] did break through that smoke, the island would rise up in [Telegonus'] defense, the beasts and birds, the branches and rocks, the roots in the earth" (Miller 223). Her magic thus also functions as a protective force. While the island at first is supposed to be Circe's prison, as soon as Circe learns to work with the island's ecosystem, Aiaia ceases to be a prison and Circe is able to imagine leaving the island: "[T]his is when she is able to envision escaping it: through learning from and existing in harmony with her environment, through an engagement with nature on its own terms, as opposed to dominating it or imposing herself upon" (Rivers 21). Magic is a symbiosis of powerful language and plants and is only accessible to Circe through gardening (Rivers 21).

Cixous argues that "writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879). As a young girl, Circe has been fundamentally taught to be silent and invisible, for to speak up would be to challenge the her father's looming patriarchy. However, Miller's Circe becomes aware of her womanhood, and magic becomes the symbol of growth and development. Furthermore, Miller ends her novel with an open ending: Circe uses moly to transform things into what she thinks is their true nature (Rivers 18), leaving her subject to mortality and thus time. Eventually she brews a potion of it that she drinks herself, but the novel's ending never reveals whether this potion works on her. Circe does envision her mortal future with Telemachus, hoping he will assure that things will turn out fine (Miller 333) so she can face the reality of time and eventually death. This imagining of the future "opens up the potential for a future based on risk, certainly, a vulnerability to radical change, but also sustained by genuine interconnection between subjective beings who enter into the cycle of time, of living and dying, with grace, trust, flexibility and mutual care" (Rivers 23). Circe sees mortality and death as what encapsulates being truly alive: "Telemachus does not mean that it does not hurt. He does not mean that we are not frightened. Only that: we are here. This is what it means to swim in the tide, to walk the earth and feel it touch your feet. This is what it means to be alive" (Miller 333). In the end, "[t]he modelling of change in the garden space has the potential to design and cultivate models for how life or thinking would or could work in the post-revolutionary future—a future which is not phallogocentric, thus positing a whole new system of discourse itself" (Rivers 23). Not only does Circe's attitude toward mortality and immortality change, Circe herself must attain narrative power to change the way history has characterised her (Rivers 23). Only by telling her own story can she reclaim the definition of what it means to be a witch.

Sisterhood

Although Miller presents some rivalry between women in her novel, especially between Circe and her sister Pasiphaë, Miller sheds light on sisterhood between women. This is most prominently illustrated in the relationship between Circe and Penelope. Although initially, Circe suspects Penelope has come to Aiaia for vengeance (Miller 258), Circe becomes a listener for Penelope to tell her story to, which is exactly what Atwood's Penelope is looking for (Morillo 24). Both women are part of a canonised literary work in which they share minor roles and have been silenced throughout history, and, meta-literary, this may also contribute to their sisterhood. Circe recognises in Penelope something of fierce womanhood: "[Penelope's] eyes held mine, gray and steady. It is a common saying that women are delicate creatures, flowers, eggs, anything that may be crushed in a moment's carelessness. If I had ever believed it, I no longer did" (Miller 274). Miller gives Penelope "the opportunity to find peace, to find someone who understands, to find protection in a true sisterhood. As a matter of fact, Miller gives Penelope a new ending, or rather, a new beginning, for she becomes the new witch of Aiaia" (Morillo 24). Having both loved Odysseus, both women decide not to fight over him, but to empower each other through sisterhood. Considering that patriarchal power constructs in which often the marital relationship between man and woman is regarded as that upon which society builds rather than the sisterhood between women[5], Miller pushes against these patriarchal conventions by bringing sisterhood to the forefront of the novel.

Sexual Trauma: Circe's Rape and Vengeance

Circe's first thought when she arrives on Aiaia, after her father Helios leaves, is that "[i]f anyone came, I would only be able to scream, and a thousand nymphs before me knew what good that did" (Miller 70). As a lone woman without the protection of a man, Circe is aware

[5] See also Smit 2022

of her vulnerability and the very likely prospect of someone coming to rape her. Ann Cahill writes that

> danger is almost always specifically sexualized. That is, the reason that men can travel where women ought not to is only that women can be and are raped (whereas men can be, but are not often), not that women can be and are mugged or beaten up (as in fact men can be, and are). For the male subject, the threat presented is one of the destruction of the body; for the feminine body, the trenchant threat is one aimed at their sexual being and freedom (55)

The female body, then, should be considered within power constructions. Already when she is exiled to Aiaia, Circe is given the role of a what Cahill calls a "pre-victim" (52), meaning that the person in question is marked by fear: "fear of bodily desires (so strong they threaten to undo all the subject's best efforts), and fear of harm (so likely that the subject con- structs a small "safety zone" around the body)" (Cahill 52) which in turn stress "the degree to which the woman experiences her own individual body as culpable for making all of these dangers possible" (Cahill 52). Thus, even if a woman's body has not (yet) been violated, awareness and fear that this might happen may make her act like she has already been victimised. Likewise, Circe is inherently aware of the dangers that her body may bring her: "[Women] may only sense that something very bad, and very hurtful, will befall them should their surveillance falter, and, correspondingly, that all sorts of social opportunities will be open to them should their project of femininity be successful" (Cahill 57). Thus, Circe's body, being a female body, may be able to grant her power but simultaneously poses a threat for her if she falters at being alert for anyone who may want to violate it. Her fear for being raped reveals that she has been conditioned as a girl that her body is a sexual object and that may provoke men to rape her. This enhances her role as a pre-victim: Circe fears harm perhaps even more than she fears her exile, and although her body has not physically been harmed (yet), the fact that she fears

becoming a rape victim tells the reader that her body "creates its own vulnerability" (Cahill 52).

This vulnerability of the body comes to the fore when her fear for being raped starts to become reality, even though initially she treats the twenty men who arrive on her island as "visitors" (Miller 161). She unsuspectedly ensures no animals are around and the men's gratefulness "bred kindness and good grace" (Miller 161). Even when the captain calls her "sweet" (Miller 162), Circe, still unsuspecting, thinks that this "title had been only a flattering courtesy for a woman alone" (Miller 162). She is confident in her idea of being the highest authority of Aiaia and gives away her position of being this authority when the men inquire her about the host they should thank:

> "Mistress?" It was the leader again. "When will your husband be home? We would toast such fine hospitality."
>
> I laughed. "Oh, I do not have a husband."
>
> He smiled back. "Of course," he said. "You are too young to be married. Then it is your father we must thank."
>
> It was full dark outside, and the room glowed warm and bright. "My father lives far away," I said. I waited for them to ask who he was. A lamplighter, that would be a good jest. I smiled to myself.
>
> "Then perhaps there is some other host we should thank? An uncle, a brother?"
>
> "If you would thank your host," I said, "thank me. This house is mine alone."
>
> At the word, the air changed in the room. (Miller 162-63)

This air that changes in the room is Circe realising that she has told the men that there is no male human around to protect her and that she is, in fact, a woman who is all alone with twenty unknown men. However, even now, she still wants to think the best of the men in her house: "They were surprised to find a woman by herself, that is all" (Miller 163). Still, she takes a

precaution when she drugs the men to make them frozen in their places if it would come to assault. To activate this drug, she does not her voice to speak a spell. This again illustrates that she is a pre-victim. She has to act and take measures even before any kind of assault has happened to her, even while telling herself that "I must be wrong" (Miller 164). Even when telling this part of her story in hindsight, fully aware of what has happened, when Circe as the narrator tells herself that she "must be wrong" (Miller 164), she is blaming herself for the rape:

> The typical reactions of a rape victim, marked by overwhelming guilt and self-loathing, are the reactions of a person who should have known but temporarily forgot that she was always at risk, that in fact the risk followed her everywhere she went, that it was inescapable. To have believed for even a moment that she was not in danger, for whatever reason, is felt to be the cause of the attack. Those assumptions which were prevalent in the production of her bodily comportment have been confirmed, and the attack itself may well be considered as a reminder for the need of increased self-surveillance. (Cahill 60)

While mastering her magic and making Aiaia her home, she has the sense that she has escaped the patriarchal structures of her world while the men who arrive on her island remind her that she has not. The Circe of the present who is narrating this past event becomes almost audibly enraged at herself in her narration. Even while she reflects on this event she grants herself no forgiveness, for she has been taught as a child that her body is mere a sexual object and that it will inspire lust in men. Therefore, the retelling of rape should be understood within the context of traumatic memory. According to Mieke Bal "[t]raumatic memories ... cannot become narratives, either because the traumatizing events are mechanically reenacted as drama rather than synthetically narrated by the memorizing agent who "masters" them, or because they remain "outside" the subject" (Bal viii). Thus, in order to narrate traumatic experience, the victim needs to witness and attest to their own trauma. Miller's novel is narrated by a voice

from the present who is reflecting on the past and therefore Circe is bearing witness to her own trauma. This is the very reason why she, although she still blames herself, is able to incorporate her traumatic experience into narrative. When describing the rape scene, Circe's voice as well as her body are violated. Circe can only activate the spell that will freeze the men in their places by using her voice, something that the captain takes from her when he assaults her and squeezes her windpipe. She is literally stripped from her voice and left as only a sexual object. Unable to defend herself, she believes that, "I am only a nymph after all, for nothing is more common among us than this" (Miller 164), making an alternative, false narrative around the event that is happening to her: self-blame. Without acknowledgement from her father, who again does not come to her rescue, Circe turns to vengeance. This revenge expresses itself in turning men into pigs and slaughtering them. Although the slaughter leads to death and thus is also a bodily assault, it is Circe who in the end is trapped with the traumatic memory of rape and a body that has been assaulted:

> I picked up the overturned benches, wiped the soaked floors. I stacked the platters and carried them to the kitchen. I had scrubbed myself in the waves with sand till the blood came through. I'd found the glob of spit on the flagstone and scrubbed that too. It did nothing. With every movement I could feel the prints of his fingers. (Miller 167)

The rape has literally lefts its marks on her body that refuse to scrub off, and mentally, the rape has also left its marks. Circe only comes to a better understanding of her trauma once she narrates it to the reader.

The experience of rape trauma evaporates Circe's disillusionment of having escaped patriarchy. The choices that Circe makes after this trauma are loaded with apprehensiveness and mistrust. Indeed, by including the rape scene, Miller offers Circe to the reader as a woman who has good reasons to be apprehensive of and sceptical towards the intentions of the men

she encounters. Turning men into pigs is not something she does out of pure wrath; rather, it is a residue of traumatic experience. Her magic is not evil, but instead symbolises justice.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Moon marked and touched by sun
my magic is unwritten
but when the sea turns back
it will leave my shape behind.

Audre Lorde, *A Woman Speaks*

On writing about women rewriting myths, Diane Purkiss suggests that "the rewriting of myths denotes participation in … historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators" (441). Atwood and Miller both utilise *The Odyssey* as a tool to convey a feminist message. Both *The Penelopiad* and *Circe* reverse the narrative's focus from the male character to a female character. Furthermore, both works elaborate on female characters to transform the negative-female role (Purkiss 441) into a more positive one. The silence of the women is transformed into a narrative. For *Circe* and *The Penelopiad*, this means that both authors have elaborated on the characters' history, and therefore both have become more multifaceted characters who have understandable motives for their actions.

Atwood revises *The Odyssey* by being able to receive Penelope's voice regardless of seeing *The Odyssey* as a closed canon. She does this by responding to what has already been told by letting Penelope narrate her part of the story in hindsight from the Underworld. Atwood's novel becomes a "post-script" (Hauser 115). Atwood takes Penelope's inconsistencies in *The Odyssey* and works with these faultlines to create a complex and modern Penelope. These inconsistencies may be identified as what Roland Barthes calls "halos of virtualities" (119), which is precisely what leaves space to revise Penelope as a character. Atwood uses Penelope as a vehicle to "[(de)construct] myths and critique notions of story-telling and different versions of the same story" (Morillo 23). Penelope's main aim is to undermine the rumours that have been distributed about her while the maids try to get justice

for them being raped and murdered. Both these stories differ from each other, and thus there is a constant conflict between narrators who claim to have different versions of the truth. This leaves the reader with unreliable narrators. It is thus clear that for *The Penelopiad*, "postmodernism remains fundamentally contradictory, offering only questions, never final answers" (Hutcheon 1988, 42). In Miller's novel *Circe*, this conflict between different truths is less present because there is only one narrator. However, Circe too participates in a canonised literary work. *Circe* can be seen as a post-script when Circe implies that the canonised version of *The Odyssey* has reached her ears, which makes her able to respond to Odyssean receptions. By writing solely from Circe's first-person perspective, Miller draws on the concept of a "herstory" (Cixous 875). By giving Circe a herstory, Miller defines Circe's female self (Ostriker 70). Both authors seem to push back against Homer, participating in what Ostriker calls "hit-and-run attacks" (73) that challenge "familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (74).

Atwood's and Miller's reinterpretations showcase that both characters are multifaceted women who go through change and growth. Circe develops from a voiceless, belittled girl into a feminist woman through the relationship she builds with her environment on Aiaia: her magic is the most significant source of her development and growth throughout the novel. Miller here focuses on when Ostriker calls "the relation of the female of suppressed dimensions of her own identity" (74) and revises Circe when Circe learns to find her own identity. Rivers writes that:

> In Circe's garden, the historical living of humans is absent, but so are the political conflicts of the gods. Homer's Circe is remembered for transforming Odysseus's crew members into pigs. This non-human metamorphosis is the ultimate fear for Odysseus, and this is what is symbolized by the magical space of Circe's island. For Miller's Circe specifically, however, the risks and possibilities of magic which steps beyond the

> human and masculine are empowering and transformative: this happens through gardening. (21)

As a woman, Circe is aware of her femininity, which is why she becomes more outspoken throughout the novel as her voice becomes stronger. Although working with the nature around her gives her the power to rebel against the gods, Circe learns the hard way that isolation on her island does not mean that she has escaped the patriarchal power structures of her world. The scene in which Circe is raped explains that turning men into pigs is a residue of traumatic experience and that her magic symbolises justice.

Justice also comes to the fore in *The Penelopiad* when Penelope draws on the concept of narrative justice in pointing out that Helen was never punished for her behaviour. This results in both women rivalling each other. Penelope's blunt language towards Helen undermines Homer's dignified writing style of *The Odyssey*. In turn, the rivalry between the two women results in a rounder character representation of women since it brings out unlikeable sides of both characters. By bringing the rivalry between Penelope and Helen to the forefront of the novel, Atwood uses Penelope as a vehicle to revise both cousins from a feminist perspective. Rivalry also comes to the fore between Penelope and the maids, who both claim to have different truths of events. This brings to the light that there exists no such thing as a solely good or evil woman in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*; all women have likeable, unlikeable, and doubtful sides to their character. Atwood too plays with justice by having the maids call out Odysseus during his trial, eventually letting them "invoke the law of blood guilt" (Atwood 183).

Atwood's and Miller's revisionist mythmaking of *The Odyssey* results in "the reassessment of subject matter such as gender and class difference" (Morillo 23). Both authors bring two previously minor female characters of *The Odyssey* to centre stage. Additionally, they address that are still present in present-day society, i.e. they aim to mirror the circumstances of women in contemporary society (Morillo 23). By making their own herstories

(Cixous 875), Circe and Penelope "are given the opportunity to fight for selfhood and subjectivity and to define themselves by narrating their story" (Morillo 23). Both novels depict women struggling to escape from patriarchal suppression and battling for the autonomy of their voice. Miller's *Circe* especially stands out in this regard since she provides Circe with a new beginning. Furthermore, Miller unites women in sisterhood rather than setting them up against each other in rivalry. Penelope and Circe aspire to write their own odyssey, and thus both characters appeal to women "whose values, voices, and bodies have been ignored, whose worth and potential have been discounted, whose only hope for more equitable treatment is to vigorously *assert* their presence in spheres where they have been too-long absent" (Moore 21). Ultimately, "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction, is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival" (Rich 18). Both novels are feminist retellings that confront issues such as gender and justice that are present in the closed literary canon as well as present-day society. Circe and Penelope both reclaim narrative power by telling their own stories to change the way history has represented them.

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