Correcting the Narrative: Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking in Twenty-First-Century Appropriations of Classical Mythology

Verbeek, Paula

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Paula Verbeek

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Leiden University

Supervisor: Prof.dr. P.T.M.G. Liebregts

Second reader: Dr. K. Rolfe PhD

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Introduction

One of the most remarkable features of ancient myth is its ability to endure the test of time. Readers, authors and scholars alike continue to be fascinated by stories that were told, retold, and ultimately written down millennia ago. This endurance has the inadvertent side effect of giving the impression that these myths are set in stone and that their most common interpretations are not only invariably the correct ones, but also the only possible interpretations. Myths, however, are themselves products of change, as they were circulated orally for centuries before being written down. Like any other genre, myths are open for interpretation and can be re-examined in a new light.

In recent years, novels focusing on feminist appropriations of ancient myth have seen a striking rise in popularity. These so-called feminist revisionist works are not specific to the past decade. Yet, every wave of revisionist literature is a reaction to the zeitgeist of its conception. While feminist revisionist retellings of classical myth from the 1970s and 1990s corresponded with third wave feminism, the most recent feminist revisionist retellings are products of a new feminist conscience in the wake of the #MeToo movement and tend to focus on topics such as manipulation of women and (the lack of) sexual consent (Guest 2). Revisionist mythmaking may support a feminist outlook by infusing a traditional reading of a narrative with "female knowledge and female experience, so that [the old stories] can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy" (Ostriker 73). Far from copying the well-established male-centred readings of myth, these conventional readings are used as a base on which to build a new point of view, one that highlights the lived experience of women in such a way that is still received as relevant in the present day. Instead of drawing a dividing line between the present and the historical or mythical past, feminist revisionist mythmaking aims to show the continuity of women's experiences and struggles, topics that still resonate with readers today (Ostriker 87).

Retellings of mythical female characters tend to stay true to their stories as they traditionally have been handed down, with the exception that now they are seen from the female character's perspective and placed within a larger context of that character's life. In traditional readings, mythical women are typically reduced to narrative features or brief interruptions in the male hero's grand adventure; they serve another character's story, rather than having a story of their own (Morse 177-8). Circe, for instance, serves merely as a temporary stop along Odysseus's journey in Homer's *Odyssey*,

but in Madeline Miller's *Circe*, her encounter with Odysseus, though memorable, is one of many encounters in her long life, inverting the expected pattern. These appropriations of myth allow female characters to be the main characters in their own narrative rather than functioning as a structural device in a main (male) hero's narrative (Macmillan 27-8, 32). In a similar vein, feminist revisionist retellings can encourage empathy for characters who are otherwise dismissed as monstrous. An example would be the Gorgon Medusa, who may be given a sympathetic reading as a victim of sexual violence and a sufferer of injustice, rather than merely being the monster to be vanquished (Morse 183).

This thesis will focus on three recent novels: *Circe* by Madeline Miller, *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker, and *Stone Blind* by Natalie Haynes. It will explore how the female protagonists of these novels are transformed or otherwise represented by feminist revisionist mythmaking. Specific attention will be paid to the effects of the #MeToo movement on these appropriations in the way the movement's concerns are represented in the novels. Before delving into the novels there will be a chapter on feminist revisionist mythmaking, which will lay the groundwork for the perspective through which the novels are analysed. In the second chapter, Miller's *Circe* will be discussed in relation to identity and choice in a repressive patriarchal system. The chapter on Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* will focus on shifting the focus away from men at war with each other to women suffering dehumanisation and enslavement and the survival of women's identities in a society that does not acknowledge them. Finally, Haynes's *Stone Blind* will focus on subverting the negative image of Medusa by reframing it as a story of victim blaming and the othering of women who fall outside of society's conventions. This thesis will argue that feminist revisionist mythmaking in twenty-first-century appropriations of ancient myth can lend a voice to traditionally silent mythological women and thus reflect feminist concerns of the present day.

Chapter 1

Myth, Women, and Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking

This chapter will focus on the definition of myth and how women have traditionally played their parts in the genre. It will then continue with the way feminism can be used to reinterpret mythology before finally arriving at feminist revisionist mythmaking, the main focus of this thesis.

Myth

In order to discuss appropriations of myth, let us first consider what exactly is meant, in the current cultural understanding, by "myth" itself. The term sometimes gets conflated with other genres dealing with the fantastic, such as folktales and legends. William Bascom's attempt at distinguishing myths, legends, and folktales provides a formulaic approach to set the three forms of narratives apart from each other, although he admits that the distinctions are somewhat flexible and occasionally ambiguous. In general terms, folktales tend to be set in an undefined time and place and are considered fiction; the stories are not believed to be true by those who consume or produce them, yet they can function as moral lessons. Legends, by contrast, are considered to be true by their narrators and audience[1], feature human protagonists, and take place in a relatively recent past that does not differ much from the real world that audiences would know. Finally, myths, like legends, are held to be true by their intended audience, but they generally feature non-human characters, like gods or demigods, and they are set in a more remote past that feels alien to the myth's audience. Additionally, myths, in their original function, are religious in nature and often serve as explanations for why the world is as it is (Bascom 3-4, 7). A more recent definition of myth can be found in Chris Baldick's *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, in which he addresses its function rather than its form. In his definition, he focuses on myths' purpose of legitimising a culture's social traditions and of providing a satisfying explanation for then otherwise inexplicable natural phenomena. On a psychological level, he considers myths to be "fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity, and existence (sometimes deemed to be 'universal')" (Baldick). For the purpose of this chapter, then, myth

[1] Meaning narrators and audiences for whom the tales were originally created, not narrators and audiences today.

may be defined as a narrative that is no longer believed to be true that nevertheless is still considered relevant to a current culture for its underlying messages.

It is the perceived relevance of myth that ensures its endurance in both mainstream culture and scholarly circles. The study of mythology has branched out into many subdisciplines. Robert Alan Segal writes that

> [t]heories of myth may be as old as myth themselves. […] But only in the modern era – specifically, only the second half of the nineteenth century – have those theories purported to be scientific. For only since then have there existed the professional disciplines that have sought to supply truly scientific theories of myth: the social sciences, of which anthropology, psychology, and to a lesser extent sociology have contributed the most. (Segal 1)

Ironically, by accepting the events happening in myth as untrue, these myths can be interpreted as stories expressing universal truths. The complete dismissal of religious elements like gods and monsters encourages discourse instead of stifling it, as it leaves room for interpretations that have nothing to do with the truth of events, because everything that is considered fantastical now can be interpreted as an expression of some deeper meaning or insight. The secular afterlife of classical mythology has allowed it to survive the downfall of the religious context it was tied to. Instead of being driven out of the public conscience by the rise of biblical mythology, classical myths have persevered as a part of a shared European cultural identity, rather than as remnants of a rival religion to Christianity (Segal 79-80). The continued fascination that myths inspire can be attributed to the varied ways in which they can be understood symbolically. In Segal's opinion, myth connotes a story, one that may or may not be considered true in the literal sense and that may express a certain conviction, that is held onto by those who wish to believe in it or who see some symbolic value in it (Segal 6). The freedom to look at myths for whatever a reader or scholar finds relevant in them is what ultimately opens up the possibility of reinterpretation and revision of those myths.

Myth Relating to Women

One of the approaches to reinterpret or revise myths is by looking at female characters. Although these characters do not necessarily have to be analysed from a feminist point of view, it is not an uncommon approach. Yet, myth, at first glance, is not an obvious choice for feminist authors to express themselves

in. Women who feature in myths tend to get depersonalised; with very few exceptions, they end up as an archetype of the selfless maiden who sacrifices herself for the good of more or less deserving men or, on the other end of the spectrum, as a vicious monster, figuratively as an agent of gruesome revenge or literally as a non-human entity waiting to be slain. Alicia Ostriker names myth as the reason that "we believe that woman must be either 'angel' or 'monster'" (Ostriker 71). Still, the steady endurance of myth continues to attract writers, including those who feel excluded from the narratives and who use the genre to carve out a place for themselves where there was none originally. The old myth is taken apart in order to make room for a new narrative (Ostriker 72). The dissatisfaction with the roles traditionally ascribed to women in myth is exactly what makes myth a genre suitable for revision.

Revision, in its simplest form, is a way of saying "to look at something again". Simply looking, however, does not suffice for the purpose of rewriting. No amount of looking is going to change the historical context or any entrenched outlooks on the source material. True revision requires creative thinking, the ability to look beyond that which is long-established as the one and only correct interpretation. It can only be done from the belief that there is more than one way of looking at a source and that this way may contradict interpretations that came before. Additionally, studying myths for deeper meanings "may help awaken readers to new perceptions and to different judgments about themselves, others, and life in general" (Knapp xii). Present-day readers of myth may engage with the material for pure entertainment, but it is not uncommon for readers to also feel inspired to think about the themes and moral lessons embedded in the stories. For the ancient Greeks, myth served a similar dual purpose of entertainment and introspection. Stories could inspire or reproach audiences; their thought-provoking storylines could express ideas that were difficult to bring across in abstract, theoretical language. As Bettina Liebowitz Knapp states,

> "[t]he subtleties of societies and cultures can be better understood and explained via the ambiguities, discrepancies, contradictions, and paradoxes of the great myths. Attitudes toward humanity—women, in particular—toward nature, learning, logic, and love are projected in the mythical narratives of known or anonymous poets. […] To project […] is to assign to others characteristics we love or hate. While we believe the qualities we ascribe to an individual, to a group, clan, tribe, or culture belong to others, they are, in fact, our own." (Knapp xvii)

Knapp touches on an unavoidable feature of revision in general, namely that it is impossible to escape one's own time and place. Even when the best efforts are made to present an authentic picture of the past, "what we end up providing is a new portrait of ourselves and our own modern concerns" (Lefkowitz ix). Mary R. Lefkowitz rejects the notion that ancient Greeks were patriarchal in the modern sense. She argues that the current view of them is based largely on translations that cannot fully express the connotations and meanings that contemporary audiences would have associated with myths and that audiences and scholars today unwittingly see their own preoccupations and concerns where they were not intended by the original poets (Lefkowitz xv-xvi). She claims that "Greek men may not have been so much concerned with repressing women as with protecting them, in a world in which they were far more vulnerable than they are today" (Lefkowitz 187). Lefkowitz attributes the origins of misogynistic attitudes towards women's sexuality to early Christians, whereas ancient Greek men were more wary of women's minds and fearful of their power to use their intelligence to cause destruction and mayhem (Lefkowitz 169-171, 181-185).

Whether or not it is justified to judge Greek myth or ancient Greek men as inherently misogynistic is somewhat beside the point when it comes to revision. What is much more important is the way myths are remembered and interpreted at large today. As mentioned before, women in myth tend to end up on either side of a spectrum of virtues; they are evil, corrupting forces or innocent victims and helpers. Even those who are exalted above regular women are set apart to an extent where they are mostly seen as "cult objects" and "virtual untouchables" (Knapp xix-xx). Revision does not accept that these characters can be nothing more than archetypes. In fact,

> [t]o explore their actions and reactions and to experience their worlds is to transcend the religious parochialism of those who are wont to look down on so called archaic myths. Smugness and/or arrogance should cede to cognizance and feeling, for myths experienced openly and broad-mindedly may hold a small key to explain the behavioral problems that beset today's society. (Knapp xx)

This way, revision can be used to critique present-day society and to get readers thinking about, for instance, feminist concerns wrapped in in a mythical jacket.

Feminism and #MeToo

It would be a task well beyond the scope of this chapter to lay out the entirety of feminist theory. Not only does the term "feminism" hold different meanings to different people, but it has also been transformed, expanded, and reapplied since its conception, spawning a vast variety of theories, applications, and sub-theories. Yet, all feminist outlooks share a core value; that people should be treated with equal fairness and opportunity regardless of gender. In terms of literature, feminist works focus on calling attention to gender inequality. In her definition of feminist literary criticism, Lisa Tuttle describes feminist criticism as "ask[ing] new questions of old texts" (Tuttle 184) and lists some of its purposes as follows:

1. to search for an underlying, consistent female tradition
2. to uncover and interpret the symbolism specific to women's writing so that it does not seem as incomprehensible or unimportant as it might when judged by male standards and symbols
3. to rediscover 'lost' works of the past
4. to reassess male writers from a feminist standpoint
5. to learn to resist the sexism in a text – while admitting it may be important or valuable in other ways
6. to become aware of the politics of style and language (Tuttle 184)

Not all of these claims are equally applicable to feminist revisionist mythmaking specifically, but taken together they speak of a general desire to uncover a female presence in an otherwise male-dominant literary space.

Since this thesis argues that the novels under discussion are not only products of feminist revision, but also are a response to the #MeToo movement in particular, it would do well to also give a brief outline of the movement. The earliest appearance of a #MeToo movement, then spelled without the "#", occurred in 2006 when social activist Tarana Burke called for women on the social media platform Myspace to share their stories of sexual harassment. Interest in the movement rose remarkably in October 2017 following accusations of sexual misconduct against film producer Harvey Weinstein when actress Alyssa Milano asked her followers on Twitter to reply "me too" to her post if they had ever been sexually assaulted. The overwhelming number of replies ensured that the term #MeToo quickly became widely known, both among victims of sexual harassment and people previously unaware

of the scale of the problems it called attention to. The sudden publicity the movement enjoyed helped open up conversations about sexual misconduct, power imbalances, and improper behaviour at work (Stenberg and Hogg 396). One major factor why the #MeToo movement reached an extensive audience was the fact that it focused primarily on personal experiences of sexism and sexual harassment that many women could relate to. Another reason was the fact that the movement itself was easily accessible and interactive via posts on social media. It called attention to gender-related issues that were traditionally considered taboo and offered a space for women to share their experience among fellow victims. In feminist fiction, the effects of the movement are present in themes such as sexual assault and harassment and the manipulation of women. Since these themes are present in many Greek myths as well, the genre is a particularly useful one to emphasise how these concerns are not simply a recent cultural obsession, but enduring issues.

Myth Relating to Feminism

Ancient myth can serve as useful source material to express feminist thought. Yet, Greek myths can also be difficult to appropriate to a feminist purpose because they are absorbed into the cultural memory of Western culture and the way they have been taught and told has had the effect of setting them in stone; people remember hearing or reading them a certain way using a certain interpretation and are less willing to accept that there may be other ways to interpret them that go against the more common reading. The fact that reading the myths in their original language is an option available to a relatively small and elite group of people makes challenging the messages in myth seem daunting to say the least. Yet, the form of myths also invites "looking back" in the sense that they are heavily supplied with repetition of phrases, themes, and whole scenarios (Guest 3-4). Many of the stories warn against history repeating itself and only come to a resolution once a harmful pattern is broken.

As mentioned before, literary revision is not by definition feminist; there are many ways myths can be interpreted[2]. Feminist revisionism seeks to expose harmful (patriarchal) power structures, particularly those relating to gender, and to give an expression to women's lives and experiences. The

[2] *Ransom* by David Malouf and *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller are examples of novels that revise sections of the Iliad, but neither of them centre around a feminist standpoint. That is not to say that they are antifeminist, but rather that their main concerns lie elsewhere.

effect is enhanced by choosing source material that has been "foundational to and perpetuating enduring patriarchal systems of power" (Guest 3). It should come as no surprise that the most recent revisionist works reflect concerns of recent times, specifically the late 2010s and early 2020s up to now. Since the #MeToo movement has a particular interest in bringing the personal experience of abuse victims into focus, it lends itself well to revision of ancient myth, considering that the stories of mythological women are often reduced to a minimal presence or left out entirely in the source material. Revision allows for a broadening of these female characters while also creating a space to discuss matters important to the movement in a way that is accessible to a casual readership. Myths' original function of explaining the workings of the world and society can be repurposed as a way to illustrate concepts like "the question of sexual consent and the redefining of acceptable sexual standards, particularly the identification of gaslighting and other manipulative behaviours in romantic partnerships and other close personal relationships" (Guest 2). The #MeToo movement started life as a vehicle to bring forth voices and stories that had been supressed and erased. Its function in fiction has been to do the same: to revive interest in previously ignored perspectives and to lend expression to personal experiences of women's lives. Taken together, the revised myths and its #MeToo preoccupations emphasise the continuity of the struggle for victimised women to be heard and for their concerns to be taken seriously (Guest 12).

Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking

When feminism, revisionism, and the making of myths are combined, the result is what Alicia Ostriker calls feminist revisionist mythmaking. Ostriker names four features that feminist revisionist works have in common. First, they treat the source myth as only a fraction of a much larger truth that the revised text attempts to tell. Second, the revised texts challenge hegemonic patriarchal beliefs that underlie the source myths. Third, feminist revisionist mythmaking does not glorify the past and subverts any attempt at nostalgia, emphasising the fact that history is a continuous process and that many of the core issues identified in source myths are still poignant in the present day. Finally, revisionism allows for not just a change in subject matter, but also a change in form, which opens up possibilities to draw attention to topics that may be understated in the source material's traditional form[3] (Ostriker 87). The making of

[3] Although Ostriker's analysis is based on revisionist poetry, her point of reclaiming narratives on behalf of women is equally applicable to prose.

myths, as opposed to the reiteration of them, is in itself a significant act of defiance against the status quo. The longform oral poetry that the source myths are typically written in is usually attributed to male authors, even if it is unclear who exactly those authors were. The act of a woman author to write lengthy poetry or prose with myth as its main topic can be seen as a breach of convention, but it is especially the case if the creation challenges entrenched conceptions about the mythological subject (Ostriker 78). This does not mean to say that translation choices cannot also greatly alter the perception of a mythical text, but rather that an invention complementing an already existing myth has the potential of completely dislocating a story from its generally accepted interpretation.

In order to break away from ingrained preconceptions about gender and society, one must first become aware of such preconceptions. Adrienne Rich likens becoming conscious of one's repression to waking up from death. The following awakening can be as terrifying as it is invigorating (Rich, "When We Dead" 18). She writes that

> [r]e-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an text from a new critical direction—is for us [women] more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an *act of survival*. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are 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-destructiveness 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 live—afresh. (Rich, "When We Dead" 18; emphasis mine)

Rich's understanding of revision is two-fold; it requires retrospection, a review of how things have been, however depressing that may be, and additionally it demands change. The "act of looking back" has to have the effect of shocking the audience awake and encouraging them to question concepts of gender and society that they have thus far taken for granted. Not just the source text, but also the reader has to undergo a change in perspective in order to learn to distinguish between silence and a silenced voice. Only then can there be any hope of making a lasting impression that is not immediately drowned out by the more traditional, patriarchal readings of myth. Readers "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" (Rich, "When We Dead" 19).

Breaking tradition's hold over readers is challenging when these traditions are perpetuated by authors who are more readily accepted as authorities in a certain field. Ostriker argues that in order to resist patriarchal voices, women authors have to resort to stealing back language itself and to use it to reclaim literature that has traditionally diminished or completely excluded them. Writings following an awakening of consciousness tend to come from a place of anger and feminist revisionism is no exception. Rich argues that the reason this intensity of anger has, until relatively recently, gone largely unexpressed on paper is that, historically, women authors have been held back by the "specter of […] male judgement [and] the active discouragement and thwarting of [women's] needs" (Rich, "When We Dead" 20), which has created a situation in which early feminist authors have avoided expressing their frustration fully in favour of calmer, watered-down writing that was less likely to be dismissed in a male-dominated (literary) culture, for instance by obscuring opinions, feelings, and experiences as something more easily accepted of female authors, like writing of scenes of nature instead of human experiences or changing a female protagonist into a male one to have him experience repression and injustice (Ostriker 69; Rich, "When We Dead" 20). Feminist revisionist mythmaking is a far more direct approach in the sense that it takes a familiar image of a mythical woman and plainly and unapologetically shows how she struggles in a system of oppression that readers still relate to millennia after the source myth was composed. "Since the core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (Ostriker 73-4). Any alternate interpretation of myth is bound to be received as radical if the dominant interpretation is entrenched in a culture that considers the myth its cultural heritage. Yet this dominant interpretation can only be questioned by challenging it and consequentially challenging the societal foundations it is based on.

Feminist revisionist writing does not come without its inevitable difficulties. If a genre claims to speak for women and to express the personal experience of women, the immediate question that

comes up will be: "Which women?" An author wishing to speak for *the* woman will ultimately fail to encompass everything a woman can be. As Judith Butler puts it,

> If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler 6)

In writing a feminist-forward version of a known myth, a choice must necessarily be made on how to present its main female character, particularly when she is largely absent in the primary source. She will inevitably be a reflection of the revisionist's cultural and political environment. By lending a voice to silent or silenced literary women, the revisionist has the task of deciding what this character will say with this voice. Besides a voice, the revised character has feelings, a backstory, and thoughts that may be largely up the author's imagination. Just as there are multiple ways a myth may be interpreted, so there is no one way of revising a myth. Butler further suggests that "the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions" (Butler 7). Representations of women and patriarchy are not universally applicable and pretending otherwise would only serve to discredit the political point that is being made.

That being said, it would be a mistake to give up on trying to raise silenced voices simply because the result fails to be all-inclusive. Any kind of revisionist writing is a response to an earlier interpretation and expresses an awareness of specific problematic elements. Ostriker describes works of feminist revisionist mythmaking as what she considers to be "representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves," "retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered," and sometimes "instructions for survival" (Ostriker 73). While the point of feminist revisionist retellings may not be to be an exhaustive expression of the struggle of every woman who has ever lived, they do provide a counter-voice to established outlooks that the revisionist wants to challenge; the source myth is "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).

Looking forward to the literary analysis of *Circe*, *The Silence of the Girls*, and *Stone Blind*, it is important to note that the novels under discussion do not delve into the intersectionality of feminism. That is to say, they do not discuss how for instance racism or differences in cultural heritage intertwine with the repression of women. The novels each take a familiar female character from ancient Greek myth and tell her story from her perspective. The revised narratives are intended to make the reader uncomfortable in a way that the original sources, in which these characters' suffering is only alluded to or glossed over entirely, do not. This discomfort emphasises that even though the original myths' patriarchal tones are expected, they are not necessarily desirable or acceptable for a present-day audience and that there is still a need for previously silenced stories to be heard.

Chapter 2

Circe

Madeline Miller's 2018 novel *Circe* is a prime example of a feminist revisionist retelling. Following its titular character from childhood, through exile, and finally to freedom, it explores topics such as female exclusion, injustice, and self-expression. In an interview in 2018, Miller stated that she "wanted *Circe* to be about her growing up, the fullness of her life, and [she] wanted her to be arguing with Homer's version of her story. [She] wanted [Circe] to be pushing back and saying, 'That's what you said, but here's what I think'" (Miller, "It's All Greek" 50). When asked if she always intended to write the novel as a feminist interpretation of *The Odyssey*, she left no doubt as to its intention:

> It was absolutely a feminist project from the start—in the sense that I wanted a woman to speak her own story, and to give her the same scope that male heroes have by right. Women have traditionally been shut out of epic, but women's lives are epic too. Which really shouldn't be revolutionary, just standard practice!
>
> I was inspired by the themes of the Odyssey, which is, among other things, the story of a weary man yearning for home. Circe too yearns for home, but unlike Odysseus, she doesn't have an Ithaca waiting for her. She has to discover that home, and carve it out for herself, in defiance of a world that is hostile to her. (Miller, "A Q&A with Madeline Miller")

Miler's Circe develops herself despite the world's hostility to her. This chapter will address three areas in which she learns to establish her autonomy, namely her voice, her island, and her divinity. Realising she will never be granted a place of her own, Circe creates a place for herself and ultimately chooses true freedom by cutting herself loose both from the safe space she created and from immortality, both of which have come to symbolise the unchangeability of her situation.

Voice

Arguably the most radical departure from Circe's appearance in *The Odyssey* is the fact that in *Circe*, she is at the centre of her own story instead of being relegated to the margins. Miller's *Circe* uses passages from a variety of classical sources by having characters from several myths interact with Circe on her island. The most obvious would be Odysseus and his men, but Miller's Circe also crosses paths with, among others, Medea, Daedalus, and the Minotaur. Where Miller's interpretation of Circe deviates

from any of her source material is in the fact that throughout the novel, she never becomes a side character in someone else's story; the events are told from Circe's perspective alone (Macmillan 27-28). Miller's choice of using first-person narration is in direct opposition to the tradition of male poets and performers of Greek mythological narratives. It gives Circe a voice, one that allows her to take control of her narrative and to correct, where necessary, passages in her life that she feels have been misinterpreted or purposefully misrepresented (Thomas 2). Circe's consciousness regarding the telling of her story mirrors the intention of the novel itself, which is to illuminate parts of the literary tradition that have by and large been overshadowed or left out entirely in favour of narratives more in line with a male-centred culture. Still, with regard to the shaping of literary traditions, Robert Crossley states that

> [r]etelling old stories is a vital part of literary history. After all, Homer (whoever he, she, or they may have been) was already retelling and reshaping existing tales of the legendary conflict of Greeks and Trojans. […] the motive for revisiting an old story may be the pleasure of reiterating a popular narrative, or the restoration of something that has been lost over the course of time, or the creation of a new relevance in timeworn materials. But there is almost always some novelty in the retelling, something fresh added to hand-me-downs from the past. (Crossley 195-6)

Reinterpretations do not just challenge the status quo, they also add to the existing literary culture, changing it in the process. Barbara Goff argues that novels like *Circe* and *The Silence of the Girls* offer a "new song" (Goff 1) to counterbalance or compete with the classic Homeric tradition. She acknowledges that the genre has generally been exclusivist, particularly with regard to keeping women away from writing or otherwise engaging with the material. Yet, it is precisely this exclusion that fuels recent feminist revisionists to seek out gaps in the narratives where the stories of female characters would be. In Miller's novel, Circe's criticism of the bards' narrow-minded treatment of women in their songs serves as a reminder to the reader of the limited and dehumanising roles that women in Greek myths have been given, while the novel in its entirety shows a whole life around one relatively small mention in *The Odyssey* (Goff 1-2). Giving Circe a voice of her own does not just allow her to revise how she has been represented thus far, it also automatically places her at the centre of events, allowing her to be the main character in her own story.

The Goddess with a Mortal's Voice

Making Circe the narrator to her own story is not the only significance given to her use of voice. In *The Odyssey*, Circe is described in as a goddess "who can speak with human voice" (Homer 10.150), a contradiction that defines her as a person in Miller's interpretation. Suffering ridicule and ultimately exile for her otherness among the gods, Miller's Circe finds herself more in tune with mortals. Yet in their presence Circe is in an awkward position of being technically a goddess, with only the voice of a mortal, a combination that leaves her to be spurned by her own kind and doomed to outlive the mortals she does care for (Crossley 199; Macmillan 28). Circe initially uses her voice only in ways that are least likely to end in rejection. She starts her life in silence. Since she is mocked by the other titans for her human voice, she is resolved to speak as little as possible. Even in the rare occasion that Circe's voice inspires pity, the best advice her half-sister can give her is to never speak again. Although Circe's resorting to silence is a reaction to criticism of others, like Perses and Pasiphaë, it is self-imposed. Speaking as little as possible is her way of attempting to be accepted by her peers or at the very least to avoid their negative attention. She does something similar in her initial conversations with Glaucos. When he is noticeably disconcerted upon finding out that Circe is old enough to have met Prometheus, she corrects herself, saying that "[i]t was only a stupid joke" (35) and that she is really the same age as Glaucos. She does not mention her uncle again, policing her own history in her desire to seem acceptable to him.

Circe's desire to conform to the expectations of others makes her an ambivalent storyteller. Although she puts more effort into understanding mortal concepts like death than her fellow gods and titans, her immortality makes her so far removed from a mortal's understanding of the passing of time that her account of her life becomes somewhat questionable. Especially in describing her time at Helios's court, she passes by centuries without a single comment. By her own admission, "[d]ivine days fall like water from a cataract, and I had not yet learned the mortal trick of counting them" (5). It is impossible to know whether the titans truly spend all their time in meaningless repetition or whether Circe herself looks back on that time in that way because she has always felt excluded among them. Circe's reliability as a narrator is further questioned through the discrepancies between Circe as a narrator and Circe as a character in her own story. Circe revises her own actions and feelings retroactively by commenting on

how her judgement was sometimes off or how she used to be ignorant in certain areas like magic and love. This is perhaps most noticeable when she looks back on the rape by the anonymous sailors. Before the attack, she struggles between feelings of alarm and suspicion against the sailors and the impulse to chide herself for being paranoid. At the time, she genuinely does not know what to think until she finds herself incapable of fighting back, whereas Circe the storyteller, with the benefit of hindsight, finds the sailors' behaviour leading up to the rape obviously malicious in nature and recognises her own misplaced trust as the result of growing up answering to male authority without question. Circe's revising of the events in her life is not just done by Circe the narrator, but also by Circe the character. In raising Telegonus, she repeats to him stories that Odysseus used to tell her of his own endeavours[4], but, realising that his ruses and tricks suddenly seem malevolent when told to an innocent child, she edits the stories so that Odysseus is shown in a much more positive light. When she tries to tell one of the stories as it really happened, Telegonus corrects her, saying that it does not sound like the Odysseus she has told him of. Circe changes the story accordingly so that it becomes acceptable to Telegonus's expectations, which begs the question whether Circe the narrator would have any scruples about doing the same to her audience if it means painting herself in a better light (Goff 5-7).

Circe using her voice to manage expectations is a centuries-old habit that dies hard. Yet, her finding her voice is also the first step she takes towards some semblance of personal freedom. After all, her first act of disobedience is using her voice to speak to Prometheus. Granted, the first time she truly speaks up for herself results in her exile from Helios's court and banishment to Aiaia, but it is there where she has the opportunity to reshape herself into something more.

The Island

Circe's complicated history with finding and using her voice is not the only way that her coming unstuck from her repressive beginnings is shown. She truly manages to make leaps once she has some distance

[4] In telling the story from Circe's perspective, Miller also allows for a refreshing look at Odysseus. When he is with Circe, he comes across as an intimate lover who nevertheless is anguished by his separation from his wife and child. Here Odysseus is a veteran of war and a devoted husband and father. Yet, when Penelope joins Circe on Aiaia, she tells a very different story of a man who was cruel and paranoid, never to be satisfied by domestic life and instead continuously seeking out conflict and violence. Miller's Odysseus as told by Penelope is not admirable for his ruses and lies, but rather a loose cannon who destabilises both his kingdom and family (Crossley 205-6).

between her and her immediate family. The island Aiaia[5] is of course intended as a place of punishment—it is after all a place of exile—and the house, though beautiful, initially seems to Circe only "a monument to [her] father's pride" (69). Yet, it also becomes the first place Circe can label as her own. Indeed, the island undermines the intention of the gods; it is meant to stay stagnant and monotonous, when in fact it changes and flourishes over time, just like Circe grows and develops herself the more time she spends there. Being away from the watchful eyes of her fellow gods is only half the change; just as important is the fact the Circe now has time to devote to herself. The island becomes a place of relative freedom, a place where space and time can facilitate growth should its inhabitants wish to pursue it.

While on the topic of how time and location are intricately linked in Circe's development, it would be a disservice not to mention Catherine Macmillan, who uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to analyse Aiaia in Miller's *Circe*. A chronotope is "the inseparability of space and time in any work of literature" (Macmillan 29). In other words, a fictional text is not only influenced by its events and dialogue, but equally as much by its setting in time and space, or its fictional world. "[T]he chronotope is a method for 'seeing' time in the physical and spatial world" (Macmillan 29). This also includes the real-world context, spatial, political, or historical, that this work exists in outside of fiction. Epic myth in its most commonly accepted form is an exception to this, since it is often considered to have fixed meanings and interpretations. Novelisation of these myths can break through this barrier, since it speaks directly to readers today and allows for some degree of interpretation (Macmillan 30). Regarding Miller's version of Aiaia, Macmillan identifies three chronotopes relating to the island. One is the chronotope of the road. It entails a journey of some kind during which a traveller meets other characters along their way. These other characters further the journey, but they are essentially stops along the main traveller's road. From a gender perspective, it is fair to argue that in Greek myths female characters often belong to one of these temporary episodes and that they are rarely, if ever, allowed to participate as the main traveller who makes stops on her own journey. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe herself is one of characters who functions as a structural device who adds an interesting passage to Odysseus's

[5] Also commonly spelled "Aeaea", for instance in Robert Fagels's translation of *The Odyssey*.

already long and varied journey (Macmillan 32). By only following Circe's point of view, Miller allows for an unconventional take on the hero's quest; Circe plays a role as a fixed point in other travellers' journeys, but her interactions with travellers are also points of variation in her otherwise monotonous, repetitive existence on the island.

Another chronotope that is relevant to Circe's experience on the island is the idyll, which is characterised by "a harmonious, enclosed space that can only be maintained by a regular, cyclical time rhythm, and where the cycles of the seasons, day and night, sowing and harvesting, death and rebirth permeate the landscape" (Bakhtin, qtd. in Macmillan 33). The change from the dark, manmade halls of her father where no natural light penetrates to a natural space under the influence of the seasons is significant in its effect on Circe's personal development. Her life is suddenly subject to a rhythm, and although it is beyond her control, it is not superimposed upon her like the oppressive patriarchal society of the titans. The presence of nature and the passing of seasons are not restrictions to Circe, in fact, they allow her to become part of the island's ecosystem. Over time, Circe transforms her island into one large domestic space, complete with tame wild animals, vegetation that only grows where and how she wants it, and bugs that know better than to enter her house. The passing of time on the island is marked by the passing of the seasons, which, with Circe's immortality, form a never-ending cycle. Long-term changes are minimal and only noticeable by Circe herself due to the limitless number of seasonal cycles that she sees (Macmillan 33-34).

Finally the last of the three chronotopes Macmillan identifies in Miller's Aiaia is the threshold, which embodies a "crisis or period of change for those who are permitted to land there" (Macmillan 34). The most obvious change that many of the sailors who arrive on Aiaia undergo is their transformation into pigs, but those who visit the island without some form of physical transformation still are changed in some spiritual sense or have their journeys altered after meeting Circe. Circe herself does not remain unchanged by the island either. It allows her a space to develop into a confident, independent person and into a competent witch who is wholly in control of her powers. Her meetings on the island, both loving and loathful, transform her further into a lover, mother, and defender (Macmillan 34-36).

The Change of the Seasons

What all of these interpretations of the island have in common is an element of change. Even when the island is considered an idyllic place, an enclosed space that always reverts back to itself after the passing of a cycle, it is still subject to the transformations of the seasons. Circe is no victim to the changes of the island; in fact, she welcomes them. With every passing day, she becomes more in tune with the island, to the point where the two are completely entwined. In this vein, Brighid FitzGibbon analyses Miller's *Circe* from an ecofeminist perspective. She argues that Circe's discovery of her true self coincides with her developing a mutually beneficent relationship with the natural world on Aiaia. Circe moves from the stone, sterile halls of her father to the luscious nature of her island and in the process finds herself. In contrast to other gods and heroes, who live in opposition or even direct conflict with nature, Circe learns to cooperate with it and in a sense become one with it. Circe's acceptance of nature as opposed to the exploitation of it may be read as a commentary on current concerns regarding ecological and environmental issues (FitzGibbon 1-2). FitzGibbon notes that

> Circe, as reinterpreted by Miller, can be seen as an archetype for modern-day cultural creatives and environmental activists working to shift entrenched cultural beliefs and habits related to commodification and exploitation of the natural world. This narrative challenges patterns of domination and anthropocentrism and offers imaginative pictures of unravelling and reassembling notions of human exile from nature. Not only can Miller's Circe be seen as a heroine, she can be regarded as an eco-heroine. (FitzGibbon 2)

Despite her godhood and immortality, Circe accepts that she has to work with nature rather than force it to give up its powers. She gains in power through patience and respect, becoming aware that her relationship with nature is one of give and take; she can use it for her own purposes and support it at the same time. This is ultimately what allows her to use the island and everything on it to protect her son Telegonus and ward off Athena. Circe has respected and cared for the island and nature protects her interests in turn (FitzGibbon 5-6).

Circe eventually outgrows her island. Although Circe's life on Aiaia allows for her to transform, it does not protect her from the whims and wishes of other gods. When Apollo uses Circe as a vessel to receive his prophesy, he does not ask permission and Circe feels violated and used once again: "I shook

with rage and humiliation. How many times would I have to learn? Every moment of my peace was a lie, for it came only at the gods' pleasure" (201). The island, beautiful as it may be, is still a place of confinement. When it has given her everything she could wish for, she can begin to imagine leaving it behind, ending her exile in the process (Rivers 21). In the end, the island has become a crutch that she no longer needs or desires. She has mentally come loose from both her family's controlling and restrictive behaviour and her own limitations.

Immortality

One of the limitations that Circe cannot escape is her own immortality. Circe craves change, like a change of scenery and a change of companions, but her divine status does not allow her to change herself in any permanent physical way. As an exile, Circe finds herself trapped on the island. As an immortal, she is trapped unchanging in time (Rivers 8). This dissonance between Circe's immortality and her wish to change is present from the very start of the novel. Even as a child, Circe sees herself as different from the other gods and titans, a view reinforced by the assertions of her relatives that she is indeed different. She has always had a strong dislike for the gods' callousness regarding mortal lives, from her discomfort in knowing that astronomers will be killed over irregular movements of the sun caused by Helios to the full horror of hearing how Pasiphaë cursed the girls Minos slept with to die a painful death, prompting her to conclude that "[i]f [she] was trapped on this island, at least [she] did not have to share the world with [Pasiphaë] and all her kind" (139). Circe thinks of the gods as people who are of her sister's kind, rather than of her own kind. She does not count herself among the gods, at least not in their sense of morality. The prospect of living forever does not diminish the value she places in the lives of mortals. It is significant that she does not force Odysseus to stay with her on Aiaia, even though she has the power to make him. She "imagined his face empty of all thoughts but what [she] put into it. He would sit at [her] knee, gazing up, fatuous and adoring and empty" (195), but stripping another person of his autonomy, especially since her own freedom is limited, is not a line she is willing to cross. Circe's desire to leave the island is tied to her desire to live in the mortal world and be part of its history. Despite her loneliness and frustration, she would not inflict the exclusion of human history on another (Rivers 13-4).

Divinity and Mutability

Until the very end of the novel, Circe may not be able to shed her divinity, but she does manage to change the concept of what she is. She starts out her life as only a nymph, meaning both minor goddess and bride, but she changes that identity when she discovers magic. As a budding witch with her own territory, Circe can reflect on who and what she wants to become. In order to turn the island into a place of nourishment and magic, she has to make a conscious effort, something that is inherently alien to gods and titans. Circe choosing to quite literally get her hands dirty is in itself a departure from the path that was set out for her; in choosing develop her skills and understanding, she empowers herself despite her exiled state (Rivers 18). The island is in a sense what Circe longs to become. Aiaia, which becomes Circe's personal garden, changes with the passing of time. Circe can help perform this ritual by tending to her garden, but she herself cannot truly participate. Being immortal, Circe can choose to change her behaviour, but she cannot be changed by time itself the way mortals are. "She cannot live because she cannot die and therefore the *change* she craves is a paradox" (Rivers 10). The dissociation she feels between herself and her fellow gods shows in her becoming repulsed by their immutability and perfection. After she returns from Crete and still has Daedalus's scarred hands in mind, she cannot quite stand the sight of Hermes anymore: "a distaste rose in me now when I looked at him. […] When his hands reached for me, I felt a strange dislocation. They were perfect and unscarred" (136). Circe's hands are equally perfect and unscarred, but the lack of blemishes that other gods take for granted is unnerving to Circe. Her features wash away any proof of the life she has lived; her longevity only reinforces her inability to hold on to the things she values. She imagines her future stretching out endlessly before her: "I would go on through the countless millennia, while everyone I met ran through my fingers and I was left with only those who were like me" (310), a fate she can no longer accept.

In the end, Circe takes the risk of losing the comforts she has over the possibility to experience a human life. Her choice to drink her own potion is a choice for the unknown. Circe has been vulnerable before, but this is only one of two times that she chooses vulnerability where she could have certainty, the other time being her choice to have a child of Odysseus. Circe's choices to have a mortal son and ultimately become mortal herself are indicative of the person she has become; she accepts the risk of loss and grief and the inevitability of death rather than holding on to a certainty of changelessness (Rivers

11). Here is perhaps the strongest feminist revisionist argument of the novel; it is preferable to accept the risks involved with change than to uphold a standard that falls short of one's needs in life.

Madeline Miller's *Circe* tells a story about letting go of the past, while at the same time it stresses the power of taking what you want and refusing to let it be taken away. Circe's story is revised to reflect on the importance of finding a voice in a society that denies its importance, and the continuous struggle to use it responsibly once it is found. Circe's island functions as a cultivation ground for Circe's identity, but as time wears on it gradually feels more and more like an extension of the gods' restrictions on Circe's development. Like Aiaia, Circe's own divinity becomes a prison. Her ending her exile and her decision to drink her last potion show that change is possible and that it is worth the risk of failure.

Chapter 3

The Silence of the Girls

Like Miller's *Circe*, Pat Barker's novel *The Silence of the Girls* sets out to supply a voice to a mostly silent female character, in this case Briseis from *The Iliad*. In explaining how she landed on her desire to write back the voices of silenced women, Barker recalls her experience reading Homer's epic, saying that "[she] had just read *The Iliad* and was astonished by that silence. The eloquence of the men, the absolute silence of the women they're quarrelling about" (Barker, "I had just" 19) and pointing out how "[f]or men [European literature] starts with a quarrel. For women it starts with silence" (Barker, "I had just" 27). The difference between the cacophony of men arguing and the near-complete muteness of women is a story in and of itself. In *The Silence of the Girls*, this story shows itself in the tension between Briseis's suffering as a result of her captors' relentless dehumanisation of enslaved women and her quiet rebellion against it. This chapter will first analyse how the novel shifts the focus of *The Iliad* from its male characters to its often overlooked female characters, then it will look into the way women in the story are commodified as political tokens, and finally it will focus on how Briseis is shown to stay quietly defiant in the face of enslavement in an effort to preserve her sense of self.

Shifting the focus

Inverted Glory

From the very start of the novel, *The Silence of the Girls* signals its feminist revisionist intention; the title addresses a lack of women's perspectives that demands to be filled. In order to achieve this, *The Iliad*'s main preoccupation, men's experience of war, has to be taken out of its prime place in the spotlight in favour of women's experience of war. Noting this in her review of Barker's novel, Emily Wilson points out how *The Silence of the Girls* alters not just the main perspective of the epic narrative, but also sheds a different light on the implications of war for women. The novel starts in a way most war stories end: with the fall of a city. Yet, the defeat and consequent sacking of Lyrnessus is not the end of Briseis's story; indeed, for her and the other surviving women captives it begins a new chapter of loss and hardship (Wilson). Instead of focussing on the glory of the victors or the bravery of the defeated, the opening chapters describe the blood and gore and inexcusable acts committed by the invaders of Lyrnessus, turning any expectation of heroics on its head. "The visceral immediacy of

violence and the absence of compassion in the warriors performing the sacking places the reader firmly on the side of the defeated; the *Iliad's* valiant men lose all their allure when shown indulging in casual brutality" (Curyłło-Klag 15). With the Trojan women as witnesses, the actions of the Greek soldiers lose their shine and instead are revealed as barbaric, cruel, and callous in their propensity towards excessive violence (Sen 50). Such a viewpoint can only come from someone placed firmly on the other side of the victorious warriors, someone like Briseis, who is unfortunate enough to both be a woman and a foreigner about to be enslaved by the very soldiers she is watching. Throughout the novel, Briseis's matter-of-fact and sometimes sardonic narration paints a picture of Greek glory stripped away to reveal mindless horror, yet it also "candidly represents a subjugated woman's quest for an individual identity and personal freedom in the face of innumerable hazards and uncertain odds." (Sen 49).

The Experience of Women

The desire for an individual identity and personal freedom stands in sharp contrast to the lack of expression by women in *The Iliad*. Tuhin Shuvra Sen connects this silence to one of mythology's primary functions: to confirm and cement society's customs and traditions. As discussed in chapter 1, a myth can be used to lend authority to whatever a society's most common reading of that myth is. "Accordingly, myths as a patriarchal instrument yield, preserve and prescribe a subordinate identity for women, which is perceived as natural" (Sen 45). Since *The Iliad* and other ancient Greek myths have largely been written and retold in patriarchal contexts, the women who inhabit these stories are by and large regaled to passive and marginal roles and their silence only further emphasises their lack of agency over their lives. This state of things is made to appear as natural and unchangeable, its appearance in ancient myth seemingly suggesting that it is simply the way male-female relationships have always been. Retelling a well-known myth from the perspective of a woman allows authors to reconstruct mythical female characters as something other than passive, silent stock characters (Sen 45-6). Not unlike Circe in Miller's novel, Barker's Briseis deplores the shallow roles male bards are bound to give her in their songs:

> [People of unimaginably distant times] won't want the brutality of conquest and slavery. They won't want to be told about the massacres of men and boys, the enslavement of women and girls. They won't want

> to know we were living in a rape camp. No, they'll go for something altogether softer. A love story perhaps? (323)

In her prediction, the harrowing reality of her experiences are erased in favour of something more easy to digest, a prediction that proves to be correct where *The Iliad* is concerned[6]. It is in keeping with the nature of the patriarchal culture and literature that Briseis originally appears in to give little to no attention to the experiences of women, let alone enslaved women. Barker's novel does the opposite; it draws attention to those people who are normally not given a second thought and the "brutality and conquest of slavery" (323) that Briseis expects to go unrepresented. An example of the discomfort this produces appears near the end of the novel, when Briseis mentions that her sister is married to one of Priam's sons and Automedon suddenly sees Briseis as a person with a history: "Automedon blinked, forced, for a moment – and I honestly think it was for the first time – to see me as a human being, somebody who had a sister – and a sister, moreover, who was King Priam's daughter-in-law" (281). It is important to note that this shift in attitude only happens after Briseis has shared something personal about herself. This little interaction plays out what the entire novel does to the reader; it provides an insight into a previously obscured part of a story, creating a "new song" (314; originally with emphasis) in the process. Briseis becomes her own bard, one who includes her thoughts, her emotions, and her personal motivations (Altin 852-4).

Besides adding her own experiences into Homer's epic poem, Briseis also "demythologizes the premises of the plot" (Lanone par. 3) of *The Iliad* by changing the tone from solemn and reverent to cynical and gritty. A notable example of how the novel subverts the focus of *The Iliad* from the experiences of men to the unacknowledged experiences of women is the appeal of King Priam to Achilles to relinquish Hector's body for burial (Altin 857):

> *I do what no man before me has ever done, I kiss the hands of the man who killed my son.*
>
> Those words echoed round me, as I stood in the storage hut, surrounded on all sides by the wealth Achilles had plundered from burning cities. I thought: *And I do what countless women before me have been forced to do. I spread my legs for the man who killed my husband and my brothers*. (267)

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[6] An example of Briseis and Achilles's relationship being represented as romantic and (debatably) consensual can be found in Wolfgang Petersen's 2004 film *Troy*, in which Achilles is treated sympathetically and both are considered star-crossed lovers.

In *The Iliad*, this scene is intended to show just how extraordinary King Priam's act of submission is. Briseis, though not denying the grief it must cause Priam, puts the scene in perspective by juxtaposing it with her own position as a sex-slave. Briseis does not admonish Priam for the pain he experiences at the demise and consequent mutilation of his son, but the solemnness of the scene becomes jarring when compared to the overwhelmingly more commonplace and severe sexual violence that women have suffered at the hands of their families' murderers. Even when the perspective shifts from Briseis to Achilles or Patroclus, sympathy remains firmly with Briseis. This is in contrast with Madeline Miller's Briseis in *The Song of Achilles*, in which the lack of a sexual relationship between Briseis and Achilles effectively exonerates Achilles from any guilt on his part and the focus remains on the oppressors' discomfort at the abuse of women around them rather than sympathising with the victims of that same abuse. *The Silence of the Girls* is unflinching in its depiction of suffering women, but it does not erase the experiences of others to do so.

Woman as Political Object

At the core of the enslaved women's silence is the fact that they are not recognised as people who could have a relevant opinion to be heard by their captors. They are instead reduced to objects of varying political value, particularly Chryseis and Briseis. Spending the first weeks in a state of shock and vigilance, Briseis finds that she does not care at all that she is only seen as a prize while serving wine to Achilles's men. When thinking about her new situation, she notes that "[a] slave isn't a person who's being treated as a thing. A slave is a thing, as much in her own estimation as in anybody else's" (38). Briseis is treated as a political object from the moment she becomes a prize, as opposed to many other women in the camp who are simply taken and enslaved by default after their cities fall. Briseis is aware of the distinction herself, spending time with the other prizes and despairing of losing her prize status and becoming a sex-slave for common use. Agamemnon's unorthodox decision to take Briseis as compensation for losing Chryseis raises her to an even more political, though not necessarily better, position. She has left the category of prizes and ends up in an undefined and rather precarious position, one that, although it puts her at the centre of Greek politics, does not grant her anything in the way of power, political or otherwise. Agamemnon's decision ushers in a state of exception: "a provisional lawlessness justified by extreme circumstances, in an authoritarian claim that implements a new

paradigm of government" (Lanone, par. 4). Agamemnon acts outside of the law as it is generally accepted. In the process, Briseis is reduced not just to an object to be passed from one man to another, but to a political bargaining chip (Lanone par. 4-5). This position quickly turns out to be mostly for show, as Briseis realises when reflecting on how after one terrible night, she is only required to work at the loom and serve wine: "I was useful I suppose; I served a particular purpose. Men carve meaning into women's faces; messages addressed to other men" (120). The message in question is that Agamemnon can take what and who he wishes without facing the consequences. Yet, this message shifts when the consequences show themselves in Greek losses on the battlefield and the men, in particular the wounded, begin to resent Briseis for Achilles's refusal to fight, turning Briseis yet again into a symbol for the actions of men that are beyond her control. Even when Achilles finally relents, Briseis notes how she is still only treated as property to be handed over from one general to another. In the procession of gifts to Achilles from Agamemnon, she describes how "[she] brought up the rear, along with the seven girls from Lesbos *and all the other things*" (211; emphasis mine). Referring to herself as "one of the things" echoes Achilles's earlier bitter remark that Agamemnon has not "earnt it" (108), referring to Briseis as "it". Achilles almost has a moment of reflection where his feelings for Briseis seem more than simple ownership, before realising that the reason he misses Briseis is the personal insult to him and the injustice in Agamemnon claiming her when she was Achilles's prize. At all times, Briseis's purpose is to be on display.

Despite having been reduced to an object of status, Briseis does not disregard her own personhood. She takes up a position somewhere between a victim and a cautious rebel. She does not deny that she has been wronged and continues to be so, but she also does not yield to hopelessness in the face of her situation. She attempts to stay true to herself within the constraints of her captivity and enslavement (Lanone par. 22). This is not always as successful as it could be. When the plague breaks out across the Greek camp, Briseis is oddly satisfied by the mess. Part of it is fuelled by her hatred for Agamemnon, which is a defiant, vindictive line of thinking, but she also feels as though she belongs "among all the other rubbish" (66). She does not blame herself for the fall of Lyrnessus or the fact that she was made a slave, but she does feel responsible for her own transformation into a trapped, mouse-

like creature, unlike the women who chose death over life as a slave (Curyłło-Klag 18). Acceptance of herself in her new state takes time and persistence.

The Silence of Defiance

Confined and silenced as she is, Briseis has little opportunity to challenge her oppressors. Yet, she does manage to quietly act against their wishes and commands. In her review of *The Silence of the Girls*, Mahvesh Murad emphasises the relentlessness of the societal system of the Greeks that makes any form of resistance seem futile. Briseis is rightfully aggravated by her treatment as a slave and war captive, but she lacks the power to vocally reassert herself as an individual without serious repercussions. Achilles, whether from birth, upbringing, or the previous nine years of fighting, has been reduced to a creature of violence, yet he still shows moments of tenderness with Patroclus and his mother and he becomes repulsed by his own grotesque hands. Even Patroclus, one of the few Greek men showing any consideration for the captive women's plight, finds himself powerless to change any part of the system (Murad). Briseis, of course, suffers far worse from this system than either Patroclus or Achilles and her outrage occasionally overrules her fear of repercussions. One such occasion is her reaction to hearing Chryses's increasingly loud prayer to Apollo as she walks back to the camp after watching Agamemnon refuse to return Chryseis to her father. Once she realises he calls on the god specifically as the god of plague, she starts praying along: "*God of plague, hear me!*" (63). Another memorable act of disobedience occurs not much later, when Myron's body is handed over to women to be washed. Achilles and his men briefly enter the hut and Briseis senses that he sees her as a Trojan in that moment, which pleases her. As soon as the men are gone, one of the women takes Myron's penis and waggles it around; all the women laugh, but no one comes to stop them. In that instance, there are still unspoken rules that prevent the men from intervening in what is considered a women's space, offering Briseis some protection. She lacks this protection later in the novel when she sneaks out of the women's hut and places a white cloth over Hector's battered face. She only avoids becoming a suspect because Achilles assumes the culprit must have been one of his men because "[a] slave wouldn't dare" (233). Briseis's acts of disobedience become increasingly risky and brazen, ultimately culminating in her short-lived escape attempt. Yet, arguably her most significant act of defiance is internal: her choice to remember who she used to be in spite of her changed situation. Despite her being consistently treated as

an object by the men in the Greek camp, she manages to hold on to her own identity and personhood. She is silent out of concern for her own safety, but her thoughts are beyond censorship. When Nestor tells her to forget her old life she immediately decides to do the opposite, thinking to herself: "*Forget*. So there was my duty laid out in front of me, as simple and clear as a bowl of water: *Remember*" (20). Several times in the novel, she conjures up images of her past life so vividly that she can almost imagine she is bringing her old reality back into existence, including people who have long since been killed or whose fate is unknown to her. Briseis telling herself to remember when she is told to forget is an act of defiance, even if no one but herself will know about it. As far as she is concerned, her life is still her story, even if it is not recognised as such by traditional storytellers (Altin 855; Sen 51). Adrienne Rich's claim that "looking back […] is an act of survival" (Rich, "When We Dead" 18) is all too true for Briseis; she keeps her sense of self alive by remembering that there is more to her than the situation she finds herself in currently.

Facing Reality

Briseis is determined to remember, but even she cannot live in the past. Since the main purpose of the novel is to counteract the silence of women in *The Iliad* through Briseis's voice, it is vital that Briseis stays absolutely adamant in her resolve not to lose sight of reality. Adrienne Rich, besides arguing for the importance of feminist revisionist writing, points out that women in patriarchal societies are expected to lie about the realities of their lives. In societies where women's chastity and obedience is valued over their honesty, women's honour is not measured in their truthfulness. Indeed, in order to maintain a place in such a community, lying is not only expected, but required. "In the struggle for survival we [women] tell lies. To bosses, to prison guards, to police, men who have power over us, who legally own us and our children, lovers who need us as proof of their manhood" (Rich, "Women and Honor" 189). Hiding the harsh reality of life to keep from further harm is a legitimate survival strategy, but it becomes more complex when these lies extend to other women or when they are told to oneself. Extending the lie into a community of women is an attempt to make the projection of contentment or indifference seem real, to lose the distinction between playacting in front of men and sharing the truth among women. These lies are not born of survival, but of fear, particularly the fear of not being in control of one's life and the emotional emptiness threatening to swallow up any hope of escaping that fate (Rich, "Women and

Honor" 186-91). Briseis never pretends to herself or the other prize women that Achilles loves her in any meaningful way, as opposed to Tecmessa, Ajax's prize, who fully devotes herself to the role of wife and mother, even going as far as excusing Ajax's violent outbursts as war trauma. Although Briseis sees Tecmessa as something of her opposite, Tecmessa is who Briseis could have become had she made a few different choices. After her first few weeks in the camp, Briseis's emotional numbness wears off and she finds the reality of her situation almost too much to bear. Nestor's advice to try to forget her old life and start from scratch may at that point have been the easier option, but she still chooses to see her enslavement for what it is rather than pretending that there is no undeniable rift between her and the men around her. The first time this resolve is tested is when Patroclus tries to connect with her. He claims to recognise himself in her situation and her relation to Achilles, but she does not find it comparable. As their friendship grows, Patroclus muses how he could convince Achilles to marry Briseis and that they "could all sail home together" (92), a fantasy that is immediately spoiled by Briseis remembering that she already had a home and that Patroclus had a hand in burning it down. Something similar goes through Briseis's mind when she finds herself caring for wounded soldiers at the camp hospital. Briseis becomes passionate about the work, but she does not forget that her patients are also her captors, thinking: "They were men, and free. I was a woman, and a slave. And that's a chasm no amount of sentimental chit-chat about shared imprisonment should be allowed to obscure" (139).

Given that Briseis does not allow herself to forget the rather glaring disadvantages of her position, it may seem inexplicable that she does not follow through in her escape when she finally has the chance. Although she cannot resist to try when the opportunity first presents itself, upon reflection she realises that escaping patriarchal oppression cannot be done by simply leaving the latest oppressor only to wait for a new one. Instead, she tries to build a new life that suits the person she has become: "Perhaps [what made her turn back was] no more than a feeling that this was my place now, that I had to make my life work *here*" (292). The novel of course aims to shed light on the horrors experienced by silenced and enslaved women, but it also shows how these women respond to their confined position. They give meaning to their lives, defying the common narrative that they are only the property of men and the spoils of war, even if the only people who see the significance of that defiance are the women themselves (Sen 52).

As a feminist revisionist mythical retelling, *The Silence of the Girls* concentrates its efforts on shifting the focus from men fighting in war to women trying to survive war. In doing so, Barker describes the objectification and commodification of women in a gritty, sometimes uncomfortably visceral manner through the eyes of Briseis, whose presence in *The Iliad* is limited to her passive role in Achilles and Agamemnon's conflict and whose voice is only used to lament Patroclus's death. Barker gives Briseis a voice to speak of the harrowing experiences of women that do not feature in *The Iliad*, but she also offers hope in showing that Briseis's identity and personal freedom can survive against the odds and that the stories of her and other silenced women live on outside of the main narrative as told by traditional bards. The novel does not shy away from injustices done to enslaved women, but it also does not linger on them. Instead, the novel focuses on the ways these women may endure. While *The Iliad* is about "the rage of Peleus' son Achilles" (Homer, *Iliad* 1.1), *The Silence of the Girls* is about the anger, frustration, sisterhood, and ultimately endurance of silenced women.

Chapter 4

Stone Blind

The last and most recent novel under discussion is *Stone Blind* by Natalie Haynes. Where the previous novels were primarily concerned with lending a voice to a silenced female character, *Stone Blind* goes one step further in not only providing Medusa with a history and personality of her own, but also in its aim to correct the narrative regarding Medusa's legacy. Upon being asked about her inspiration for the novel, Haynes recalls that it followed an already extensive chapter on Medusa in her essay collection *Pandora's Jar*: "I was still so mad about everything that happened to her when I finished that chapter. I couldn't get past it, how unfair it was at every stage. And if you're still angry after 9000 words, I figure you owe that character a novel" (Haynes, "Interview"). Like Pat Barker in her reading of *The Iliad*, Haynes noticed the lack of proper representation for Medusa in Hesiod's "Theogony" and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and saw an opportunity to address the missing pieces. She notes that "[e]specially with female characters […] you'll just get this very brief account of what we would consider to be an earth-shattering event. […] [W]hat you have is this skeletal framework and all these people in the shadows that you get to fill in and bring forwards" (Haynes, "Natalie Haynes on Challenging"). Indeed, *Stone Blind* focuses on many people in the shadows, providing a wider view of the world that Medusa inhabits. The novel is still a vindication for Medusa, but by analysing the characters around her, Haynes delves into the patriarchal structure of society that reduces Medusa to nothing more than the monster she is remembered as. Written after the rise of the #MeToo movement, the novel focuses on topics such as sexual assault, manipulation, and victim blaming, resulting in a work that aligns with the movement's concerns despite its ancient source material. This chapter will first analyse Medusa's image as a mythological figure, before analysing the novel's approach to correcting this image by questioning the meaning of monstrosity, showing the distortion of justice in a system where vengeance takes precedence over accountability and blame, and showing the struggle not to give in to despair in the face of injustice.

Medusa in Context

In order to understand how *Stone Blind* attempts to rectify Medusa's reputation, it is necessary to look into the way she has traditionally been interpreted. Throughout the centuries, Medusa has mainly been represented as, perhaps predictably, a monster. This interpretation leaves little room for exploration of

her history, motivations, or personality. Heidi Morse finds that the majority of interpretations of characters like Medusa view them purely as a threat to a male subject. They serve as an immediate danger to a hero and nothing beyond that. Morse states that "[t]hrough figures such as these, mythological encounters come to signify stratified gendered relations, encapsulated and passed down unchallenged through poetry and art" (Morse 177). Repetition without revision further entrenches already commonly accepted ideas on how to interpret characters like Medusa. This effect is further enhanced by the fact that many Greek mythical women only appear in stories that are not theirs. Medusa's story is actually that of Perseus and she appears in it as the main challenge in his hero's journey. Ironically, "[Medusa's] narrative immobility signals [her] own gendered petrification within myth's symbolic order" (Morse 178). Even artists who use Medusa as an inspiring figure in her own right tend to focus on the danger of her power or the morbid, yet often strangely beautiful, images of her severed head in visual representations, reducing Medusa's head, and by extension Medusa herself, to an object to be feared or appreciated for its use. Since these artists have predominantly been men interpreting the myth around Medusa as a commentary on women and femininity, "it is not a stretch to say that the figurative seizure of the Gorgon's apotropaic power in poetic and artistic representation epitomizes a literary and cultural history of women's objectification in the service of male arts." (Morse 188)

There is something inherently ironic about the interpretation of the Medusa figure as a threat to men's bodily integrity when the opposite is the case in the myth itself. Susan R. Bowers notes this contradiction in Medusa's legacy, with her becoming the ultimate object of the male gaze and yet being a powerful representation of the female gaze. Bowers notes that feeling someone's gaze upon oneself can have a paralytic effect and induce the feeling of being merely an object in the other person's view. Medusa is the personification of this effect; she quite literally turns anyone to stone who meets her gaze. Beheading her is a way of violently ending the danger of being perceived as an object. Yet, the interpretation of this myth is not that clear-cut since it is also deeply gendered, with Medusa coming to signify the dangers of female sexuality and Perseus stepping up as the strong virile hero keeping her under control. The myth in a sense contradicts itself; it is Perseus's seeing Medusa that leads to the deadly conclusion, not the other way around. The decapitation also does not end Medusa's gaze; it simply

passes her deadly power on to another. Bowers sees the patriarchal interpretation as an attempt to overpower the female gaze as exemplified in Medusa with the overbearing and violent male gaze of Perseus (Bowers 217-20). In her view, "[p]atriarchal males have had to make Medusa—and by extension, all women—the object of the male gaze as a protection against being objectified themselves by Medusa's female gaze" (Bowers 220). Looking at Medusa with fresh eyes may reveal a character unjustly vilified for her power who can be the antithesis to the ever-present male gaze[7].

Hélène Cixous and "The Laugh of the Medusa"

Where the reconsideration of Medusa as an inspirational figure for women authors is concerned, it would not do not to mention the influence of Hélène Cixous, particularly of her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." Cixous writes about the impulse of women to hold back their desire to write because of preconceived ideas that writing belongs to others who would be better suited to the task or that women's writings are inherently silly or less meaningful when compared to the work of male authors. If these women[8] choose to write, they do so in secret, because writing down a true account of their feelings would produce a piece of writing that is too honest, too personal, and too different from society's expectations. As Cixous asks: "Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?" (Cixous 876). In her view, an explanation for why women's silencing has been so effective is that a true account of women's experience of life and emotion would be considered monstrous in a patriarchal society, but most importantly, women themselves are conditioned to see their own experience, and by extension their writing, as monstrous (Cixous 876-7). Cixous encourages women to resist this conditioning and express themselves in their writing, even if the literary world reserves no place for them or their ideas: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from bodies—for the

[7] Bowers proposes that one way of doing so may be by considering that the image of Medusa, a female face with serpentine hair, was already "an ancient, widely-recognized symbol of divine, female wisdom" (Bowers 220) before the spread of the Hellenic empire altered her perception. By the time she appears in Hesiod's "Theogony", she has been stripped of any divinity and no mention is made of her power to petrify. The old image of a powerful and prominent goddess has been erased in favour of a few lines relating her intercourse with Poseidon – leaving any questions of consent unanswered – and her beheading. The Olympian Medusa myth, even in the forms that do acknowledge Medusa's power, reduces her to a monster to get rid of (Bowers 221).

[8] Cixous acknowledges that there is "no general woman, no one typical woman" (Cixous 876) and that she can only write about what she believes women tend to have in common.

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" (Cixous 875).

"The Laugh of the Medusa" is a call for women to write, but also a scathing condemnation of Freudian ideas that women are essentially men lacking a phallus and the use of the Medusa figure as a metaphor for the supposedly petrifying concept of female sexuality. Instead of metaphorically avoiding Medusa's gaze and all the negativity that has been attributed to it, Cixous tells women authors that they "only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (Cixous 885). In order to be free of the false notion of women's monstrosity, women must face how they have been manipulated into seeing themselves as inferior to men. In this sense, re-examining the Medusa myth means reconsidering the representation of womanhood as a whole.

Monstrosity Is in the Eye of the Beholder

The question of who or what is a monster is perhaps the most prevalent theme in *Stone Blind*. The Gorgoneion introduces the issue at the very beginning, calling attention to monstrosity as a concept that is both inherently gendered and only exists in contrast to a hero, who "[s]ometimes – not always, but sometimes – […] is monstrous" (3). Meanwhile the monster "is what happens when someone cannot be saved" (3). The rest of the novel illustrates this point by showing how "[t]his particular monster was assaulted, abused, and vilified" (3). Since monsters are largely defined by their opposition to heroes, it may be useful to first look into Perseus. While his role as slayer of Medusa makes him a kind of hero-by-default in the mythological framework, Haynes questions whether he is worthy of being considered a hero at all through the narration of the Gorgoneion, who speaks directly to the reader: "The idea that Perseus is a hero is one I have taken exception to since – I can't even tell you how long it is" (113). Indeed, next to nothing is said about what makes Perseus heroic. If anything, there is much emphasis on the ways people find him lacking; especially Athene and Hermes never miss an opportunity to stress that he is whiny, useless, and dull. Granted, gods are not the most reliable judges of character, but Perseus's questionable suitability for heroics is already hinted at before the quest by his mother, Danaë, who "had never taught him about men's cruelty, she had never wanted him to need to know" (110). Inadvertently, Perseus has also never learned not to be cruel himself. This becomes starkly apparent when he meets the Graiai and imagines the horror of having to share a single tooth and eye among three

people "[a]nd just as he felt the surge of pity, he knew what to do" (153). Perseus exploits the Graiai's miserable situation to get information. Once he has it, he throws the eye and tooth into the sea, an act that gains him nothing and leaves the three old women even more destitute than before. There may be little to recommend Perseus as a hero, but he is unwavering in his judgement that his enemies are in fact monsters. When Athene warns him that the elder Gorgons will defend Medusa out of love, he asks: "Why would anyone love a monster?" (257), prompting Hermes to ask in turn: "Who are you to decide who is worthy of love? […] And who are you to decide who is a monster?" (257). Even Athene will not stoop to calling the Gorgons monsters simply because she has a misguided vendetta against Medusa. Perseus tries to prove his point by listing features of the Gorgons he finds monstrous, but Athene points out that those are all animal features and he would hardly call animals monsters. She observes that he "thinks anything that doesn't look like [him] must be a monster" (257). Exasperated, Perseus gives up all pretence and concludes that they seem "monstrous enough" (258) because ultimately he has to behead one of them, which is at the heart of the issue; Perseus sees the Gorgons as monsters because thinking that way is convenient to him in his role as a hero.

Predetermined roles in a narrative are of course not the only things that define a monster. In his review for *Stone Blind*, Alex Preston notes that the novel at its core is about how "ideas of what is monstrous are culturally conditioned, predicated on fear of the unknown" (Preston). One of the most potent examples of this is in the elder Gorgons' reaction to meeting Medusa. The Gorgons, who would normally be considered monsters themselves, are at first horrified when they see that their little sister is undeniably unlike them: "It was impossible for gods to look at mortals and not feel some revulsion. Sthenno loved her new sister as much as she loved Euryale. But she still had to repress a shudder when she caught sight of her sister's horrifyingly small hands and feet, her revolting little fingernails" (17). What starts as revulsion quickly develops into concern, both for Medusa's relatively fragile physical condition and her feelings when she is old enough to understand that neither of her parents have cared for her. Sthenno and Euryale try to spare Medusa by telling her that she could not have lived underwater anyway, hoping to "ke[ep] her from feeling what they knew to be true: that she was a freak whose birth had horrified both parents" (25). Before part one of the novel is over, the Gorgons have completely changed the way they used to live and how they feel about Medusa's mortality:

> A shudder ran through Sthenno as she thought of what she had lost: the sweet sense of owning herself and her feelings, of having no concerns at all, or only the very mildest kind. All of this was gone, exchanged without warning for a cold, gripping panic whenever a child stumbled or hid or cried.
>
> This, she knew, was love. And she felt it even though she did not want it. (26)

Even the Gorgons, who are classified by most as monsters without much question, have their own ideas of what is or is not natural in one of their kind. Yet, these ideas are based on what they know and until they find Medusa, the only Gorgons they have ever seen are each other. Medusa's otherness to her sisters makes her more vulnerable, but ultimately not monstrous.

"Who decides what is a monster?" (272)

The Gorgoneion checks in with the audience every once in a while to see how they feel about Perseus and Medusa. When the head wonders if the reader thinks of Medusa as a monster she supposes that "it depends on what you think that word means" (204). She wonders if people gauge monstrosity based on a creature's ugliness, terrifying traits, or evil nature, but then the judgement will differ between each person's assessment of what is ugly, terrifying, and evil. No one Perseus meets even thinks of the Gorgons as monsters until he suggests that they must be. The Hesperides cannot make sense of his motivations, wondering "[w]hat had the Gorgons done to be embroiled in this young man's family matters? Nothing, came the reply. As far as they could tell, he did not seem to have thought about the Gorgons at all" (184). Both the Graiai and the Hesperides are puzzled by the fact that the Gorgons have clearly done nothing to deserve killing. After all, they cannot help it if they are perceived as monsters; targeting them for this image alone is problematic at best.

Accountability and Revenge

Another significant concern in *Stone Blind* and in the legacy of Medusa is the questionable relation between accountability and revenge. Throughout the novel, most of the gods are embroiled in a cycle of violence. Whether the person on the receiving end of this violence is to blame for the god's wrath is of little importance. Athene stands out in this respect, but even before she is born the novel introduces a female goddess handing out unjust punishments to women who fall prey to men. Hera does not even consider whether tormenting her husband's victims and offspring makes any logical sense. It clearly has no effect on Zeus's behaviour either, since Hera, despite being "a goddess with an almost limitless

supply of spite, could barely keep up with the number of women, goddesses, nymphs and mewling infants she needed to persecute" (9). Daisy Dunn notes how Haynes's Athene is more complex in her motives for vengeance. "A victim one moment, a vengeful goddess the next, her punishment of Medusa is horribly irrational, and not even Haynes is prepared to contort the myth to let her off the hook." (Dunn). Contorting the myth would be to present Athene's curse as some sort of gift, as if the curse's intention is to keep Medusa safe from future assailants. This, however, would ignore the lack of agency Medusa has over her affliction. Euryale and Sthenno discuss the matter when Euryale is initially excited because Medusa's petrification makes her a force to be reckoned with. Sthenno, however, understands that causing petrification is a curse when Medusa has no control over who is afflicted, saying that "[p]ower is something you can control […] Medusa can turn anything to stone, yes, but she can't not do it if she doesn't want to" (245). Sthenno's explanation echoes Alicia Ostriker's observation that many feminist revisionist mythmakers reframe vilified female characters by stressing how "the female power to do evil is a direct function of her powerlessness to do anything else" (Ostriker 78). The curse, then, must most definitely be understood as a punishment. The reason why is much more difficult to comprehend.

Blaming the Victim

It goes without saying that Athene's punishment for Medusa is meted out on exactly the wrong person. AnnMarie Patterson points out how the novel, though being feminist beyond doubt, acknowledges that men are not the only ones who can abuse their power. Athene is a "highly intelligent sociopath", who "is cunning but incapable of empathy and unable to understand why she is so bored" (Patterson). Within the novel, Athene has built a similar reputation, with Euryale calling her "[v]engeful and cruel, always blaming women for what men do to them" (138). Athene enforces patriarchal standards rather than counter them. Just because Athene is a woman herself and is later assaulted by a fellow god does not mean that she has an interest in using her power as a force for women's justice (Patterson). When she first learns of her temple being the crime scene of a rape, her need for revenge is as simple as realising that "her anger was roused and she needed to expend it" (117) and since Poseidon was far away, "[t]he girl would do" (117). Later, when Athene herself becomes a victim of sexual assault, this same twisted logic makes her blame herself for what happens. Although Athene initially wants to scream at

Hephaestus and report straight to Zeus, she changes her mind when she sees the complete lack of concern in Hephaestus, and she internalises the shame instead: "it was a shameful act and disgust and contempt were the proper response. If Hephaestus did not feel these things then she must. They had to go somewhere" (161-2). This does not make Athene's punishment of Medusa excusable, but it does provide some insight into the gods' view of revenge and retribution, which has nothing to do with blame. In the gods' sense of justice, if the actual culprit is out of reach, any vengeful urges are pointed towards the next available person involved, who just so happens to almost always be the victim.

The gods' warped sense of justice provides an excellent opportunity to address another topic that is highly relevant to the #MeToo movement, namely victim blaming. The term is self-explanatory with regards to its effect on the victim, but it has the side effect of absolving the abuser. This is especially important to note when the abuser profits from an already existing prejudice against their victim, like a powerful man assaulting a marginalised woman in a patriarchal society. These roles correspond with Poseidon and Medusa. Poseidon even attempts to use his privileged position as a way to manipulate Medusa when she makes it clear that she has no interest or inclination to sleep with him. His answer is intended to make Medusa question her own judgement, as he tells her:

> You will want to [have sex with him]. Why wouldn't you want to? I am one of the Olympian gods. You should feel honoured that I am singling you out in such a way. It is a privilege you have done nothing to earn. I have seen you and decided to bestow my favour upon you. It wouldn't occur to you to not want to. It will occur to you to say thank you, I suppose. (53)

Poseidon blatantly denies that not wanting to sleep with him is even a possibility, suggesting that there must be something wrong with Medusa if she feels otherwise, a particularly insidious manipulation to use on someone who already feels like a freak of nature. He then tries to turn the argument on its head by claiming that instead of offence and horror, Medusa should feel flattered, even honoured to be assaulted, particularly since she has not *earned* it. Throughout his answer, Poseidon dances around sensitive words, not once mentioning sex or rape and instead using euphemisms like "singling her out", a "privilege", and "bestowing his favour". When none of these prove effective, he opts for threatening innocent girls. Athene's judgement, if it can be called that, is so jarring because she does not take any circumstances into account, only focussing on how she is affected. Her choice to persecute Medusa

touches on the fundamental flaw in victim blaming; it encourages lashing out at whoever is least likely to be defended, not who is most guilty.

Correcting the Narrative

After Medusa has been killed, the Gorgoneion reveals herself as her severed head. She makes it clear that she is a separate being from Medusa, with her own opinions and outlook on the world. She is also the main narrator throughout the book, the only one speaking directly to the reader. This puts the narrative so far into question, considering that much of it depends on what is or is not fair and just, only to find out that the narrator herself is indifferent about the mass casualties caused by Perseus. The Gorgoneion has "a much lower opinion of mortal men than [Medusa] did, for reasons which [she] would assume were obvious" (291). From the beginning, she guides the audience through the events leading up to Medusa's death, admonishing the reader if she suspects they have started to view Perseus a little too sympathetically. The Gorgoneion says that Perseus "has no interest in the wellbeing of any creature if it impedes his desire to do whatever he wants. He is a vicious little thug and the sooner you grasp that, and stop thinking of him as a brave boy hero, the closer you'll be to understanding what actually happened" (113-4). Like the Gorgoneion, Medusa's snakes also feel the importance of correcting the traditional narrative, as they discuss the decapitation:

> β: She was asleep.
>
> ε: We know, don't worry.
>
> β: It's important no one forgets.
>
> α: Everyone will forget.
>
> β: We can't let them. (283)

The Herpeta keep stressing that Medusa was asleep and that Perseus had unfair advantages. Most of the snakes agree that Medusa woke up just before, but chose not to move "[b]ecause she wouldn't kill him" (285). In contrast to Medusa, The Gorgoneion has no interest in the survival of mortals; she "feel[s] like becoming the monster [Perseus] made [her]" (304). She briefly mirrors the gods whose callous attitude she previously condemned, marvelling in her strength and power rather than worrying about being complicit in mass murder. There is hope for the Gorgoneion, however. She does not stop thinking of what happened to Medusa as anything other than a series of crimes and she has a genuine moment of

reflection when she realises that she has turned her mother to stone when she could have closed her eyes instead. The Gorgoneion is angry with the world for allowing terrible things to happen and jaded enough to no longer care, but once she becomes as wantonly destructive as the people she despises, she realises that this is not the answer. Her agreement to petrify Athene at the end of the novel is an act of mercy, not revenge. The Gorgoneion does not pass judgement on whether or not Athene deserves mercy; her giving it regardless shows maturity and serves as a promise that speaking out against injustice does not have to end in succumbing to despair.

Haynes's *Stone Blind* takes the well-known figure of the Gorgon Medusa and reframes the narrative into one of victimisation and vilification in a patriarchal setting. More so than *Circe* or *The Silence of the Girls*, the novel expresses the anger of becoming aware of misrepresentation. As discussed in Chapter 1, becoming conscious of one's underprivileged position can be paired with outrage once it becomes clear that the distinctions made were unfair and have had severe consequences. Haynes's novel is an outcry against injustice and victim blaming. The urgency of the message belies the novel's ancient source material, raising issues that remain relevant in the aftermath of #MeToo. As Haynes states, "[m]yths are a mirror – they reflect the times in which they are read or viewed as much as the time in which they were created" (Haynes, "Interview").

Conclusion

From the conception of this thesis to writing its conclusion, I can still walk into any bookstore of my choosing and find a section dedicated to fictional retellings of Greek myth. The "flood of novels featuring women from Greek mythology who have often been overlooked, maligned or sidelined as pawns in male heroes' journeys" (Alter) is showing no signs of stopping and the genre continues to inspire authors and interest readers as it uncovers previously undervalued characters and issues that prove to be continually relevant.

Any kind of revisionist literature, feminist in nature or not, stresses the importance of reconsidering entrenched outlooks and interpretations of well-established texts and correcting them where necessary. This is particularly applicable to classical narratives since they have played an integral part in the construction of a shared European cultural identity and they have long been interpreted in such a way as to justify oppression and patriarchy. When the revision of mythology takes on a feminist character, the result is what Alicia Ostriker terms feminist revisionist mythmaking, which focusses on female characters who have been left out, largely ignored, or misrepresented in favour of silent stock characters who only appear to further the men's story. Feminist revisionism aims to return their voices and do them justice. The latest wave of feminist revisionist mythical retellings is particularly attuned to issues brought to the fore by the #MeToo movement, which is especially focussed on foregrounding matters that have been dismissed as taboos, such as women's experiences of sexual assault, victim blaming, and manipulation.

Circe by Madeline Miller is one such feminist revisionist retelling. While Circe makes only a relatively brief appearance as one of the people Odysseus encounters on his journey in *The Odyssey*, Miller's novel follows its titular character through her long life as she gradually learns to carve out a place for herself in a society that treats her like an outsider. She does so by finding her own voice and accepting it once she has, both figuratively in her learning to speak up for herself and literally in accepting it as a feature that sets her apart from her fellow gods. She makes the island Aiaia a place of her own, developing her own identity as a witch while learning to live in harmony with nature, and then moves on from it once her aspirations outgrow the island. By also cutting herself loose from divinity,

she fully commits to a life of change and uncertainty, meaning she will live the life she chooses rather than the life she had no choice to live.

The Silence of the Girls by Pat Barker shifts the focus of *The Iliad* from the fighting men to the quietly suffering women, showing their inner strength in their endurance. With visceral descriptions and matter-of-fact narration, Barker shows the gritty realities of slavery and conquest, particularly the dehumanisation and sexual assault of the enslaved women in the Greek army camp, witnessed and experienced through the eyes of Briseis. Yet, Briseis also harbours a never-ending hunger for defiance, shown in small acts carried out in secret, but most importantly by staying true to herself and holding on to her sense of identity. The novel tells a story of survival, physically in the sense of living through the horrors of enslavement and mentally in the survival of women's identity against all odds.

Finally, *Stone Blind* by Natalie Haynes concerns itself with correcting the traditional interpretation of Medusa as nothing more than a monster; it is a vindication for Medusa and a subversion of the negative connotations associated with her and the heroic image associated with Perseus. By showing Medusa's side of the story and contrasting her with selfish, egotistical gods and heroes, monstrosity is shown to be a relative concept used to demonise those who do not fit anywhere in society. Medusa's curse and beheading is reframed as a story of victim blaming, in which the immediate gratification of revenge is considered to be more important than punishing the one responsible. The Gorgoneion, arguably the character with the most reason to be consumed by hate and cruelty, overcomes these feelings and even shows mercy to the goddess who grievously wronged her, showing that the cycle of violence and revenge can in fact be broken.

What binds these novels together is a desire to do justice to women's stories that can be read between the lines, but never quite make it into the traditional readings. Indeed, these retellings share a common interest with the #MeToo movement in their aim to bring experiences of silenced women to light. While there are concerns that present-day preoccupations distort the source material to cater to a specific audience (McRedmond), it is the fact that echoes of these preoccupations are already present in classical mythology itself that make these revisions a potent vehicle for feminist issues.

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