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# Contemporary Feminist Adaptations of Greek Myth

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## **Abstract**

This project primarily addresses why there has been such expansion of interest among women writers in adapting and retelling classical mythology, and what this work reveals about current issues and priorities within feminism and feminist theory. It is my contention that the recent literary vogue for women's revisionist myth writing reveals much about current concerns within feminism as well as trends within contemporary women's writing. The scope of this thesis is as follows: it begins with the publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) for the Canongate Myth Series, which I propose to be the mainspring of the current trend in women's writing to adapt myth, and ends with relevant novels published in 2021. Notable authors within this study include Jeanette Winterson, Ali Smith, Pat Barker, Natalie Haynes, Madeline Miller, and Ursula Le Guin. This thesis utilises a methodology of feminist literary criticism, while also incorporating feminist work in classical studies and, where relevant, in the disciplines of Sociology and Women's Studies. The 'Literature Review' takes as its starting point foundational work within feminist classical scholarship, before moving on to argue that non-traditional literature (mainly women's myth writing for general audiences, podcasts, and online articles) are essential in order to contextualise the current critical climate of women in Classics. The subsequent five chapters are 'Women in the Texts', 'Antigone's Afterlives', 'Mythic Masculinities', 'Queering Myth', and "'I want to tell the story again': Palimpsests: Paratexts, and Intertexts'. Each chapter organises texts around specific concerns in contemporary feminism while also noting the variety of writing styles and techniques which reflect wider contemporary women's writing practices.

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**Author's declaration**

I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and I certify that this thesis is my own work, except where indicated by referencing, and that I have followed the good academic practices.

Signed: S.Judge

Date: 31st March 2022

## Contemporary Feminist Adaptations of Greek Myth

### Introduction

In the *Iliad*, one encounters Helen for the first time in book III, weaving the events of the Trojan War as they unfold around her. In ancient Greece, producing texts may have been a storytelling method reserved for men, but producing textiles was women's work, and woven into these textiles were elaborate renderings of the same myths, reshaped by women. One need look no further than the myth of Philomela – who weaves her testimony against her brother-in-law after he has kidnapped and assaulted her, and cut out her tongue (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.438-674) – to comprehend the revolutionary power of women weaving their own tales. The English words *text* and *textile* derive from the same Latin verb *texere*, meaning to weave or compose. 'In the old myths,' states Carolyn Heilbrun in 'What Was Penelope Unweaving?', 'weaving was women's speech, women's language, women's story' (1985; in Higgins 2021: 9). From the moment Helen is introduced in the *Iliad*, she challenges the narrative imposed on her by carving out a space for her own story, even within the confines of Achilles' epic poem. It is this desire to tell women's stories — to excavate, liberate and, at times, exculpate these female mythical figures from the male narratives in which they were encased, on which this thesis is focused.

More specifically, this thesis is concerned with the recent proliferation of women writers adapting Greek myth with explicitly feminist aims. It is my contention that the recent literary vogue for feminist revisionist myth writing reveals much about current concerns within feminism as well as trends within contemporary women's writing. The scope of this thesis is as follows: it begins with the publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) in the Canongate Myth Series, which I propose as the mainspring of the current trend in women's writing to adapt myth, and ends with relevant novels published in 2021, including Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta*, Pat Barker's *Women of Troy*, and Charlotte Higgins' *Greek Myths: A New Retelling*. Relevant literature published at the beginning of 2022 (such as Susan Stokes-Chapman's *Pandora* and Jennifer Saint's *Elektra*) have been omitted to facilitate submission, but nonetheless illustrate the continuing force of the genre.

This thesis opens with a ‘Methodology’ chapter that outlines the feminist literary criticism and critical classical reception methods utilised within this project and is followed by a ‘Literature Review’. The ‘Literature Review’ takes as its starting point foundational work within feminist classicist scholarship, before moving on to argue that non-traditional literature (mainly women’s myth writing for general audiences, podcasts, and online articles) are essential in order to investigate the current critical context of women in Classics. The subsequent five chapters are ‘Women in the Texts’, ‘Antigone’s Afterlives’, ‘Mythic Masculinities’, ‘Queering Myth’, and “‘I want to tell the story again’: Palimpsests: Paratexts, and Intertexts’. Each chapter organises texts around specific concerns in contemporary feminism while also noting the variety of writing styles and techniques which reflect wider contemporary women’s writing practices.

‘Women in the Texts’ analyses adaptations of three women from the Homeric Epics – Penelope, Briseis, and Helen – in contemporary women’s literature. The chapter opens with a contextualisation of feminist Classics discourse and goes on to analyse adaptations of these female mythical figures, and how these women’s retellings of Greek myth can be understood to speak to contemporary feminist concerns. The first section, ‘Penelope’, focuses primarily on *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood (2005), a novella that is characterised by Penelope’s discovery of her own voice, one which is at once whiny and snide in its vociferous complaining at her mistreatment in her lifetime and in her reputation ever since. The novella also features interludes by the hanged maids that challenge Penelope’s version of the story. The ‘Penelope’ section also draws on Penelope’s characterisation in Natalie Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships* (2019) – a polyphonous retelling of all the women of the Trojan War – and Madeline Miller’s *Circe* (2018) – the Women’s Prize-winning novel that retells some of the most significant Greek myths (including the Minotaur, Medea, and the *Odyssey*) from the perspective of the increasingly-powerful eponymous Titan witch. Ultimately the first section of the chapter demonstrates that Penelope’s myth has been utilised to speak to concerns about female domestic labour and the double-discrimination of class and gender. The second section of ‘Women in the Texts’ focuses on Briseis, a relatively underrepresented figure in Greek myth, though one that has become the focus of many feminist adaptations. *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker (2018) is an unflinchingly harsh novel that retells the Trojan War with a particular focus on the brutalities that women face in wartime; *For the Most Beautiful* by Emily Hauser (2016) retells Briseis and



Achilles' relationship as a romance; and *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller (2011) is focused on the romance between Achilles and Patroclus, often omitting Briseis' experiences as a result. The central question of the Briseis section is whether Briseis could be capable of consent. It analyses whether Briseis could ever consent to a relationship with Achilles since he literally owns her, and if she does not consent, what further questions are generated by that narrative. The 'Briseis' section also suggests that Briseis' sparsity in the myths leaves plenty of room for adapting authors to construct new meanings for, and directions within, her myth. This obscurity contrasts to Helen's very extensive literary afterlife inhabited by many misogynistic ideals about female beauty. The 'Helen' section of 'Women in the Texts' looks at reproductions of Helen in feminist theory, poetry, and drama – at how she has been used both as a symbol of sex work and of the dangers of being beautiful – and contrasts this to the relative paucity of adaptations of Helen in contemporary women's prose. There have, however, been more recent novelistic projects that adapt Helen, including Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* and *The Daughters of Sparta* by Claire Heywood (2021), which tells the Trojan War through the framework of a relationship: the sisterhood between Helen and Clytemnestra. This tripartite chapter ultimately demonstrates that excavating and reinterpreting the women of the Greek epics is one of the most significant ways that contemporary female authors are adapting ancient myth to stage and discuss contemporary concerns within feminism.

'Antigone's Afterlives' is a case study that considers how one myth can be re-read and developed for a variety of feminist purposes. The chapter opens with Ali Smith's *The Story of Antigone* (2013), a children's story that invites young readers to realise the political power of their voices through its self-conscious discussion of the act of adaptation as a method of story survival. Salley Vickers' *Where Three Roads Meet* (2007) is a Socratic dialogue between Freud and Tiresias, discussing the myth of Oedipus, which stages Vickers' contention that Freud fundamentally misread the myth. It opens up discussions of Antigone's potentiality for post-Freudian psychoanalysis, where she has variously been read as a symbolic representation of *Até* (ruin), as well as a rejection of heterosexuality. Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) mirrors the characters and events of Sophocles' *Antigone* but reframes them within the context of British-Muslim identity politics and radicalisation in order to critique the increasingly xenophobic attitudes towards citizenship in modern Britain. Finally, Natalie Haynes'

dual-bildungsroman *The Children of Jocasta* (2017) decentralises Sophocles' version of the myth to suggest that there is more than one potential feminist hero in the Theban Cycle, looking instead to Ismene and Jocasta. By exploring the significant and wide-ranging differences in the approaches to adapting Antigone demonstrated by these authors, paying particular attention to the question of Antigone's age, this chapter ultimately argues that the eternal return to Antigone's mythos demonstrates the infinite adaptive, imaginative, and activist potential for Greek myths, and that to adapt Antigone is in itself a political act.

Throughout the thesis I refer to the contemporary interventions aimed at diversifying Classics: to de-centre the upper-class white man as the subject of classical studies. This means that the current moment is particularly exciting when considering the reception and reinterpretation of male mythical figures. 'Mythic Masculinities' firstly analyses hegemonic and toxic Atlas and Heracles in Jeanette Winterson's Canongate text *Weight* (2005). *Weight* is a surreal novella, set against the backdrop of space, that satirises Heracles' hegemony and liberates Atlas from his eponymous and symbolic weight. It is interspersed with autobiographical interludes from the author who posits her own Atlas Complex as the springboard for the adaptation. Heroic masculinities are revisited in Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018). Additionally, this chapter investigates Theseus' character in Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021) — a novel that is similar to *Circe* in its empowering tone, though it is a narrative that is shared between the sisters Ariadne and Phaedra. 'Mythic Masculinities' functions as a parallel to 'Women in the Texts', analysing how mythical heroes such as Achilles, Theseus, and Odysseus have been scrutinised, as well as transformed, satirised, humiliated, and exposed in contemporary literature, generating narratives that, while set in the ancient world, stage and interrogate many feminist concerns about modern masculinity. These concerns include the emotional toll that patriarchy takes on men, the gender-based violence that women suffer at the hands of men, and the inexorable connection between normalised rape culture and misogynistic violence.

'Queering Myth' begins by outlining the shared history of queerness and ancient Greek myths, before moving on to contemporary queer myth writing. First, the chapter studies *if not, winter* (2002), Anne Carson's translation of Sappho's fragments, where the translator's formal and linguistic choices amplify the enduring significance of Sappho's work for queer women. The

chapter then offers an in-depth study of Madeline Miller's immensely popular *The Song of Achilles*, wherein the Trojan War is a gruesome backdrop against which the love story of Achilles and Patroclus is staged. My analysis considers how ancient and modern understandings of homoeroticism are portrayed in the novel. Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) is an adaptation of Iphis and Ianthe, whose myth has fallen into obscurity since the medieval and early modern eras, but which Smith has reinvigorated into a lesbian, genderqueer, and ecoactivist narrative. This chapter concludes that these novels are two literary exercises in queering myth and, in doing so, they reveal not only a method of reinstigating queer history, but also how queering myth can be radically politicised in this process.

Finally, "I want to tell the story again": Palimpsests: Paratexts, and Intertexts' argues that mythic adaptations can be understood as palimpsests, since the newer meanings inscribed by contemporary adapting authors are layered on top of the meanings ascribed to myth throughout history. The chapter argues that the layer of para- and intertextual awareness demonstrated by contemporary mythic adapters adds further layers to the myth's meaning. The chapter begins by proving that the contemporary authors within the scope of this thesis write with an awareness of the current literary phenomenon of women's revisionist myth writing; it goes on to identify the moments when this paratextual awareness becomes intertextual — references within the novels to the work of the authors' contemporaries, to the novels that further contribute to the present popularity of female authors adapting Greek myth. This has led to a phenomenon within this genre of women writing about their current literary circumstances or, more specifically, women writing about women writing about myths.

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to critically examine the ongoing trend within women's writing of mythic adaptation. It seeks to demonstrate that this phenomenon is not only popular, but illustrates how contemporary feminism has shaped both the fields of Classics and literature, as well as fuelling a mode of writing that is essentially interdisciplinary. The genre of contemporary feminist myth writing instigates a creative and political interrogation of the institution of Classics and the patriarchal cultures it has supported.

## **Methodology**

Since at least Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), women writers have adapted figures from Greek myth, but in recent years there has been a more intense level of activity in this field. This project primarily addresses why there has been such an expansion of interest among women writers in adapting and retelling classical mythology, and what this work reveals about current issues and priorities within feminism and feminist theory. The investigation of these questions also involves the careful consideration of an appropriate methodology which both selects the most useful strands of feminist literary theory and is also sufficiently agile to incorporate feminist work in classical studies and, where relevant, other disciplines. This chapter outlines how feminist literary criticism is employed as a methodology, as well as key methodologies from Women's Studies. It goes on to pay particular attention to gynocriticism, Angela Carter's feminist writing praxis, writing as re-vision, feminist myth criticism, recent feminist scholarship on intersectionality and the internet, and radical reception theories.

First, I will briefly outline the work of second-wave<sup>1</sup> feminist thinkers that were instrumental in determining and critiquing the violence of Western literature. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argues that 'sex has a frequently neglected political aspect' (1970: xix). She goes on to analyse the violent influence of patriarchy in sexual relations as it is portrayed in literature, looking particularly at the work of D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer. The text opens with a close analysis of a passage from Miller's *Sexus* (1965) with a particular focus on the motif of the male hero overcoming or outwitting the woman in his sexual quest. In Millett's interpretation, the passage not only evokes a sense of empowerment and 'excitations of sexual intercourse' for male readers, it is also 'a male assertion of dominance over a weak, compliant, and rather unintelligent female' (Millett 1970: 6). It is therefore emblematic of what Millett terms 'sexual politics' at the fundamental level of sexual intercourse. The literature reflects sexual violence inflicted upon women by men, and this, on a sexual level, reflects the wider social oppression of women under patriarchy. Of course, this theory falls into the same essentialist pitfall as much second-wave feminist thought. Essentialism propounds that there are

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<sup>1</sup> There has been much debate in the last decade on the relative usefulness of the wave metaphor for feminism. See Nicholson (2015) for a comprehensive summary of the debate, and Hewitt (2012) for the potential for regenerating the wave metaphor.

unique male and female essences: broadly, men are defined by their sexual violence and subjugation of women, while women are defined by their pacifism and caregiving. There is also a biological component to this, that men and women's social roles are determined by their physiological differences. Essentialist stances are criticised for perpetuating outdated sex-based stereotypes, as well as being trans-exclusionary, and unhelpful for people ranging from cisgendered women who cannot have children to masculine-presenting non-binary people.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Millett's theory remains useful as a theoretical underpinning for the feminist response to literary misogyny and its relationship to patriarchy in society.

Andrea Dworkin's study of pornography also holds relevance, since she uses pornography as a vehicle to analyse male power. For Dworkin, pornography reinforces several strains of patriarchal control, including 'the power of the self, physical power over and against others, the power of terror, [...] the power of owning, the power of money, and the power of sex' (Dworkin 1981; 2013: 83). Pornography reflects the ideology of male domination, which posits that men are superior to women and 'physical possession of the female is a natural right of the male' (Ibid., 85). Pornography is a prism through which to view male sexual violence against women, which is a facet of patriarchal control and systemic misogyny. While Millett's theory pertained primarily to sexual intercourse in male-authored literature and Dworkin's theory is focused on pornography in its most visual and literal sense, these theories do have important implications for the Western literary canon more broadly. They both lay bare the violence inherent in the Western canon, and how it is used to normalise and enforce systemic misogyny. They also provide a framework for feminist responses to canonical gender-based violence, particularly Millett's methodology of close textual analysis to demonstrate how art is used to maintain patriarchal hegemony. This study, by its nature of being about women's novelistic responses to a core facet of the Western canon, benefits from these early feminist theories on gender-based violence in literature.

For the purposes of this study, I combine close textual analysis with a variety of predominantly feminist approaches to literary criticism and classical studies. In Humm's model (1994: 7-8), feminist criticism addresses four issues in literary criticism. Firstly, by re-examining

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<sup>2</sup> See Hines (2019) for the epistemological and political tensions between feminism and transness in the twenty-first century, and current debates on biological and social essentialism.

male texts, androcentric literary history is addressed, and patriarchal portrayals of women are confronted. Secondly, the invisibility of women writers is highlighted, and a new literary history is charted with neglected women's writing and oral history being recovered. Third, feminist criticism constructs a "feminist reader", by offering new methods and theory. This encourages texts to be read in the context of feminist teaching and wider political practice, thus equipping readers with new knowledge and wider critical questions (see Beetham & Beetham 1992: 168-173). Fourth, we are encouraged to act as feminist readers by creating new writing and discourse. In researching contemporary feminist adaptations of Greek myth, the patriarchal domination of the field – from mythographers in antiquity to the historic androcentrism in classical studies – is addressed, and redressed through feminist scholarship and creative writing that has excavated the forgotten, or reductively portrayed women of Greek myth. If feminist criticism addresses ideologies and practices of gender-based inequality, feminist *literary* criticism attends to how these have shaped literary texts; both, notably, are concerned with feminist discourse and praxis (ibid., viii). Feminist (literary) criticism lacks a unifying ideology, with Humm going as far as to assert that it is 'impossible to write feminist literary criticism [...] untouched by feminist thinking in other disciplines and feminist thinking outside the academy' and that although 'it has no party line' it 'brings together any ways of looking which in turn draw on different disciplines and debates' (Humm 1994: viii; Humm 1995: xi). This interdisciplinarity informs my analysis as I draw upon feminist discourse from across disciplines. Of course, feminist classical scholarship – for example by Sarah B. Pomeroy, Mary Lefkowitz, Marta Weigle, Vanda Zajko, and Katie Fleming – is indispensable to any critical approach to contemporary feminist adaptations of Greek myth. Their specific analyses of mythical figures through feminist questions about – for example – agency and oppression, and their considerations of the relationship between Greek myth and modern feminisms are strongly aligned with the aims of this thesis. Clearly, however, such feminist scholarship in classical studies must needs be qualified and adapted when deployed in feminist literary studies of the contemporary novel.

Humm's specific reference to 'feminist thinking outside the academy' is also central to my analysis. By drawing on popular feminist writers (such as Laura Bates); classical writing for general audiences (such as Helen Morales' *Antigone Rising* and Natalie Haynes' *Pandora's Jar*);

and relevant journalism, I have selected work that specifically speaks to the adaptations I have selected, but which I hope also provides a model of a more comprehensive set of critical contexts and reference points for feminist analysis of classical literature. To consider contemporary conceptions of Antigone without Morales' exploration of the subversive power of ancient myths for modern society would be, for example, to overlook her interpretation of Antigone as an enduring figure of young female activism. Similarly, Natalie Haynes is an adapter of Greek myth herself, as well as being one of the most vocal advocates for the importance of Classics in contemporary education and culture. Therefore, Haynes' popular discourse – in *Pandora's Jar*, as well as her *Guardian* column and BBC Radio 4 series *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics* – are vital to this research because she exemplifies the way popular discourses on the Classics in the media can provide immediate and innovative insights. Moreover, such work helps to break down the 'ivory tower' prejudice about the Classics — a term used throughout this thesis to refer to the manner in which working-class people have historically been excluded from classical scholarship and pedagogy.<sup>3</sup> In terms of second-wave feminism, Classics has been upheld as the epitome of exclusionary institutional and pedagogical practices. Watkins evokes the image of a 'straw person classicist, revealing in the arcane delights of Greek principals,' who has

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<sup>3</sup> Important work on the diversification of Classics include Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987) which argues that the Greek mythic tradition can be traced back to African and Asiatic myths (for discussions of this controversial study, see Lefkowitz and MacLean [1996]; Daniels [2017]; McCoskey [2018]) and Greenwood's work on Black traditions of classical reception (such as *Afro-Greeks* [2010]). Also relevant is Stray's work on the construction of the relationship between Classics and class in Britain, including the monograph *Classics Transformed* (1998) which provides an account of Classics as a discipline throughout British educational reforms, and the edited collection *Classics in Britain* (2018) which is organised around the study of Classics at elite higher education institutions, the role of publishing history and societies, and pedagogical approaches to the Classics. Influenced by Stray, Hall and Stead's *A People's History of Classics* (2020) explores the influence of the classical tradition on the lives of working class people, whose voices have traditionally been overlooked in classical scholarship and pedagogy. 'Classics has long functioned to exclude working-class people from educational privileges' and 'Classics was uniquely instrumental in the intellectual and cultural reproduction of class hierarchies in Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian society', but this does not necessarily mean that lower-class culture was a 'Classics-Free Zone' (Hall & Stead 2020: 10). Their work excavates the cultural past at the intersection of classical culture and working-class identities, drawing upon resources as wide-ranging as memoirs, Trade Union collections, poetry, factory archives, and artefacts and documents in regional museums (Ibid., 12). Moreover, their study investigates what less privileged people did with their 'hard-won' classical knowledge, including using it as a springboard for social advancement; career progression in higher education, politics, or other industries; working on the excavation of alternative canons or providing them with their own radical poetry; or the burlesquing of the classics in creative class warfare (Ibid., 12). In the present, Classics can be used in curriculums as a class equaliser rather than an indicator and isolator: 'it has been the curriculum of empire, but it can be the curriculum of liberation' (Ibid., 18). *A People's History of Classics* demonstrates that the relationship between the working classes and classical antiquity have been varied, and it typifies one of the ways in which Classics and classical reception studies can be diversified: by analysing the historic intersections of class and Classics and advocating for equal education opportunities.

‘dug their own cultural grave by denying the immediate, political importance of their work’ — that is, the opposite of explicitly radical disciplines such as Women’s Studies (Watkins 1979; 1983: 84). More recent feminist concerns include misogyny in online spaces, recent statistics of violence against women in domestic and professional settings, intersections of oppression, and subconscious, systemic gender-based oppression. Such concerns are narrated in recent women’s myth writing, and they are clearly expounded in popular feminist writing, such as in the work of Laura Bates and her contemporaries. Hence, the interdisciplinary and, at times, extra-academic, approach employed in this study is informed by current feminist literary criticism and provides an extensive critical framework for the research undertaken.

Various key methodologies in Women’s Studies inform feminist critical praxis in literary studies.<sup>4</sup> Tracing the emergence of feminist scholarship in the academy in the 1970s-80s, Watkins recalls that, before the establishment of Women’s Studies, ‘a woman with explicit, political goals in, say, philosophy, literature, or the classics, [was] more quickly labelled an outsider and “unprofessional” than her counterpart in the *less* culturally powerful [...] fields’ such as social policy (Watkins 1979; 1983: 85). Thus, feminist scholars issued an ‘institutional challenge’ to conservatism in the academy, offering revolutionary scholarship that Watkins specifically contrasts to the ‘straw person classicist’ (Ibid., 84-6). Feminist scholars are distinguished by ‘their commitment to a movement for social change, and their conviction that women have been excluded, devalued, and injured by many aspects of human society,’ (Ibid., 81). Feminist methodology, in this context, is necessarily defined by its revolutionary goal, irrespective of its discipline-specific context within the humanities. Maria Mies builds on this in ‘Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research’, where she asserts – as a response to Angela Carter – that ‘New wine must not be poured into old bottles’ (Mies 1978; 1983: 117). In other

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<sup>4</sup> Juliet Mitchell’s work was used as a blueprint for the new field of Women’s Studies, and her pioneering of the feminist revision of Freudian psychoanalysis is central to the reweaponising of myth. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) was novel in its reconciliation of feminism and psychoanalysis at a time when most feminists were more focused on criticising Freud’s chauvanism. For Mitchell, abandoning Freudian theory was detrimental to feminism, since it offers analyses and critiques of patriarchal society that can be utilised by feminists. Moreover, as expounded in *Mad Men and Medusas* (2000), Freud utilises myth and literature – most notably the myth of Oedipus and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – as explanatory devices to illustrate theories of psychoanalysis (2000: 251). Mitchell uses *Don Juan* and Iago in *Othello* as examples of male hysteria, to demonstrate that both men and women suffer from hysteria. This is despite the fact that *hysteria* has become gendered in light of centuries of misogyny, while male hysteria has been otherwise pathologised, for instance as shell shock in the First World War. It is this same method of myth utilisation (moreover, utilisation written in the knowledge of psychoanalysis’ own myth utilisation), which later feminist theorists and novelists necessarily draw upon.



words, androcentric research methods are fundamentally incompatible with feminist research praxes, because activist research demands innovative methodologies. Of course Carter's implication was that 'the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode' (1983; 26) – so she in fact endorses the concept that new feminist research methodologies will 'explode' the conservative aspects of the academy. Mies rejects androcentric research methods as 'elitist narrow-mindedness, abstract thinking, political and ethical impotence and arrogance of the established academician' (Mies 1978; 1983: 126) and, like Watkins, defines feminist methodologies as a site of resistance and activism, within the academy and beyond.

Gynocriticism – the study of women, women writers and female readerships – is a field within feminist literary criticism that is particularly useful here for the way that it focuses on female literary tradition, allowing me to address myth revisitation in women's writing as an expanding literary tradition. Elaine Showalter defines gynocriticism as 'the feminist study of women's writing, including readings of women's texts and analyses of the intertextual relations [...] between women writers (a female literary tradition)' (Showalter 1990: 189; in Allen 2000: 141). She proposes gynocriticism as an alternative 'to this angry or loving fixation on male literature,' in previous literary criticism (Showalter 1979; 2011: 224). Rather, its goal is to 'construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories' (Ibid., 224). Gynocriticism as a feminist literary method is built upon the foundational methodologies of Women's Studies, that were revolutionary in their departure from androcentrism, as well as French feminist literary criticism, including *Écriture féminine*. My textual analysis is gynocritical in that it is focused on the female literary tradition of rewriting Greek myth, particularly in contemporary women's writing, and I am situating myself as a specifically feminist reader of women's literature. For Nancy K. Miller gynocriticism evokes a *desire* for change; gynocriticism is a call to 'change the subject (this is boring), let's talk about something else (women writers, feminist criticism), let's make the subject different (refigure the universal, change the canon)' (Miller 1988: 18). Miller's framework for identifying literature as feminist is valuable for the way she characterises feminist writing as 'a resistance to dominant ideologies; for the feminist critic, the signature is the site of a possible political disruption' (Ibid., 17). This claim from Miller is important because there have been some instances in the writing of this thesis when I

have questioned whether the text I am working with, or the approach I have taken, can necessarily be considered feminist. In Miller's gynocritical model, resistance to dominant ideologies (particularly the ideologies that speak to gender) is the mark of a feminist text – each text within the scope of this thesis is a response to a Greek myth and, often, an act of resistance against the patriarchal domination of the classical field, as well as a space to narrate modern gender-based issues in a mythical framework.

Angela Carter's praxis of women's writing is also methodologically relevant. In 'Notes From the Front Line', Carter acknowledges that the lived experiences of women in certain periods of history have hampered their creative production, most notably the dangers of childbirth and the demanding nature of child-rearing. Although this is not to say that women have not engaged in creative practices: Carter mentions specifically women writers in mediaeval Japan, female musicians and actors throughout history, and writers in any period since the seventeenth century in Britain and France, especially childless authors like George Eliot (Carter 1998: 28). Crucial to the theoretical underpinning of this thesis is Carter's assertion that 'most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts', and that she is 'all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode' (Ibid., 26). This is to say that revisiting, rewriting, parodying, or otherwise responding to traditional stories (be they canonical texts, myths, or – most relevantly in the case of Carter – folklore and fairytales), is at once a preservation of the old texts and a disruption or destruction of them. Such works are a new contribution to knowledge using familiar frameworks. Carter describes a writing praxis wherein she 'feel[s] free to loot and rummage in an official past, specifically a literary past,' in the creation of new, specifically feminist, literature (Ibid., 29). She calls these stories 'old lies', the revisitation of which facilitates an interrogation of the social, political, and literary 'lies' that have their roots in those stories. *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) is described by the author as an 'anti-mythic novel', and she describes her work more broadly as a 'demythologising business', since she posits myths as products of the human mind and reflections of material human practice, while her own work is about defamiliarising material reality and social constructs (Ibid., 27). Feminist literary adaptations of Greek myth are evidently 'new readings of old texts', and their relationship with the adapted text is once one of preservation and disruption. There is also, within

the tradition of women's writing practices, a dual acknowledgement of women's creative traditions and the gendered imbalances that have hindered them.

The idea of writing as re-vision is vital to the methodology of this project for the way that it considers the tradition of women writers interrogating and revising literature that has come before. In 'When We Dead Awaken', Adrienne Rich conceptualises re-vision as 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction' (Rich 1972: 18). She categorises this method of literary criticism as specifically radical and feminist, an act of looking back at women's portrayals in literary history – as two-dimensional symbols in the service of men's writing – and revising them in celebration of women's real, lived and written, experiences (Ibid., 18-20). Feminist adaptations of Greek myth are acts of re-vision, revisiting portrayals of women from myth and revising them with fresh perspectives. Moreover, contemporary feminist myth writers are not only revising the portrayals of mythical women from antiquity, but also how they have been used in the service of patriarchy throughout the intervening centuries. For example, Penelope has been employed throughout men's literature as a symbol of the good and faithful wife, while Clytemnestra and Helen have continued as Penelope's foils, the absolute worst wives – and women – imaginable. In women's re-visions, these female figures are afforded richer characterisations that liberate them from the sphere of the abstract. For Rich, re-visionary reading is essential, because women writers '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' (Ibid., 19). Rich's use of 'tradition' is particularly fruitful to consider within the context of this thesis, because it is my contention that, since adaptation has been a part of the classical mythical tradition since the work of Euripides, Plato, and Ovid, contemporary women's myth writing is the latest iteration of this mythical tradition. Here, though, 'tradition' is a reference to masculine tradition, the male domination of the textual field and thus the rendering of women *in* literature. Feminist revisionist myth writing, then, is at once a continuation of the mythical tradition, and a breaking of the androcentric traditions in literary history.

Annette Kolodny and Monique Wittig have also considered writing as re-vision in ways that inform this thesis. Kolodny asserts that '*re-vision* constitutes the key to an ongoing literary history' (1980: 464) which effectively communicates the argument that adaptation and

innovation are integral to the continuation of literary tradition. Due to the focus on adaptation in this study, re-vision is an aspect of feminist literary criticism that is essential to the methodology employed. Its importance is underlined by Kolodny's conclusion that 'not only would [...] revisionary rereading open new avenues for comprehending male texts but [...] it would, as well, allow us to appreciate the variety of women's literary expression,' (Ibid., 465). Analysing contemporary feminist adaptations of myth as revisionary rereading considers how they are at once a new reading of "male" myths and a distinct genre within current women's writing. On a linguistic level, Monique Wittig's call to reclaim oppressive language also applies to analysing feminist myth writing as re-vision. Wittig asks, 'Can we redeem *slave*? [...] How is *woman* different? Will we continue to write *white, master, man*? [...] We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is of the concepts which are strategic for us' (1980; 2011: 373). In rewriting myths, women are reclaiming the stories of gender-based oppression, such as abduction, rape and lack of agency. Moreover, feminist revisionist myth-making needs to be understood as a response to what Wittig calls 'over-mythified' myths (Ibid., 374). For Wittig, thinkers such as Freud and Lacan typify how myths have been used, altered, and heterosexualised in the service of maintaining patriarchal hegemony. Her manifesto of linguistic reclamation is a useful approach for analysing feminist revisionist myth, because it can be applied to the manners by which adapting authors deal with the misogyny ingrained in myth, and how those myths have been used in the service of patriarchy throughout history.

Myth is a critical genre within feminist literary criticism; indeed, the work done by feminist myth critics is foundational to my theoretical framework. As Humm explains (1994: 54-60), myths represent the masculine psyche and, while women are represented *in* mythology, they are typically rendered by male writers. Feminist myth criticism is therefore a rejection of the essentialism rooted in mythologised women, with a goal to move beyond androcentrism in mythic gender representation. Humm suggests that feminist myth criticism is more acceptable to the literary establishment than other avenues of feminist criticism due to the canonisation of male myth critics, such as Northrop Frye,<sup>5</sup> and the long-running academic tradition of myth criticism. For feminist critics, myths provide 'familiar frames which can be reshaped and remade to give a truer picture of women's experience' (Humm 1995: 24). Although myths have a history of being

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<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, Northrop Frye was Margaret Atwood's academic mentor.

utilised in the service of misogyny, they can be ‘reshaped and remade’ by feminist writers. In ‘Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction’, Susan Sellers highlights the dualism that is inherent in feminist myth criticism, that it is at once ‘an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women,’ as well as ‘a task of construction – of bringing into being enabling alternatives’ (2001; 2011: 189). In Sellers’ model, the familiarity of the myth provides compass points from which to communicate innovative and dissident theories (Ibid., 189). Altering (augmenting; re-contextualising; intervening in) the myth is necessary for the act of creation, and to move away from reductive portrayals of women in myth. Yet she also cautions that, ‘if we make too many holes we are in danger of writing something other than myth’ (Ibid., 188). YA fantasy literature that uses Greek gods and mythology in their otherwise original plot and worldbuilding – such as Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series (2005-2009), Alexandra Bracken’s *Lore* (2021), and Kalynn Bayron’s *This Poison Heart* (2021) – exemplify this theory of making holes in the myth, in that they have written something other than myth using myths, rather than writing an altered myth. On the other hand, Sellers points to ironic mimicry and clever twists as examples of how feminists can ‘open the myth’, leaving in place enough of the myth that is still recognisable while still incorporating new possibilities (Ibid., 188). Luce Irigaray, for instance, reflects on mother/daughter bonds using the myth of Demeter and Persephone; both Irigaray and Julia Kristeva incorporate the myth of Antigone in their criticism. Each of these feminist critics have twisted their respective myths to encompass new possibilities, speaking to the generative potential of myth for feminist theory.

Much early feminist classical scholarship was focussed on appropriating goddesses as symbols of feminine power (Caputi 1992: 426), and ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ by Hélène Cixous is perhaps the most famous use of myth within feminist literary criticism. Cixous epitomises the use of monstrous women for feminist purposes. She asserts that men’s literature, from antiquity to present (for her, 1976), ‘riveted us [women] between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss’ (Cixous, trans. Cohen & Cohen, 1976: 885), because women are either presented as monstrous or not at all. This suggests that women writers have had to navigate the strait between these two ‘horrifying myths’ in an Odyssean manner, to represent women in literature. As an alternative, Cixous proposes rewriting these monstrous women, in order to challenge and frighten men:

[...] isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. (Ibid., 885)

Here, the 'Sirens were men' as they used their (literary) voices to lure women to their own destruction, through their monstrous representations of femininity. To 'look at the Medusa straight on' is a call for re-analysis of Medusa outside of patriarchal prejudice. In doing this, Medusa is liberated from her monstrous reputation and we are reminded that it is only men that were petrified by looking at Medusa. The male address is confirmed when Cixous invites us to 'Look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes' (Ibid., 885). Here the plural 'Perseuses' refers to the men who previously considered themselves (literary and social) heroes, yet now 'tremble' when faced with women re-writing themselves. Apotropes were Ancient Greek objects intended to ward off evil; here they demonstrate how men demonise women who oppose patriarchal rule. Ultimately, Cixous is advocating for the revolutionary power – both in terms of literature and society – of revising previously oppressed mythical – or, more broadly, literary – women for female empowerment. The work done by feminist myth critics will be drawn upon throughout this study, and the methods by which these critics approach myth – as a space that has previously served patriarchal purposes but which has generative potential for women's writing – provide a methodological base for the research undertaken.

Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* is a seminal work of feminist myth criticism, in which she introduces her theory of the hag-ocracy. Her primary concern is to expose the ways in which male critics manipulate myth to maintain patriarchal hegemony by concealing aspects of Greek myth that challenge their ideologies (such as Apollo's homosexuality and Dionysus' androgyny) and proffer myths that consolidate male power. She points to Athena as an example of a woman who is emblematic of male aims, due to her patronage of war and male heroism and her repeated lack of support for the mortal women of myth. Another example in-line with Daly's theory is Penelope, who has been lauded as the perfect model of wifeliness against which other women

will inevitably fall short, therefore maintaining female subjugation in the domestic sphere. She rejects the ‘male myth-masters, [that] fashion prominent and eminently forgettable images of women in their art, literature, and mass media – images intended to mould women for male purpose’ – that is, dominant narratives about women – and seeks instead models of womanhood from the ‘Background’, the ‘wild realm of Hags and Crones’ (Daly 1978: 2). Women’s writing is an essential part of Daly’s metaethical theory, because ‘As we write/live our own story, we are uncovering their history, creating Hag-ography and Hag-ology. [...] Women traveling into feminist time/space are creating Hag-ocracy, the place where we govern’ (Ibid., 9). Women, she claims, must create a new literary (and social) ecology, to redress the male domination of myth that has been used to cement patriarchal order.

While this is an interesting example of feminist myth criticism, Daly’s work has been criticised for its essentialism, particularly in her reductive portrayal of men as compulsively violent and her idealised view of women. Her conception of gender relies on outdated binaries and stereotypes, but perhaps the most striking critique of *Gyn/Ecology* is posed by Audre Lorde in ‘An Open Letter to Mary Daly’ (1979) where she particularly objects to Daly’s eurocentric focus and reductive, racist portrayals of African women. While Lorde makes clear that she would have been more sympathetic had Daly chosen only to investigate only European goddesses, but her choice to draw upon African women only as victims of FGM ghettoises non-white herstories. Lorde points to Afrekete, Y emanje, Oyo, Mawulisa, the warrior goddesses of the Vodun and Dan, and the Dahomeian Amazons as examples that Daly could have discussed, and expounds the importance of looking beyond the Eurocentric vision in Daly’s apparently universal theory. In her letter, Lorde writes that Daly’s oversight is ‘another instance of the knowledge, crone—ology and work of women of Color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western european frame of reference’. Moreover, she points to the wider implications of Daly’s oversight in terms of both feminist myth criticism and Western society more broadly. She explains how racism intersects with sexism (a phenomenon more recently labelled misogynoir), an issue which white feminists have a tendency to overlook in their quest for universalities. In terms of myth criticism, Daly’s oversight is emblematic of ‘the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background,’ while ‘nonwhite women and our herstories are

noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization'. Indeed, in feminist literary criticism and beyond, 'The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging', and it is particularly the case in feminist myth criticism, that either focuses only on European myths, or that looks to African mythos only insofar as it serves their purposes. I will further address this issue in the 'Literature Review' below, with regard to Beyoncé's more recent contribution to this dialogue.

There is a problem more broadly with whitewashing in Classics as a discipline (see Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996; McCoskey 2018; Umachandran 2019). Often, unfortunately, this issue falls beyond the scope of this thesis, because my focus is not on classical scholarship, but on literature that adapts classical myths. Hence, if the authors are not focused on race in their retellings, it is not an issue that I can address. That being said, it is a relevant issue when considering works like Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), which both revisit Greek mythical women (Antigone and Medea, respectively) while foregrounding modern issues of race (in Britain and southern USA, respectively). Indeed, contemporary adaptations of Greek myth where the authors have specifically written race into their retellings are doing much of the work in decolonising and re-politicising the Classics. This occurs outside of the academy, for general audiences, though it can and should be utilised *within* the academy in efforts to decolonise Classics and redirect the use of classical imagery and iconography for more radical, less oppressive political standpoints.

Humm notes that 'In the long run, myth criticism may be more important not to feminist criticism but to creative writing' (1994: 70). This prediction suggests that women's *creative* writing may be the more productive site of generative feminist myth-making towards which this study certainly points. Indeed, contemporary adaptations of myth in women's fiction are the most recent instances of feminist revisionist myth writing that also began in feminist myth criticism. This blurring between critical and creative writing is true of feminist writing more generally. Humm attests to this, because she argues that literary criticism ('the activity of textual *analysis*') and literary creativity ('*the expression* of female experience') come together; 'critical practice and experiential testimony' also come together in feminist literary criticism, thus erasing previously-held distinctions between fiction and criticism (Ibid., 296). Methodologically, then, in analysing the creative prose adaptations of Greek myth, I am also dealing with the most



contemporary feminist engagement with myth criticism, and the ways in which these creative works impact on the study of Classics shall be revisited throughout the project.

Before moving onto the methodological relevance of radical reception theories, it would be useful to draw upon more recent feminist scholarship that proffers an intersectional approach of the sort adopted in this thesis. Intersectionality offers a method to understand how structures such as capitalism, heterosexism, patriarchy, white supremacy, abled supremacy and others work together to harm people. Intersectionality is a way for marginalised women to communicate how a combination of oppressive structures impact their lives, and cause them to experience multiple forms of discrimination at once. The term was originally coined by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to make ‘feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what [she] thought they should—highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced’ (Crenshaw 1989 in Eric-Udorie 2018: 21). The theory draws upon the work of earlier Black feminists and womanists, notably Sojourner Truth’s ‘Ain’t I A Woman?’ speech (1851); Audre Lorde’s ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House’ (1984) which calls to prioritise difference in activist communities; and bell hooks’ definition of feminism as ‘a movement to end sexist oppression [which] directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression’ (hooks 1984: 33). Although the theory started with a focus on the double-discrimination faced by Black women, it has become a framework applicable to other intersections of oppression, including, but not limited to, the oppressions faced by people of colour, LGBTQIA+ people, fat people, disabled people, poor people, and other marginalised groups (Eric-Udorie 2018: 13). Moreover, intersectionality opens up a space to critique key feminist writers for their exclusionary practices without undermining feminism as a movement or said writer’s contribution to it. Examples of this include Betty Friedan’s lesbophobia in 1969 or Germaine Greer’s transphobia in 1999 (Ibid., 23-4). *Can We All Be Feminists* (ed. Eric-Udorie 2018) is a recent edited collection on the theme of intersectional feminism, which features chapters written by people whose feminism intersects with their other identifiers, such as faith, transness, fatness, poverty, diaspora, and imperialism. This indicates a rejection of a feminist community, or *sisterhood*, that is blind to intersections of oppression, and caters exclusively to privileged and affluent women — often condensed to the moniker ‘white feminism’. It is necessary to contextualise intersectionality here, since this thesis

takes an intersectional approach to its feminist analysis, and the texts within its scope are published within third-wave feminism, which includes within its purview intersectionality.<sup>6</sup>

Eric-Udorie comments on the frivolity of current mainstream feminism, where unspecific #GirlPower is prioritised over the #SayHerName movement (Ibid., 29-30). However, both #GirlPower and #SayHerName – while on opposite ends of the scale of import – indicate that much contemporary feminism is happening online. In 1994, Sadie Plant coined the term ‘cyberfeminism’, building upon Haraway’s ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ (1984), to refer to online space as a means of worldbuilding, and to challenge the patriarchal normativity of an offline mainstream (Russell 2020: 55). Cyberfeminism introduced modern technology to mainstream feminism, and offered online spaces as sites of feminist networking, theorising, and critiquing, immediately and whilst transcending geographical limitations (Ibid., 57). Early cyberfeminism also suffered from privileging white, affluent women — it ‘marginalized queer people, trans people, and people of color aiming to decolonize digital space by their production via similar channels and networks’ (Ibid., 57). Nevertheless, it laid the groundwork for online feminism and negotiations of power, embodied by #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. Both are movements ‘defined and driven by technology, harbingers of a promising and potentially more inclusive “fourth wave” unfolding on the horizon’ (Ibid., 59). Legacy Russell’s *Glitch Feminism* is a manifesto advocating for the activist potential of glitches: in technology, glitches are errors and failures to function, and this same form can be applied to nonconforming bodies, especially non-white, queer, gender non-conforming bodies. Within glitch feminism, glitches are a strategy of nonperformance, particularly for people coming of age on the internet (Ibid., 23-4). The mediatization of texts and the inextricability of current feminism and the internet are threads that run throughout this thesis, particularly in the analysis of #MeToo’s impact on consent in literature and the online fandom surrounding certain texts, as well as in my use of online criticism that occurs on Twitter and Medium.

Although feminist literary criticism is my primary methodology in this thesis, reception theory, classical reception, and feminist reception are also methodologically important. Reception theory is the shift in focus from the author and their work to the reader and their

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the many aspects of third-wave feminism, see *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms*, where confusion surrounding what constitutes third-wave feminism is suggested as a defining characteristic of the epoch (Evans 2015: np).

response to the text and treating literature as a dialectical process of production and reception, or writing and reading (Holub 1984: xii; 57). Classical reception is the study of the ways in which classical mythology has survived from antiquity to the present day. It is an enormous subject that includes mythological handbooks in the Hellenistic Age; the work of Roman poets such as Ovid and Virgil; the treatment of myths in Middle Ages manuscripts; their rediscovery in the art and literature of the Renaissance; their treatment by Shakespeare and Milton; how myths have been used in literature from the eighteenth century to present; their use in philosophy and psychology; and the manifestations of myth in recent music and films (Morford *et al.*, 2011: 693; 732). The ‘traditional reception template’ can be thought of as ‘X author/artist’s use of Y ancient text/idea/motif’ (Hanink 2017: np.). Of course, much of this thesis is dedicated to how and why contemporary authors are using ancient materials and thus falls within the scope of classical reception.

There has been an increased level of interest in reception in the past twenty-five years of Classics scholarship. In his monograph *Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception*, Martindale expounds that ‘*Meaning [...] is always realized at the point of reception*’ and ‘*a writer can never control the reception of [their] own work*’ (1997: 3-4), which are the foundations of reception studies. It has not always been a readily accepted discipline, however, with Martindale citing a 1989 journal article that offers the image of Virgilian poetry becoming ‘encrusted by the barnacles of later tradition and interpretation’ that need to be scraped away to see the ‘true shape’ of the ancient work (Jenkyns 1989 in Martindale 1997: 4). For Martindale, this is a familiar rhetoric among classical scholars – philologists in particular – for whom the text comes fully armed with the intentions of its creator, and is read correctly by its contemporaries, then it later ‘suffers depredations from the follies, incompetences and sheer ignorance and naïvety of our nearer ancestors’ (Martindale 1997: 4). This is flawed, since all readers approach a text with their own backgrounds, prejudices, and aims. Moreover, texts do not exist in a vacuum: Martindale provides the example that Homer is forever changed by Virgil and Milton, who have both left their traces on Homeric texts and therefore enable new possibilities of meaning (Ibid., 6). For Martindale, this leads to two theses: that numerous insights into ancient texts are locked up in later imitations, translations, and such, and that our current interpretations of texts are constructed by the chain of receptions (Ibid., 7). Hence, we cannot get back to any *original*

meaning free from subsequent interventions into the literature. To continue with the above example, the first thesis would conclude that Virgil gives us insights into Homer, while the second would conclude that, since Virgil, no reading of Homer could be wholly free from Virgilian presence, even if the interpreter is not directly familiar with Virgil's work (Ibid., 8). In terms of this thesis, an example would be that adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone*, such as Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, give us insight into the Sophoclean drama, and they alter how the drama will henceforth be received. This is to say that 'each work becomes an intervention into a textual field' (Ibid., 17). Moreover, such adaptations exist in a tradition that also includes all subsequent interventions into the tradition, such as psychoanalytical and philosophical responses to *Antigone*, even if the adapting author herself has not read those writings.

More recent scholarship has been focused on the future prospects and political potential of classical reception. Porter proposes that 'reception studies have shown immense promise as a way of deepening the dialogue between modernity and classical antiquity' (Porter 2007: 470). He specifies that reception of the ancient world is something that occurred in the ancient world itself, with earlier Greek writers adapting an oral tradition into a written one, and later Greek and Roman writers responding to their predecessors. In light of this internal reception, we can understand that the past 'was at no time clear-cut, but was always *only* layered, cluttered, and palimpsestic' (Ibid., 472). Porter outlines that reception studies tend to cluster around particular research areas, such as time periods (Early Modern, Enlightenment, Victorian, Modernist) and themes (literary transpositions, translations, gender politics), with literature and performance arts taking precedence (theatre, cinema, and opera) (Ibid., 474-5). I would also add to the latter novelistic and philosophical reception and video games, such as *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018) and *Hades* (2018). Porter encourages as future paths for reception the study of Classics as a discipline as ongoing reception; methodologies of reception; the comparative study of Western and non-Western classical traditions; and the 'reception of reception' itself — that is, a reflexive study of the discipline of classical reception (Ibid., 475-8). Most methodologically relevant here is Porter's consideration of the interdisciplinarity of classical reception, since non-Classicists can conduct studies of classical reception. Knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin languages is therefore not necessary for some research within classical reception. As Porter puts it, 'why should someone studying the connections between Byron, Keats, or Goethe and Greco-Roman

antiquity trouble herself with the philology of Aeschylus and Livy?’ (Ibid., 479). Ultimately, ‘excellent work in reception should [not] always require specialist philological expertise or detailed knowledge of the [...] production of the source work’ (Ibid., 479). This opens up a more diverse and interdisciplinary field, and more novel approaches to the classics and their reception. It is relevant to this thesis, where I position myself as a researcher with a background in literary studies and Women’s Studies, rather than a background in Classics, accounting for my methodology of close textual analysis and feminist theory in this study of a particular facet of classical reception.

Notably, there has been a trend in more recent classical reception scholarship towards including an openly activist agenda. As Leonard and Prins observe in their foreword to *Classical Reception and the Political*, classical reception can become contemporary political activism (2010: 3). Classical reception is ‘engaged not only with the past but also with the present’ and, as well as establishing a connection between the two, the field can open the way to alternative futures (Ibid., 4-5). Classical reception has activist potential. Critical classical reception acknowledges, often explicitly but sometimes implicitly, that Greco-Roman antiquity has ‘played a major role in constructing and authorizing racism, colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy, Western-centrism, body normativity, and other entrenched, violent societal structures’ (Hanink 2017: np.). In my analyses of how Greek myth is being used to narrate racism, hegemony, and gender-based violence, I will be employing a methodology aligned with critical classical reception. The most useful facet of critical classical reception to the research undertaken in this thesis is feminist classical reception. The current vogue of feminist revisionist myth writing has been utilised as evidence for the increasing popularity of feminist reception in Classics (Hinds 2019: np.). Such retellings are works of feminist classical reception because they reject ‘the misogynistic model presented in the ancient source material and refreshing myths through the lens of otherwise voiceless characters,’ (Ibid., np.). Indeed, Zajko opens ‘Feminist Models of Reception’, with a consideration of Margaret Atwood’s Penelope in *The Penelopiad*, who ‘complains vociferously about the cultural authority of her husband’s versions of the events that shaped both their lives’ (Zajko 2011: 195). Moreover, there are examples outside of the scope of this thesis that also demonstrate the current popularity of feminist reception in Classics. As feminist scholars Kennerly and Woods note, the movie *Wonder Woman* (dir. Patty Jenkins, 2017)

was an occasion of classical reception, related to the work already underway on classical reception in comics and how classics survive in modern fantasy (2017: np.). Evidently, this is a particularly fertile moment for feminist classical reception. Zakjo considers ‘how richly feminism at one time irrigated even the most dryly canonical of classical landscapes’, though she firmly states that ‘new brands of feminism’ – that is, more recent, intersectional models of feminism – have been slow to present themselves in the field of Classics (Zajko 2011: 200; 202). This is a sentiment shared more recently by Hinds, who asks in her consideration of consent in mythical retellings, ‘If we can’t get cis, white feminism right in reception, then how can we ever hope to get intersectional feminism right? I want to see intersectional feminist reception of classical myths bloom,’ (Hinds 2019: np). Hence, there is a theoretical foundation for considering contemporary works by women utilising the methodology of classical reception and, more specifically, feminist classical reception that aspires to intersectionality. *Wonder Woman* was described by Kennerly and Woods as having ‘one well-greaved leg in the ancient world and one in ours’ (2017: np.): ultimately, a research project with one leg in Classics and one in contemporary literary studies requires an equally interdisciplinary methodology.

## **Literature Review**

The chapters of this thesis organise contemporary mythic adaptations thematically. Each chapter therefore begins with its own theoretical framework that provides a critical context for the selected texts. For example, the first chapter ‘Women in the Texts’, opens with relevant feminist classicist scholarship that makes the case for excavating the side-lined women of Greek myth. I draw upon Sarah Pomeroy for an introduction to the role of women in Greek antiquity to contextualise their role in myth, as well as to introduce the importance of studying ancient and mythical women in the modern day – because it illuminates contemporary gender issues (Pomeroy 1975; 2015: xii). I go on to consider the treatment of Medusa by Natalie Haynes (as well as Haynes’ takes on Clytemnestra and the Amazons) in order to evidence the wealth of theory that has been produced by feminist myth criticism, as well as to establish the theoretical approach for feminist revisionist myth writing. The chapter is thereafter divided into three parts, focusing on three women from Homeric epics: Penelope, Briseis, and Helen. Each of these sections also opens by outlining relevant arguments regarding the female mythical figure in question. For example, the final section on Helen opens with Bettany Hughes’ contention that Helen is an implacable figure throughout history because Helen has a trinity of guises (goddess, princess, and whore), and then Laurie Maguire’s insistence on the need to establish a literary biography - rather than a historical account - of Helen’s reception. The next chapter, ‘Antigone’s Afterlives’, functions as a case study in the adaptation of female mythical figures and therefore begins with a pivotal exploration of her treatment by feminist and psychoanalytic theorists interested in her potential as a revolutionary figure. Since the next chapter, ‘Mythic Masculinities’, is focused on how modern conceptions of masculinity are staged and interrogated in mythical retellings, it opens with a useful framework of masculinity as outlined by R.W. Connell and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who posit masculinity as a set of practices to maintain patriarchal hegemony and as something that can be explored through male homosocial desire, respectively. The penultimate chapter, ‘Queering Myth’, opens with an overview of queerness in ancient myth and history, followed by an exploration of how ancient queerness has been theorised in queer classical reception. To do this, I draw particularly on research by Jennifer Ingleheart and Hannah Clarke. The final chapter of this thesis, ‘Palimpsests: Paratexts and

Intertexts' necessarily begins with the outlining of a number of theories of paratexts because they establish how 'paratexts' and 'intertexts' will be understood for the purposes of my research, as well as providing the theoretical underpinning for the 'literary ecosystem' that the chapter seeks to demonstrate.

Rather than take a chapter by chapter approach, this literature review will provide a critical context for the project as a whole, since all the chapters are connected by a common set of questions which apply various questions in feminist and classical theory to literary adaptation of myth. Firstly, I will acknowledge that the texts within the scope of this thesis are, in one sense, doing nothing new, since redeploying myth has been a part of the literary tradition from the Renaissance's deployment of ancient knowledge, to the 18th–19th centuries' adoption of classical tropes, to Modernism's transformative encounter with antiquity. Particularly relevant to this thesis is the refashioning of mythical templates and characters in Anglophone Modernism. I will then explore foundational feminist classical theories, mainly the work of Sarah Pomeroy, Mary Lefkowitz, Marina Warner, and Amy Richlin and Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, paying particular attention to how they inform more recent feminist classicist scholarship. The core part of this literature review will focus on the published work within feminist Classics that is crucial to the formation of this thesis. Non-traditional sources – namely women's myth writing for general audiences, podcasts, and articles published on *Eidolon* – are essential both for sketching out the current critical climate of women's contributions to Classics, and to provide the framework for this thesis specifically. This chapter will close with a consideration of how one studies adaptations more broadly.

First, I shall briefly elucidate the manner in which I engage with ancient sources. Working with translations involves choices informed by politics and aesthetics – striving to select translations that best fit the goals of your current project, your political goals, and to maintain consistency insofar as possible in the project. My animating principle in selecting translations is accessibility, achieved by plain diction and omission of anachronistic prejudices. This theory is summarised by Emily Wilson when she cautions that translation 'always, necessarily, involves interpretation; there is no such thing as a translation that provides anything like a transparent window through which the reader can see the original' (2018: 86). Such a claim to absolute or direct transparency in translation is a misconception, a 'gendered metaphor' (Ibid., 86),



suggesting that the translation's worth will always be secondary to the original, male-authored text. As well as accepting that translation is an act of creation, Wilson's translating philosophy also includes a rejection of the 'notion that Homeric epic must be rendered in grand, ornate, rhetorically elevated English', popularised by Alexander Pope and his contemporaries; instead, translations should be 'rhythmical' but 'not difficult or ostentatious' (Ibid., 83). I favour less florid translations, informed in large part by Wilson's translating ethos; my preferred translations are more accessible because they choose more simplistic, modern-day diction. This choice is a vital aspect of destabilising the 'ivory tower' in Classics and of disseminating literature from antiquity beyond the academy and social elites. Wilson specifies that she 'avoid[s] importing contemporary types of sexism into this ancient poem,' (Ibid., 89) . Though she does not overlook the sexism and patriarchy that exist in the *Odyssey*, she rejects anachronistic misogyny that has a long tradition in translation. For example, most translations of the *Odyssey* into English have Telemachus call the slaves 'sluts' or 'whores', implying that their sexual history justifies their murders, whereas the original Greek does not include these misogynistic insults (Ibid., 89). Similarly, Emily Wilson departs from the long tradition of calling the twelve hanged girls 'maids', calling them 'slaves' instead, which is a more accurate rendering of their position as well as an indication of their lack of agency in the crimes that they are hanged for. On the topic of Helen, Wilson reflects that 'Many contemporary translators render Helen's "dog-face" as if it were equivalent to "shameless Helen" (or "Helen the bitch")' (Ibid., 89). In using 'hounded', Wilson maintains the metaphor and loses the misogyny, evidencing the way that translation always includes (political and aesthetic) choices.

Emily Wilson is ostensibly the first woman to translate the *Odyssey*, although Wilson herself refutes this claim on the basis that the *Odyssey* has been translated into non-Anglophone languages by women and for the reason that marketing her work as such contributes to the othering of female academics and maintains the male default (@EmilyRCWilson 2 October 2019). Nevertheless, as Myers (2019) notes, Wilson's translation is part of a growing trend in the past decade of female classicists translating ancient epics, citing Sarah Ruden's *Aeneid* (2008) and Caroline Alexander's *Iliad* (2015) as two such examples. Myers makes clear that male translators 'are permitted and even encouraged to add to and embellish in their translations because often, their voices are understood to be similar to that of the (masculine) classical

author', while translations by women are heavily critiqued for any presence of the translator herself (Myers 2019: np.). Indeed, Wilson's translation has been considered by some critics as akin to Pat Barker's *Silence of the Girls* and Madeline Miller's *Circe* as a Homeric adaptation, or even a 'piratic feminist manifesto' (Ibid., np.), implicitly undermining Wilson's work as an academic translation and clearly refusing to consider it in relation to its comparators, such as Robert Fagles' *Odyssey* translation.

Maria Dahvana Headley's *Beowulf* (2020) translation, though not strictly in the purview of Classics, figures as a key example of recent work in women's translation studies. Headley's translation also renders the ancient text in accessible English, and she makes revolutionary linguistic choices – the first, and perhaps most exciting of which, is her choice for the first word, *hwæt*. This somewhat untranslatable exclamation has previously been rendered as 'Listen', 'Hark', 'Lo', or, by Seamus Heaney seeking to replicate Irish conversation, 'So'; Headley translates *hwæt* as 'Bro.' (Headley 2020: xx; l.1). For Headley, 'Bro' can equally make you family or foe, and it can be used 'as a means of satirising a certain form of inflated, overconfident, aggressive male behaviour' (Ibid., xxi). Indeed, though *Beowulf* is, in some ways, 'a manual for how to live as a man', Headley rejects the idea that it is a masculine text because, although it is not structured around women, it does contain 'extensive portrayals of motherhood and peace-weaving marital compromise' (Ibid., xxi; xxiii). Her translation aims to 'shine a light on the motivations, actions, and desires of the poem's female characters' (Ibid., xxiii). Translations by women should not be treated as the 'smurfette' (@EmilyRCWilson 2 October 2019), that is, the trivialised female variation of the male original. Nevertheless, it remains worth noting that there is current academic momentum for women translating 'big books by blokes about battles' (Beard 2016; in Hanink 2017, np.) in new and exciting ways. Myers favours women's translations on her curriculums 'both for their aesthetic value and, unapologetically, for the identities of their translators,' as well as to open up discussions about the gendered act of translation and to demystify the labour of the translator (Myers 2019: np.). In this thesis I also favour translations by women, partly for the gynocentric appeal, as well as for the typically more accessible style as outlined above.

Before delving into feminist Classics, I will comment on the role of myth in Modernist literature to illustrate that, firstly, the texts within this thesis are the latest in a long line of

Anglophone literary responses to the Classics and, secondly, that the authors are directly influenced by their Modernist progenitors. Enlightenment thinkers viewed myth as an apparatus of superstition, credulity, and ignorance, in opposition to which they were defining themselves;<sup>7</sup> then the Romantics regarded myths as a vital resource for poets, offering idealised records of the divine in nature; and in the nineteenth century there was some value placed on the natural divinity in myth, while the dangers of myth for leading the mind astray also played a role (Connor 2005: 251-3). Modernism had a complex relationship with myth and mythopoesis: though Modernists sought absolute newness, they also retained some Romantic sensibility regarding the potential for myths, so they sought to transform myth for the modern world, to create a ‘modern myth’ (Ibid., 253). Connor locates Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) as the seed from which Modernist myth-making grew, with his juxtaposing, cross-mythological, pseudo-archaeological approach providing ‘a model for the similar historical syncopations and jump-cut structures evolved in *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, *Finnegans Wake* and *The Anthemata*’ (Ibid., 257). Indeed, in his review of *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot lists *The Golden Bough* as part of the ‘mythical method’ employed by Joyce, a method which Eliot believed was a vital ‘step towards making the modern world possible for art’ (Eliot 1922; 1975 in Connor 2005: 257). This Modernist ‘mythical method’ is not typically characterised by straightforward adaptations, but rather the cultivation of discontinuous and jagged parallels.<sup>8</sup> Mythopoeia encompasses

<sup>7</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Adorno and Horkheimer propose that myth and Enlightenment are not polar opposites, but rather intricately linked: ‘myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology’ (Adorno & Horkheimer 1944; 1997: 20). The *Odyssey* is demonstrative of the dialectic of enlightenment, particularly when the Sirens lure sailors with the appeal of losing oneself in the past (Ibid., 54). The misguided rejection of our mythical past by Enlightenment thinkers is also visible in the *Iliad*, in Achilles’ anger against Agamemnon, which can be read as a mythical figure’s anger against a rational king (Ibid., 69).

<sup>8</sup> In *Ulysses* the decade-long journey of the epic hero becomes one day in Dublin, and the connections between the mythic chapter titles and the text itself are largely symbolic. For example, in the ‘Cyclops’ episode, Polyphemus’ one eye symbolises the narrowmindedness of a bigoted nationalist, and in the Aeolus chapter, the winds become ‘journalistic windbagery’ (Connor 2005: 257). T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* uses pan-historical mythical and religious symbolism — including Psalms, the Fisher King and recasting Tiresias as the fluid protagonist — in its lamentation of the crises of the modern world (see Haas 2003: 31-3). Virginia Woolf’s work, on the other hand, has been analysed in light of a mythic form. This is particularly evident in *To The Lighthouse* (see Guth 1984: 233-249), as well as analyses of the character of Mrs. Ramsay as a modern Demeter (see Blotner 1956; Love 1970). Some Modernists, such as H.D. and Yeats, were particularly influenced by the psychoanalytical use of myths: while Freud used myths to support his insights regarding the individual mind, Jung viewed the collective unconscious as operating within mythical archetypes. Jean Cocteau’s body of work was intensely influenced by Greek myth, particularly his Orphic film trilogy and Orphic play; his illustrated poetry in *Mythologie* (1934); and the libretto he composed for Stravinsky’s *Oedipus rex*. Cocteau’s work resonates with the work within this thesis since it is an earlier iteration of queering myth and it was immensely popular; the tradition of the former is explored further in Chapter 4, and the latter is a characteristic of the present genre, which is referred to throughout this project.

Modernism's power to revive myth and transform it for its own purposes, and it is partly defined by intense self-consciousness (Connor 2005: 262). This self-reflexive adaptation of myth and the specific reform of it to reflect the author's contemporary society is identifiable with the current trend of feminist myth writing, indicating that contemporary authors are contributing to a long literary tradition of adapting myth in line with current aesthetic and political aims.

As Hoberman surveys in *Gendering Classicism* (1997), twentieth century women's historical fiction featured an intense interest in Ancient Greece and Rome, particularly in the work of Naomi Mitchison, Mary Butts, Bryher, Phyllis Bentley, Laura Riding, and Mary Renault. In response to the mythopoetic work of Frazer, Freud, and Graves, these authors borrowed the cultural cache of the Classics to work through gender-based issues and to engage with voguish discussions surrounding pre-patriarchal goddess-based matrilineal religions. In particular, Riding's *A Trojan Ending* (1937) – which follows Cressida as Troy falls and as she chooses to embody the survival of Troy – is a response to Graves' oversimplified thinking about gender. In *The White Goddess* (1948), Graves draws upon the fashionable idea that poetry grew out of worship of a moon-goddess, so this matriarchal goddess functions as a muse for later male writers (Hoberman 1997: 62). For Riding, this was an oversimplified understanding of gender (Riding's theory that gender is a construct of language paves the way for Judith Butler's theories of gender construction and performativity); moreover, *The White Goddess* is plagiarised from Riding's essay 'The Word Woman', and it misrepresents her view on the relationship between cerebral womanhood and god(desses) (Ibid., 60-1). Hoberman's monograph also interprets homosexuality in Mary Renault's novels as a masquerade to trespass on the male-dominated spaces of the classical world and the British Empire, meanwhile the phalluses in her work undermine sexual difference rather than enforce it (Ibid., 74). Hoberman argues that the twentieth century women who wrote historical novels about the ancient world were entering into a dialogue about their culture's sense of the past. This is evinced by the tensions between the male-authored texts used as source material and the integration of female scholarship, whilst undermining traditional scholarship, to walk the line between historical plausibility and subversion (Ibid., 4). She calls this the 'tension between reinscription and resistance', in reference to the process of juxtaposition, emphasis, and selection that allowed the authors to unsettle their culture's construction of their history and the claim to their cultural inheritance

(Ibid., 179). These tensions are continued in the texts within this thesis, where the conservative traditions of myth scholarship are alluded to, alongside the feminist literary traditions of myth writing.

For Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz 'Classics has, with very few exceptions, been anti-theory in general and anti-feminist in particular' (1993: 1), yet there is an ongoing attempt to rectify this, beginning with the foundational works of feminist classicists such as Sarah B. Pomeroy and Mary Lefkowitz. Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives & Slaves* (1975) was inspired by the author's awareness that 'most of the standard references in the field of Classics did not include women in their purview' (1975; 2015: xii). Moreover, the study of women in myth and antiquity has more immediate implications, since, as Pomeroy expounds, 'the past illuminates contemporary problems in relationships between men and women': Pomeroy's research notes the consistency with which some reductive attitudes towards women have been maintained from antiquity to the present (Ibid., xii). *Goddesses, Whores, Wives & Slaves* provides valuable interpretations of the women of Greek myth, as well as real women's roles in Ancient Greek city states and Ancient Rome – it is the former of these that is the more important to the direction of this thesis. Pomeroy also observes that goddesses are 'archetypal images of human females, as envisioned by males' (Athena is the asexual figure of internalised misogyny, Aphrodite is a sex-object, and Hera is a wife-mother), separated into stereotypes rather than 'a whole being with unlimited potential for development' like Zeus or Apollo, speaking to the patriarchy that the mythographers and scribes were anxiously seeking to uphold (Ibid., 2-9). Moving to the mortal women of Greek myth, she argues that Zeus and Apollo, as the two most powerful gods in the pantheon, targeting mortals epitomises the powerful man against the powerless woman, providing some of the earliest narratives of 'the destruction of the powerless by the powerful' (Ibid., 11-2). The mortal women's vulnerabilities were also, specifically, feminine, such as 'the wretched helplessness of the unwed mother; [...] and the passivity of the woman in that she never enticed or seduced the god but instead was the victim of his spontaneous lust' (Ibid., 11-2). *Goddesses, Whores, Wives & Slaves* was the first study of its kind, examining the role of women in classical myth and antiquity and considering the ramifications of these ancient oppressions on modern Western cultures.

Due to the proliferation of retellings of the Trojan War from contemporary female authors, it is these women of the Bronze Age and Homeric epics who are the particular focus of this thesis. I contend that the Trojan Cycle is of particular interest to contemporary women writers because their narratives are pervaded by powerful women, including Hecuba, Andromache, Helen and her sister Clytemnestra, and Penelope. I draw upon Pomeroy's analyses of Homeric women particularly in the chapters 'Women in the Texts' and 'Men in the Texts', where the most recent adaptations of the figures from the Bronze Age legends are analysed. In particular, Pomeroy's ground-breaking analysis of Helen, Clytemnestra, and Penelope as women whose myths are thematically similar (each woman is married, separated from her husband by the war, and their reunions are necessarily fraught [Ibid., 17]) is particularly useful to my comparative consideration of each of these women in the most recent interpretations of their myths. For Pomeroy, 'Homer's attitude toward women as wives is obvious in his regard for Penelope and Clytemnestra' because, while Penelope is lauded for her chastity, Clytemnestra is reproached for her infidelity, and all women 'are to be forever sullied by Clytemnestra's sin. This generalization is the first in a long history of hostility toward women in Western literature' (Ibid., 21-2). The condemnation of Clytemnestra versus Penelope's praise, and Helen's sheer implacability, mark the beginnings of a Western literary tradition that treats women as sexualised symbols rather than fully realised characters. In addition, the prevalence of these women's myths over the perspective of disadvantaged women in the same narratives – slaves such as Chryseis, Briseis, and Eurycleia, who are central to the plots of the Homeric epics but whose perspectives are even more shadowy than their royal counterparts – also marks an early example of privileging the perspectives of those higher up in the social hierarchy. It is these traditions, first expounded in formative feminist classical scholarship, against which contemporary feminist adaptations are writing back, refocusing on underprivileged perspectives – both the royal women that have been treated as symbols throughout literature, and the slaves who have been long overlooked.

In *Heroines & Hysterics* (1981) and *Women in Greek Myth* (1985), Mary Lefkowitz also contributed to the field of feminist classical scholarship as it emerged. In the former, Lefkowitz provides this useful introduction to the pattern of women's lives in myth:

When considered from a feminist perspective, the plots of Greek mythology present a frightening view of female experience. A woman can keep her identity only by remaining a virgin, like the goddesses Athena or Artemis, or by destroying or abandoning her male partner, like Aphrodite, or Clytemnestra, or Medea. Marriage is death, either literally, or figuratively, as for Semele or Io, whose stories end with the birth of their sons. One could regard Penelope as yet another example of a woman who is important only while her husband is absent, since the moment he returns, she disappears from view.

But when one reflects on what women say and do within the confines of the traditional plots, positive values emerge. The poets, particularly Homer and Euripides, seem to have used the female experience as a foil to [...] essentially destructive heroism (Lefkowitz 1981: 1).

This statement is central to the critical context of this thesis. Here, Lefkowitz is introducing the dual nature of women in myth, in that they are at once essentialised, reductive figures that are consistently punished for deviating from patriarchal rule, but they have been adapted in sympathetic and empowering manners since antiquity. Contemporary feminist myth writers are not only continuing the traditions of women's myth writing that begins with the works of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, H.D., and Sylvia Plath; they are continuing traditions of adapting mythical women that began with Homer, Euripides, and Ovid.

This nuanced thought is continued in *Women in Greek Myth*, where Lefkowitz rejects the criticism that the Ancient Greeks were misogynists because their women were not afforded equal rights. Instead she proposes that 'they be regarded as pioneers in recognising and describing with sympathy' the lived experiences and social importance of women (1985: 39). Lefkowitz explores the depiction of this experience with rhetorical questions such as 'If Greek men wished to repress Greek women through their mythology, why do their two most important epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, describe a war fought on behalf of a woman?' (Ibid., 135). As we shall see in my analysis of Helen's reception, this is a wilful oversimplification of Helen's role as the cause of the Trojan War. For Hallett, Lefkowitz makes a 'controversial claim' in need of refuting, a process she proposes should be done via multitextual readings of each myth and broaden our horizons

by including non-canonical authors and texts so that constructions of women by male authors can be properly interrogated (1993: 105-6). For example, tragedies such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* and Euripides' *Trojan Women* should be read alongside earlier and later treatments of the same myth. A relevant example occurs in the chapter 'Antigone's Afterlives', where Natalie Haynes' comparison of Homer's "beautiful Epicaste, mother of Oedipus" (Haynes 2017: 327) in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, is compared to Jocasta's characterisation in Sophoclean tragedy. Haynes points out that 'Homer's version of the Oedipus myth is sketched out in just ten lines of verse, but it's subtly different from that of Sophocles' (Ibid., 327). In the *Odyssey*, the myth is centred on Epicaste and, though it refers to her suicide, there is no mention of the auto-enucleation and, as Haynes asks, 'when did Epicaste become Jocasta?' (Ibid., 327). Admittedly, Lefkowitz's feminist legacy in the field is uneasy, such as when she lambasts feminist theory for apparently demanding that women with inferior qualifications to men be hired and published simply to further the feminist political agenda, which Sorkin Rabinowitz cites as an example of the hostility that feminism and Women's Studies has faced in the discipline of Classics (1993: 22-3). In a rather Penelope-esque manner, Lefkowitz has been praised by men in the discipline for having written on women and sex roles only after establishing her credentials in more established subjects within Classics (Ibid., 23). Foundational contributions to feminist classical scholarship, such as by Pomeroy and Lefkowitz, are useful to the theoretical framework of this research insofar as their analyses of specific female mythical figures, although (and this is particularly the case with Lefkowitz rather than Pomeroy) their broader understanding of the relationship between feminist theory and the Classics is outdated and underdeveloped.

Marina Warner's interpretive analysis of myths in *Monuments and Maidens* (1985) and *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time* (1994) lay important groundwork for the following feminist classical work for general audiences, as well as a useful framework for the feminist semiotics of myth.<sup>9</sup> In *Monuments and Maidens*, Warner studies allegories of the female form that inform and animate myths which have reinforced, maintained and reshaped present personal and societal identities (Warner 1985: xxii-xxiii). For example, she traces the influence of Athena as a judicious, armoured, and virginal goddess into the later female personifications of the

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<sup>9</sup> For a related study of the semiotics and traditions of fairy tales, see Warner's *From The Beast to The Blonde* (1994).



abstract concepts of Justice, Britannia, and Virtue (Ibid., 70-84). For Warner, Athena is the ‘original standard measure’ to which these later personifications are compared against and conforming to; moreover, if we are to understand the roots and continuing significance of these feminised signs, it is essential to look at Athena’s nature and character in Greek myths, primarily in her role as a ‘dominating force and the arbiter of an ideal order’ (Ibid., 87). This is important since we are still surrounded by these personifications. Athena’s armour is of particular significance for Warner, because it is worn by so many imaginary women to project ideal values, namely ‘law-abiding chastity, [...] virtuous consent to patriarchal monogamy [and] the desirable subordination of women to men over children’s lineage’ (Ibid., 124). The latter is symbolised in Zeus’ overpowering of Metis and Medusa’s defeat by Athena.

Below is a survey of Haynes’ interpretation of Pandora as an agent of change (to illustrate the interpretive methodologies and feminist implications at play in recent classical studies for non-academic audiences), but here I will preface it with Warner’s Pandoran analogues. In Hesiod’s *Theogony and Works and Days*, Pandora traps a man into marriage using her beauty, desirability, and cunning speech. She was made by Zeus to punish the human race and, in this, she lays the groundwork for Biblical Eve, who is also fashioned for man and destined to doom him. Both women are made, do not name themselves, and they inspire desire rather than experience it; moreover, deities take on a maternal role in creating them and they, in turn, become the first mothers of the ensuing human race (Ibid., 222). Of course, Warner is not the first to make this comparison, as Milton famously compares the two women in *Paradise Lost* (1667: IV:708). Warner, however, also notes a Pandoran element to Helen, who is ‘another beauty who brings about tragedy’ (Warner 1985: 222). Also, if we follow the Euripidean tradition in *Helen*, where the gods created an eidolon for the warriors to fight over, that Helen is also fashioned for the dual purposes of beauty and destruction (Ibid., 224). These early constructed women, from whom all women are supposedly descended, indicate that ‘the female was perceived to be a vehicle of attributed meaning [from] the very beginning of the world,’ (Ibid., 225) which men could shape into misogynistic control. A built-for-purpose woman also features in the myth of Pygmalion, a misogynist that repudiated all women because he was disgusted by the behaviour of prostitutes, so he sculpts himself a woman out of ivory — notably the same material used to depict the flesh of goddesses in ancient sculptures. Venus, pleased at his departure from purity,

sends a soul to the sculpture, Galatea, and brings her to life.<sup>10</sup> The creation of these women becomes ‘a paradigmatic metaphor for the act of artistic creation’ (Ibid., 239) – the artist “gives birth” to their works – and the confusion of women and art subsumes women into the abstract and allows for the projection of men’s rhetoric onto the female form.

In *Managing Monsters*, a publication of the 1994 Reith Lectures, Warner enacts her own paradigmatic metaphors: she takes contemporary concerns – such as single motherhood, male violence, and the latter’s ostensible relationship to video games – and relates them to myths and fairy tales. Her central thesis is that myths are not delusions or untruths, but rather representations of universal matters such as sexuality or family relations, and that they exert more of an influence over our social psyche than we may think (Warner 1994: xiii) She is methodologically influenced by Nicole Loraux<sup>11</sup> and Roland Barthes.<sup>12</sup> She specifies that ‘deconstructing [myths] does not necessarily mean wiping them’ (Ibid., xiii), which is to say that myths retain all of their previous meanings when new ones are applied to them. In the first lecture, ‘Monstrous Mothers: Women Over the Top’, the focus is on she-monsters that reject acceptable femininity and must be leashed, lest they wreak havoc. Perhaps the most pressing mythical example is Medea, who ‘embodies extreme female aberration’ (Ibid., 6) because she uses her magic, not only to enable Jason, but also to enable herself when she cheats her father, boils an enemy in oil, dissects her brother, and, eventually, murders her children. Warner, in a sympathetic reading of the Euripidean Medea, recognises that she perverts motherhood because that is the only power remaining to her, and it remains the area in which Jason is weakest. She also relates Medea’s actions to the demonisation of single mothers in more recent society, which

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<sup>10</sup> This myth has been retold in a short story, ‘Galatea’ by Madeline Miller (2013). In the retelling, Galatea is assaulted and gaslighted by her creator in a manner reminiscent of the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892); Miller’s story concludes with Galatea drowning Pygmalion.

<sup>11</sup> In *Born of the Earth* (1996; 2000), Loraux analyses myth through the framework of Athenian civic ideology. For Loraux, Greek city-states were anxious to edify themselves using their mythological history: ‘no city, however miniscule, [...] does not boast of once having sent an army to the Trojan War’ (Loraux 1996; 2000: 13). This study is relevant in the modern day, argues Loraux, because it is the root of all rhetoric developed by groups of people intending to idealise their values using the cultural cache of the past (Ibid., 13).

<sup>12</sup> Drawing upon Saussure’s theory of semiology, Barthes argues in *Mythologies* (1957) that myths are signs that are, in turn, used as signifiers when a new meaning is added, which then become the *signified*. Modern myths (examples of which include red wine, astrology, and detergent) are created to maintain the control of the ruling classes. For Warner, this is a ‘pessimistic’ view, as she believes that the Barthesian model of understanding and clarification can give rise to newly-told stories, affording different patterns to the social fabric, and that this act of reworking myths is a social enterprise that everyone can participate in (Warner 1994: xiv).

she recognises as a wilful exoneration of absent fathers. She locates Medea in the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where a daughter is killed as it is a preferable fate to slavery (Ibid., 10). The tradition of retelling Medea with a specific focus on racial inequality in America is continued in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), in which Medea's myth is reframed as the experience of impoverished Black people in the Southern states of America in the time surrounding Hurricane Katrina. Warner contrasts the brutality of the actions of Medea in Euripides' and Morrison's texts to Pizan's version in *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), where Medea's infanticide is overlooked. This touches on a discussion that remains central to feminist mythopoeia: should we exonerate women of crimes in favour of focusing on the injustices done to them? Warner suggests that when it comes to historical events, women's actions and the actions inflicted upon them should be equally considered, but when it comes to myths, one is dealing not with a single figure but with an entire tradition (Ibid., 8-9). Hence, Pizan's Medea is as canonical as Euripides', and the Medeas of Morrison and Ward also become part of the same textual field. Warner's work thus provides theory and practice of the feminist semiotics and hermeneutics of myth.

*Feminist Theory and the Classics* (eds. Amy Richlin & Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, 1993) is an example of scholarship that aims to redress the anti-feminism in Classics. Sorkin Rabinowitz asserts that 'there is more to the politics of classics than [...] inherited bias' because, in the study of Classics, there is more than the biases of the Ancient Greek and Roman authors, such as misogyny and racism (1993: 19): there are also the biases of the discipline itself. The edited collection is founded on the revolutionary premise that 'classics actually *enacts* a conservative politics' (Ibid., 19; 21). This is because the scholars in the discipline have been, until relatively recently, upper class males that were, moreover, white, therefore othering non-men, non-whites, and non-gentlemen. Feminist theory and radical pedagogy are central to redressing these biases according to Sorkin Rabinowitz (Ibid., 24-5), and edited collections such as this, where the work of feminist classicists are compiled, challenge this systemic bias. For Richlin, classicists distance themselves from the politically contentious issues in ancient literature such as rape and slavery by 'muffling the meaning with layers of grammar, commentary, and previous scholarship', whereas feminist theory encourages the classicist to re-centre themselves in their research (1993: 449). 'As a woman, a feminist, and a scholar,' writes Richlin, 'I want to know what relation

scholarship can have to social change' and goes on that 'I write in anger, and I write so that oppression is not forgotten or left in silence' (Ibid., 448-9). Indeed, Richlin's opening translation of the *Songs of Priapus* followed by the account of her friend's brutal rape and murder on campus truly demonstrates the need to no longer distance oneself from the violent content in ancient literature. Feminist theories and Women's Studies methodologies are vital for redressing this because they foreground social change and challenge oppression.

*Laughing With Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (eds. Vanda Zajko & Miriam Leonard, 2008) continues in this vein, though rather than focusing on how feminist thought can inform Classics, it looks at how myth has been central to the development of feminist thought. While the collection acknowledges a central tenet of this thesis, that 'many feminist have chosen to revivify ancient narratives to arm contemporary struggles', the editors remark upon the 'strangeness of this choice' due to these myths being products of androcentrism and patriarchy (Zajko & Leonard 2008: 2-3). Rather than being a feminist guide to Classical myth (such as *The Feminist Companion to the Classics* [ed. Carolyn Larrington, 1992]), or an analysis of receptions of specific myths (an example being Laurie Maguire's *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* [2009]), *Laughing with Medusa* focuses on the importance of myth in the formulation of a broad range of feminisms. The title of the edited collection refers directly to Cixous' 'Laugh of the Medusa', but it also alludes to *The Medusa Reader* (eds. Marjorie Garber & Nancy Vickers, 2003), and the long history of Medusa acting as a feminist muse (Zajko & Leonard 2006: 13). This volume is drawn upon in a number of my chapters; in particular, the attention afforded to Antigone by Pollock, Goldhill, and Fleming, all of whom support my argument in 'Antigone's Afterlives' that she is an enduring figure of political dissent, particularly for feminists. In addition, Ellen O'Gorman's 'A Woman's History of Warfare' provides a useful contextual basis for my continued analysis of the women of the Trojan War, and 'Reclaiming the Muse' by Penny Murray, a critical exploration of the gendered labour in the relationship between poet and muse is central to my analysis of Calliope, the muse in Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*. There are, evidently, many approaches available to feminist classicism, an academic discipline that has evolved immeasurably since Pomeroy's polemic in 1975; only an approach that draws dynamically upon these academic contributions will provide a firm theoretical foundation for the research herein undertaken. Foundational work in feminist classical

scholarship evinces the point that there is a history of critically combining classical mythology and feminist theory from the standpoint of feminist classicists, as well as the feminist (literary and sociological) theorists who have utilised myth in their work. My research is focused on the increased activity in the last two decades of female authors adapting Greek myth in novelistic retellings. My research asks how feminist work in classical studies can be adapted to feminist literary studies of the contemporary novel.

It is my contention, however, that much of the relevant work occurring in contemporary feminist Classics is not happening within the academy but is materialising in content created for more general audiences. Porter locates a ‘new kind of classicist-academic’: the public intellectual who can not only create new audiences for the field, but also enter into debates in the larger public sphere, examples of whom include Mary Beard, Anne Carson, and Daniel Mendelsohn (Porter 2007: 479-480). For Porter, their work exemplifies how Classics can intersect with wider publishing markets and media outlets, bringing established discourses and ongoing research into public awareness (Ibid., 480-1). This is not without its issues: the occasional sound-bite in media outlets can give visibility to Classics, but it can also tokenise the discipline (Ibid., 481). Porter ultimately concludes that making connections between the academy and the general public is the true mark of interdisciplinarity, and ought to be encouraged by higher education institutions. To borrow from Johanna Hanink who, in turn, was echoing Mary Beard, there is a rising trend of female academics writing ‘big books’, that is, working on the major epics and key events from ancient history rather than being relegated to obscure research interests. There is also an increasing popularity in ‘writing big about the classics’, by which she means writing ‘big books [for] big audiences’ (Hanink 2017: np.). Beard’s *SPQR* (2015) and Hall’s *Introducing the Ancient Greeks* (2014) are both key examples of female classicists ‘writing big about the classics’ for wider audiences. Crucially, this is not to say that these works do not contribute to the academy. On the contrary, such works make the classics more accessible to wider audiences, thus encouraging more engagement with classics within the academy (Hanink 2017: np.). These texts are often able to engage with topics more directly and quickly, due to there being less demand for academically distancing language and a generally quicker publication process. Though Hanink cites Helen Morales’ *Pilgrimage to Dollywood* (2014) as an example of this phenomenon, it is Morales’ more recent text for wider audiences, *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the*

*Ancient Myths* (2020) and Natalie Haynes' *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (2020) that have been particularly useful in the critical construction of this thesis.

I draw predominantly upon Helen Morales' *Antigone Rising* (2020) in the chapter 'Antigone's Afterlives', when addressing the question of why Antigone is a continued figure of interest and interpretation. For Morales, Antigone's myth has become 'one of the most meaningful for feminism and for revolutionary politics. She has become an icon of resistance. Of pitting personal conviction against state law. Of speaking truth to power' (Morales 2020: x). She draws a parallel between Antigone's courage and endurance in her girlhood, and real-world activism by young women, such as Greta Thunberg, who share the 'glamorous appeal' of a "girl against the world" (Ibid., xiii). Her text includes further examples of how contemporary feminists are creating innovative interpretations and analyses in Classics presently, which are particularly useful to my theoretical framework. Morales finds the mythic heroic tradition of killing Amazons symbolic; as disobedient and foreign women she claims that 'there is a relationship between the ancient fantasy of killing women and the modern reality' (Ibid., 3). Morales' stance is that we have inherited some beliefs about women from antiquity and that those beliefs 'form the imaginative scaffolding that underpins our beliefs about women today' (Ibid., 5). She evidences this by drawing a parallel between Greek heroes killing Amazons and the Isla Vista killings. Tracing misogyny propagated online by toxic men's rights groups back to the Greeks punishing Amazons in their myths for their sexual, social, and martial freedoms — since they are both 'punishment[s] of sexually renegade women' (Ibid., 6-7) — is a useful example of how an Ancient Greek mythological framework is useful for shedding light on contemporary misogyny. Moreover, it is in this analysis that Morales makes the point that she has 'worried about whether it is a crass move to make: too academic, too contrived', to compare trauma that is real and recent to ancient myths (Ibid., 14). She counters that by turning to ancient material that helps to illustrate how long-standing such cultural narratives are and how classical antiquity plays a role in legitimising violent misogyny today (Ibid., 14). This justification is at the heart of many authors' ethos when adapting Greek myth, such as when Pat Barker cites #MeToo, the Rohingya women and the rape capital of the world, the Democratic Republic of Congo, when writing of 'rape as an instrument of war' as influences on *The Silence of the Girls* (Barker & Brand 2018: np.).

Sexual assault is a recurrent point of inquiry in this thesis, due to its omnipresence in Greek myth and its revisitation by contemporary authors. It has been a continued source of inquiry for feminist classicists who have asked how we contend with the sexual violence of Greek myth as well as how we address the centuries of fetishised depictions of sexual violence from Greek myth. ‘Go into any art museum’, directs Morales, and you will see Daphne metamorphosing into a tree, *The Rape of Europa*, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, *The Rape of Proserpina*, ‘Lucretia, Leda, Polyxena, Cassandra, Deianeira...’ (Morales 2020: 66) – raped women have been the artists’ muses throughout the centuries. Furthermore, she argues that myths provide ‘a repertoire of rape narratives’ (Ibid., 66), including Phaedra who lied about being raped, Cassandra who was punished for revoking consent, and Medusa who was punished for being raped. For Morales, ‘predatory men still silence women; the removal of Philomela’s tongue is the original nondisclosure agreement’ and ‘the myth of Helen is perhaps the most dangerous of all the rape myths’ because it has been told and retold in so many different ways that it is impossible to discern whether she consents (Ibid., 72; 67). She continues that these rape myths<sup>13</sup> are ‘firmly entrenched in our culture’ and they certainly contribute to the normalising of sexual violence and rape culture in the West. As much as these myths concerning sexual violence provide the framework for rape culture, they also contain the seeds for #MeToo, which Morales reads in the sisterhood of Philomela and Procne, and the determination of Ceres/Demeter in her search for Proserpina/Persephone (Ibid., 72-4). Yet because such myths focus on the trauma, strength, and survival of victims, these myths can still resonate ‘even in our post-#MeToo world’ (Ibid., 74). It is these threads that are often pulled by contemporary feminist adapters, who can draw upon nuanced portrayals of women in myth or, alternatively, they can weave in new narrative threads where the women have not previously been given voices.

One striking reading in *Antigone Rising* is Morales’ analysis of Beyoncé with reference to entrenched ideas about whiteness in the Classics. Much like Audre Lorde’s open letter to Mary Daly, criticising her white, Eurocentric bias in *Gyn/Ecology*, Morales argues that ‘Beyoncé, a generation later, is having the same argument with, and through, popular culture,’ (Ibid., 107). It is an argument which demands an acknowledgement that ‘Greek and Roman antiquity have played a major role in constructing and authorizing racism, colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy,

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<sup>13</sup> That is, myths depicting rape, rather than untruths about rape itself.

Western-centrism, body normativity, and other entrenched, violent societal structures’ (Hanink 2017: np.). As Brill acknowledges, ‘Classical scholars have traditionally defined Greco-Roman antiquity as the origin of a Western civilization defined in Eurocentric, ethnocentric, and androcentric terms’ (Brill 1994: 400). Beyoncé has issued a challenge to this entrenched racism, firstly by adapting the iconography of Venus in her pregnancy photoshoots that ‘escape the common trap for black Venuses: denigration and hypersexualisation’ (Morales 2020: 105). Beyoncé’s challenge continues in the Carters’ music video filmed in the Louvre in which she *becomes* Nike and Venus when she performs in front of their marble statues and, more than that, ‘the juxtaposition of her black body with the white marble challenges long-held assumptions about whiteness, antiquity, and beauty’ (Ibid., 113). White marble “skin” has become idealised and romanticised, due in large part to the existing statues we have from antiquity. In fact, this is a misapprehension, since the statues were originally polychromous, though time has removed these details. In Beyoncé’s rendering, the kneeling statue of Hermes becomes Kaepernick taking the knee, lending the cultural capital of the ancients to the Black Lives Matter movement (Ibid., 115-6). Thus, Beyoncé’s performance becomes ‘a visual intervention in this controversy and a gorgeous and artistic dismissal of the old lies that conflate whiteness of marble with ideal beauty’ (Ibid., 114). Morales calls this ‘Beyoncé’s feminist mythmaking’ (Ibid., 118), evidencing the importance of this analysis in providing critical context for this thesis, since it is evidently not only authors, and white feminists who are performing subversive recreations of antiquity for activist purposes since Beyoncé functions as a compelling example of the current vogue for feminist mythmaking.

Ultimately, Morales concludes that ‘the creative adaptations of myth – the stories, videos, images, and novels that present radically different perspectives – are more than individual contestations: they amount to a formidable cultural change’ and that ‘subversive myth making is a process – one that involves the past and present and all of the versions in between’ (Ibid., 148). This is crucial to this thesis, where it is my dual argument that there is current literary momentum for feminist mythmaking and that current adaptations of myth function as part of a long tradition beginning with writers like Ovid and Plato. Charlotte Higgins — whose own text *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* was published in 2021 — reviewed *Antigone Rising* as ‘not your usual “why the classics are crucial” book’ and a departure from ‘lazy parallel-making’ (Higgins



2020: np.). Higgins' insights into the mythical tradition also inform my critical context. She propounds that 'creative readings, even misreadings, of classical texts and stories can be immensely generative' and that 'Creative misreadings and deliberate subversions are in fact central to the classical tradition' because the Greeks and Romans themselves adapted and misread the myths (Ibid., np.). This idea that classical mythology is defined by its mutability, and that they have always existed to be reread and repurposed by creators is central to my research: there is no one "correct" version of a myth, and therefore mythic adaptations in contemporary women's myth writing are as much an act of mythmaking as the work of Aeschylus and James Joyce. The originality of my research lies in its contemporaneity, in that I focus on the recent vogue in women's writing to adapt myth, and what these works reveal about current priorities within feminism. Indeed, Higgins perfectly summarises the activist potential in reclaiming myth, because 'for all that myths have often been used as a means of repression, they are only waiting to be repurposed as forces for liberation' (Ibid., np.). This what we are seeing in feminist novelistic and non-fiction retellings that repurpose myths that have previously been used in the service of patriarchy and colonialism, as well as in artistic renderings, such as in Beyoncé's performances.

Likewise, in *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (2020), Natalie Haynes argues that in the contemporary era, we have 'made space in our storytelling to rediscover women who have been lost or forgotten. They are not villains, victims, wives and monsters: they are people' (Haynes 2020: 3). The text itself is dedicated to revisiting the women from Greek myth beyond their symbolic, essentialised roles (Penelope is the good wife; Clytemnestra is the bad wife; Medea is the bad mother; Helen is the untrustworthy lover; Eurydice is the worthy lover...). *Pandora's Jar* is referred to throughout this thesis because Haynes' analysis of mythic women is particularly useful when I consider both how specific female figures have been utilised in myth and their potential for feminist repurposing. Phaedra is an interesting example, as her myth arguably resists adaptation through a feminist lens since it 'can be used to legitimise the myth that many women lie about being raped' (Ibid., 210). Haynes suggests that Phaedra is an important figure to consider in terms of women's agency in myth, since her actions are guided by Aphrodite. Conversely, Jennifer Saint chooses a different route in adapting Phaedra for *Ariadne*, where she is specifically exonerated from the crime of falsely accusing Hippolytus of rape and

therefore does not contribute to the legitimising of false rape allegations. In ‘Women in the Texts’, Haynes’ insights into Penelope, in particular, inform my argument because she points to two literary instances where Penelope is characterised beyond her virtue: Ovid’s *Heroides I* and Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*. Moreover, *Pandora’s Jar* often provides analysis that speaks to Haynes’ novelistic retellings. A key example of this insight lies in Haynes’ interpretation of Clytemnestra as ‘the mother of a daughter who has been slaughtered like an animal. Is it any wonder she nurses an unquenchable rage against the man who committed this crime?’ (Ibid., 151). This echoes Clytemnestra’s characterisation in *A Thousand Ships* where her perspective is introduced in the following manner: ‘Ten years was a long time to bear a grudge, but Clytemnestra never wavered. Her fury neither waxed nor waned, but burned at a constant heat.’ (Haynes 2019: 286). Thus, *Pandora’s Jar* not only provides a contemporary feminist classical interpretation of some of the most significant women from Greek myth, but it also works in conversation with Haynes’ novels that feature heavily in this thesis.

As well as contributing to my broader critical context, *Pandora’s Jar* provides specific areas of analysis which inform this thesis. For Haynes, there is ‘a strange assumption’ that ‘the myths have always focused on men and that women have only ever been minor figures’. While the ‘stories centred on men have been taken more seriously by scholars’ and have thus gained more cultural capital, it is also true that women have always featured in mythic texts (Haynes 2020: 285-6). Euripides wrote about the Trojan War with plays centred on the female characters, and Ovid’s *Heroides* retold many of the most familiar heroic myths from the perspectives of the women implicated in their stories. Hence, Haynes asks ‘What on earth makes us believe that the *Iliad*, where Helen is a relatively minor player, is somehow more authentic than Euripides’ *Helen*?’ and, more broadly, if Ovid and Euripides knew that ‘the stories of Greek myth could be told just as well from women’s perspectives as men’s, how did we forget?’ (Ibid., 286). Though Haynes’ sweeping statement that ‘she’s in the damn story. Why wouldn’t we want to hear from her?’ is colloquial, it does perfectly elucidate both the reason for myths being revisited from women’s perspectives and the academic value of analysing these retellings. Haynes’ defence of Ovid and Euripides as empathetic writers of women’s perspectives – indeed, she goes as far as to state that ‘Euripides is one of the greatest writers of female voices in antiquity and, frankly, in the history of theatre’ (Ibid., 189) – has greatly informed my research. I have referred throughout to

the Ovidian and Euripidean renderings of mythic women, particularly when finding the Homeric or Apollodorian writings insufficient. Ultimately, Helen Morales' *Antigone Rising* and Natalie Haynes' *Pandora's Jar*, both of which were written for audiences outside of the academy, are pertinent for academics in the field of contemporary feminist work in Classics.

Texts written for general audiences by trained classicists contribute to breaking down the ivory tower of Classics by making it more accessible and this is also the case with podcasts. Natalie Haynes was awarded the Classical Association Prize in 2015 in acknowledgement of her work bringing Classics to a wider audience for her BBC Radio 4 series *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics*. On this show, she acts in equal parts as a stand-up comic, lecturer, and interviewer as she explores and explains various figures from the classical world, ranging from playwrights and philosophers to mythical characters. Like the 'big books [for] big audiences', podcasts for general audiences on the women from Greek myth are also key contributions to current feminist classical discourse. Haynes' reinterpretation of Pandora's myth is a key example of how *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics* contributes to the critical context of this thesis. Haynes expounds that 'in the version of Pandora that we all know, she is always the only one responsible, for letting all these nasties out into the world. We never blame anyone else. [...] We just blame the beautiful woman' (Haynes, 25 May 2021: 19:15-30), though it has not always been so clear-cut. In Theognis' *Elegies*, there are good things in the jar, and in Aesop's fables, the jar is opened by a greedy man, 'but all these versions slip away' (Ibid., 20:30) in favour of blaming a beautiful woman.

The reception of Pandora's myth, for Haynes, 'is all a matter of mistranslation' because the Dutch scholar Erasmus mistranslated the Greek word *pithos*, jar, into the Latin word *pixis*, box, which is important because 'the box makes Pandora more malevolent'; Greek jars are terracotta and top-heavy, easily breakable, and therefore an unsafe place to store all the world's evils (Ibid., 23:30-25:00). Moreover, in artistic renderings of Pandora, 'it takes almost no time after Erasmus has mistranslated this word, from jar to box, for Pandora to be shown in art with a box, and really quickly it becomes a strongbox,' such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1871 painting of Pandora. This inevitably makes Pandora's act purposeful and malicious. As Edith Hall notes in her conversation with Haynes, 'Pandora's main function certainly until the 19th Century was to appear stark naked, especially in the quasi-pornographic paintings of the pre-Raphaelites', highlighting her

hyper-sexualised portrayal in art. That is, until ‘the late 20th Century when a few brave feminist scholars start to say: hey actually this is interesting’, particularly to anthropologically compare Pandora and her receptacle to Eve and her apple. In addition, Hesiod calls Pandora *kalos kakon*: this is an oxymoron, because *Kalos* means fine, beautiful, or good, and *kakon* means shoddy, ugly, or bad. Although, if both words can be either something visual or something moral, it is noteworthy that ‘the positive quality is always turned into something visual and the negative quality is always translated as something moral’ (Ibid., 25:45-26:40). If, in the Ancient Greek, Pandora is a beautiful-ugly *and* a good-bad, translator’s choices to make the first word aesthetic and second word moral (in the Oxford World’s Classics, Pandora is rendered a ‘pretty bane’), speaks to a long-held misogynistic villification of beautiful woman, therefore making Pandora ‘the original *femme fatale*’ (Ibid., 26:40). It is Haynes’ contention that Pandora is not bad, ‘she is both good and bad, beautiful and ugly, she is an agent of change’ (Ibid., 27:00), and she is a victim of misogynistic translations and artistic renderings. Natalie Haynes standing up for Pandora evinces a core tenet of this thesis, that female figures of myth have been victims of anachronistic patriarchy throughout their reception, but creative revisitations by contemporary scholars and authors create innovative interpretations of the mythical figures. Considering Pandora as ‘the original *femme fatale*’ and that ‘we always expect a beautiful woman to be bad’ also informs the critical context of this thesis in that it provides insight into longstanding misogynistic portrayals of women which have their roots in antiquity.

In a conversation with Liv Albert for the podcast *Let’s Talk About Myths, Baby!*, Haynes opines that with translations you are ‘getting someone else’s whole interpretation, and it’s only recently that women have been publishing, or been able to publish, translations’ (Albert 19 January 2021: 10:30). Representations of women from Greek myth, then, are mediated through further levels of misogyny. Albert, much like Myers, reports that she tries ‘if I can, to get my hands on translations by women’ (Ibid., 10:50). In this conversation, we can see a key discussion in contemporary feminist Classics being revisited, and the gynocentric appeal of choosing women’s translations being reiterated. Albert’s *Let’s Talk About Myths, Baby!* is an immensely popular podcast in the ever-increasing genre of myth podcasts, and its inclusion in this literature review is due in part to its cultural capital, as well as its identifiable goals to the research herein undertaken. In the podcast, ‘Myths of the ancient world are examined through a modern

intersectional feminist lens, focusing where possible on amplifying the voices of women, trans, and non-binary people' (Albert, 2021: np.). In her conversation with Natalie Haynes, Albert states that her goal with the podcast is to try 'to take back the women of mythology', reclaiming them from 'the men who wrote things down' who chose to focus instead on the men in myth. For Albert, 'it is important to examine how they [women] could be interpreted if you are constantly aware of [the patriarchy in mythic tradition]' (Albert 19 January 2021: 17:15-50). This study also seeks to examine Greek myth through an intersectional feminist lens, although specifically concentrating on adaptations of myth in contemporary women's writing. Moreover, Albert's stated goal of reclaiming mythic women from their patriarchal portrayals in ancient texts and their subsequent reception clearly comes under the purview of this study. Albert, unlike Haynes, deals predominantly with ancient sources in translation, providing innovative analyses of the myths, although she does also produce episodes dedicated to contemporary retellings, such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*; in the cases of Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* and, as we have seen, Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*, Albert engages in critical conversations with the authors themselves.

There are two episodes in the 'Conversations' series of *Let's Talk About Myths, Baby!* that are particularly useful for this thesis. Firstly, 'A conversation on Medusa and Fragility' conceptualises how feminist critiques of myth are received in contemporary, online culture. In this episode, Albert is in conversation with Anwen Kya Hayward, author of *Here, the World Entire*, a novella that retells Medusa's myth. Albert is fascinated with the reception of Medusa on the internet because it is 'unlike any other character in Greek mythology and [it] centres around deeply toxic masculinity and fragility' (Albert 5 January 2021: 1:55-2:20). Their decision to produce this episode was informed by their personal experiences online, having 'encountered a lot of angry men on the internet, with regards to Medusa specifically' (Ibid., 7:40). These cisgender men, in Albert and Hayward's opinion, are particularly offended by Medusa's feminist reception because it epitomises how 'women have carved a space into this typically male, patriarchal field of study'. Feminist thinkers have found this recognisable myth to be 'ripe for really great, productive feminist reception', using it as a means of talking about internalised misogyny, stigma, sexual abuse, and the #MeToo movement (Ibid., 8:00-9:15). In response to Garbati's *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* (2008), one Twitter user misguidedly argued that 'the statue was wrong because it wasn't how the myth actually went, and interpreting myth differently

to the “original version” is “millennial narcissism” (Ibid., 15:20). Hence, the Twitter user fell into the common pitfall that the oldest extant version of a myth (in this case, Hesiod’s account) is the original when it is widely accepted that there is no one “correct” or original version of any myth. Haywood expounds that myths can be interpreted in any way, that ‘you can read whatever you want into it because myth is such a good paradigm for you to make sense of the world as you experience it,’ but, crucially, ‘you have to be very aware of why you choose to interpret a myth a certain way, you need to interrogate your internal biases’ (Ibid., 27:10-50). For instance, if you reject Medusa’s myth as a story of sexual assault and victim blaming because you wish to preserve the heroism of Poseidon and Perseus, then this is evidently a case of misogynistic bias. This is a valuable conversation for the theoretical framework of this thesis, because it illustrates the misogynistic resistance to reclaiming myths for feminist purposes.

In ‘Conversations: The Many Faces of Myth, Classical Reception’, Albert and Victoria Austen discuss classical reception specifically in contemporary women’s novels. This episode of Albert’s podcast is important for introducing some of the key discourses surrounding feminist reception in contemporary novelistic retellings. Austen agrees that adapting myth is a matter of ‘creative licence’, and changing elements of myths is a key part of reception (Albert 9 July 2021: 15:20). Indeed, it is an argument voiced throughout this thesis that the instances where the authors have diverged from the myths, and particularly where they have introduced anachronisms, are some of the most interesting in terms of feminist adaptation. Austen specifies that adaptations using first person perspectives should be considered particularly ‘valid’ because they are cases of imagining how the (often previously side-lined) character feels during the well-documented events of the myth. It is particularly fruitful to compare the subjectivity of first person perspectives in ancient texts versus modern first person retellings, such as Odysseus’ account to the Phaeacians in the *Odyssey* compared to Circe’s first person narration in Miller’s *Circe*. Such a comparison raises questions like ‘if they are both inherently biased in some way, which one do we trust more, and why? Why do we feel empathy for one character, or not, and how does that change our interpretation?’ (Ibid., 16:20). When dealing with contemporary adaptations, we should ask ‘why was this reception made, at this time?’ (Ibid., 37:00). This question recurs throughout this study, considering, for instance, retellings that centre on sexual violence in the context of the #MeToo reckoning and retellings that queer myths with current

attitudes to LGBTQ+ communities in mind. The question is again raised in this conversation of the validity or originality of recent reinterpretations of myth. Albert and Austen utilise Bernini's sculpture of Apollo and Daphne (1622) as a metaphor because, depending on what perspective from which you view it, it is a different piece of art (Ibid., 49:55). From one angle, it is Apollo pursuing Daphne, and from another angle she has already metamorphosed into a tree. To call Daphne a nymph or a tree would both be correct, depending on one's perspective, and neither interpretation delegitimises the other. This is an astute metaphor, addressing the criticism that all adaptations are vampiric in some way, sucking the life, or relevance, from long-held interpretations. Contemporary receptions make the classics more accessible – there is, in effect, 'more Classics for everyone, more mythology for everyone' (Ibid., 27:50) – and this means that there is inevitably more diverse representation in retellings. For Austen, Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011) tells the LGBTQ+ community that there is space for us in Classics, and *Circe* (2018) makes it clear that there is space for women, particularly in the study of the Homeric epics. Ultimately, podcasts can be a site of conversation, documenting the most current and immediate discourse occurring in the field of feminist Classics. Most importantly, podcasts platform discussions of contending with myths of sexual violence in this post-#MeToo era, how we can challenge the exclusionary traditions in Classics, and how modern retellings are the latest in a long tradition of mythical reception.

In 'Rape or Romance? Bad Feminism in Mythical Retellings' Aimee Hinds acknowledges that feminist reception of ancient sources 'refreshes myth through the lens of otherwise voiceless characters' and aids in decolonising the Classics by questioning both ancient literature and the exclusionary nature of the discipline (Hinds 2019: np.). Hinds' article is particularly useful for my research because she stipulates that a 'reception isn't automatically feminist just because you've made women narrate the story, especially not if the story stays the same' (Ibid., np.), taking issue with retellings that unwrite mythic women's trauma under the guise of empowerment. Retellings that lean towards the 'suppression of themes that have the potential to be problematic today' in favour of sanitised, unspecific, and often romantic interpretations are valid instances of malleable mythic interpretation, although they are ultimately misguided in terms of feminism. Some relevant examples include Hades' abduction and assault of young Persephone, Achilles enslaving and raping Briseis, and Penelope's twelve slaves being hanged

for a crime that they had no agency to consent to. Hinds' examples of the titular bad feminism in mythical retellings are Nikita Gill's poetic retelling of the Hades and Persephone myth, in which Persephone calls Hades 'the kindest thing / that ever happened to me' (@nikita\_gill 15 February 2019) rather than a paedophilic abductor, and Atwood's unsympathetic rendering of Helen in *The Penelopiad*. In my study, Emily Hauser's *For the Most Beautiful* (2016) and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011) are also considered in this light. I argue that retelling the stories of previously silenced or sidelined women in myth is an act of the restoration of their agency. Yet, as Hinds clarifies, this is not achieved by 'denying them their trauma, or by removing the label of victim', agency is instead restored when the women can 'rise above their victimhood and become survivors' (Hinds 2019: np.). Therefore, 'true feminist retellings' are distinguished by the recognition and refusal to repress characters' liminality and suffering. Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and Anwen Kya Hayward's *Here, the World Entire* (2018) are all celebrated by Hinds as contemporary women's narratives that, rather than unwriting mythical women's traumas, engage with them in meaningful, and variously feminist, ways.<sup>14</sup> Hinds' call for more intersectionality and nuance in feminist receptions provides a useful foundation from which to analyse these adaptations.

I also wish to draw attention to the platform on which Hinds published her article. *Eidolon*, run by classicist Donna Zuckerberg, is an open-access article repository characterised by accessibility, both in terms of writing style by contributors, as well as in its rejection of exclusionary publishing practises – anyone, regardless of educational level or institutional affiliation, can write for *Eidolon*. Moreover, *Eidolon* is a challenge to the 'fragility' of Classics, inviting articles that are revolutionary or reactionary, or aim in some way to destabilise the ivory tower of Classics. It is a resource that I draw upon throughout this thesis, due to its intersectional, activist content that has been useful in various sections of this thesis. For instance, in the chapter 'Queering Myth', I utilise Clarke's survey of LGBTQ+ classicists (2019), Haselswerdt's call to re-queer Sappho (2016), and Lee-Chin's account of reading the *Iliad* as a victim of sexual assault (2020) in my engagement with queer reception in contemporary Classics.

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<sup>14</sup> As Austen notes, Barker's adaptation is different to its contemporaries because the author comes from the background of writing war narratives, rather than a Classics background, so *The Silence of the Girls* 'feels so real, it is actually describing a war [...] gruesome and brutal', rather than interpretations that include 'a romantic element' (Albert 9 July 2021: 51:20; 52:30). On the other hand, Austen finds classicist Emily Hauser's *For the Most Beautiful* 'less gritty' and 'more romanticised', or at least 'slightly lighter in tone' (Ibid., 58:30).



Much of this literature review has been dedicated to discourses surrounding contemporary feminist adaptations of Greek myth, though it is also important to consider theories of adaptation more broadly. Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) and Julie Sanders' *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006) have both been valuable to the formulation of this thesis. Indeed, my above discussion of adaptations as vampiric is drawn from Hutcheon's assertion that 'An adaptation is not vampiric' because 'it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying' and it is in no way 'paler' than the adapted work (Hutcheon 2006: 176). Instead, adaptations can 'keep that prior work alive' by giving it an 'afterlife'. The understanding of adaptations as a textual 'afterlife', as well as Hutcheon's proposition that adaptations are 'palimpsestuous' – because of their overt relationship to the adapted text (Ibid., 6) – is particularly useful in the final chapter of this thesis, in which I argue that contemporary feminist myth writing is inherently palimpsestuous due to its layers of classical reception. More broadly, Hutcheon's understanding of adaptations as '*a process of creation*' is particularly significant because she acknowledges that adaptation always includes 'both (re-)interpretation and then (re-) creation' (Ibid., 8). Of course, understanding translation and adaptation as acts of creation as much as they are recreations is central to my theoretical framework. In addition, the generative potential in revisiting and reinterpreting ancient source texts can hardly be overstated, particularly within the context of my research.

It is in broader theories of adaptation that we find new understanding of the value of story adaptation over original narration. As Hutcheon notes, 'the appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty' (Ibid., 114) – the value of an adaptation is in the promise of a familiar story as well as the uncanny variations that new creators provide. Sanders agrees that the rewrite 'transcends mere imitation [...] adding, supplementing, improvising, innovating. The aim is not replication as such, but rather complication, expansion rather than contraction' (Sanders 2006: 12), again confirming the idea that adaptations are a site of innovation and creation. For Sanders, dealing with adaptation requires 'reading alongside', dealing at once with the predecessor and its adaptation. Hence, adaptations require and perpetuate a 'canon' of literature, although they 'may in turn contribute to [the canon's] ongoing reformulation and expansion' (Ibid., 8-9). In her study of mythic adaptation in Cherrie Moranga's and Liz Lochhead's drama, Tekin expounds that 'any rewriting

of any text may be viewed as a metatext', since rewriting involves a deliberate dialogue with another text, bringing with it an implicit acknowledgement of its own textuality (Tekin 2012: 42). Mythic adaptation, then, at once creates a canon of mythic literature and expands upon it; as Albert and Austen note, classical reception includes works produced in the ancient world, such as by the tragedians and Virgil (Albert 9 July 2021: 41:30), meaning that the texts studied are 'expansions' of a canon of classical reception that can be traced back to antiquity. Sanders' study of adaptation specifically considers how mythic templates have been adopted, noting that 'myth is never transported wholesale into its new context; it undergoes its own metamorphoses in the process. Myth is continually evoked, altered, and reworked, across cultures, and across generations' (Sanders 2006: 64). In this study, I am concerned with how classical myths have been metamorphosed in contemporary women's literature, paying particular attention to how they have been 'evoked, altered, and reworked,' in the service of feminist politics.

In summation, the literature indicates that, although myth has a long history of being rewritten, the current moment is especially fertile for mythic adaptation by women. In feminist classicist scholarship, there are some recurrent issues that are particularly important in the context of this study, including how female figures from myth have been used as archetypes in the service of patriarchies throughout the centuries. More recent analysis by feminists has provided multiple questions to revisit in the consideration of these figures. In the study of any literature, the social and cultural context in which it is produced is vital to understanding the text: #MeToo, intersectionality, and racial, sexual, and gendered diversity all inform the authors in their feminist adaptations. My research is ultimately defined by the current publishing momentum for women rewriting myth as fiction, as well as the critical work being undertaken by classicists to rebuild Classics as a more inclusive and radical space. This study is therefore placed in the midst of this impetus, and its originality lies in its contemporaneity – novels included within the scope of this thesis have been published as recently as 2021. Conventionally, space is also afforded in a literature review to suggestions for further research, though I would propose that this research must continue with the same spurring momentum as the current vogue for publishing feminist revisionist myth writing.

## **Chapter 1: Women in the Texts**

The story of the women of antiquity should be told now, not only because it is a legitimate aspect of social history, but because the past illuminates contemporary problems in relationships between men and women.

Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives & Slaves*

Feminist revisionist mythmaking works, as Larrington indicates, to redress the fact that, historically, female figures within myths and mythology – the study of myths – have been ‘viewed reductively, purely in terms of their sexual function[s]’ (Larrington 1992: ix). They were defined in terms of virginity, sexual activity, and motherhood, and therefore relegated to the ‘catch-all category labelled fertility’ (Ibid., ix). A large part of feminist classical discourse has been thus dedicated to ‘expos[ing] the patriarchal bias of mythographers (past and present)’ and subsequently ‘feminist thinkers [within Classics have] actively reinterpret[ed] ancient myth, focussing attention on female divinities’ (Caputi 1992: 425). Of course, goddesses are not the only women who populate Greek myth, as the Bronze Age legends contain prolific instances of powerful female figures, including Hecuba, Andromache, and Cassandra in the Trojan royal family, Clytemnestra and Penelope in Greek ones, and Helen who was once queen of Sparta and then a princess of Troy. Feminist classicist Sue Blundell asserts that there are three models of femininity in classical myth: Goddesses, Monsters, and Mortals (Blundell 1995: 17). This chapter will focus on the third feminine iteration in Blundell’s model: mortal women. Specifically, I will analyse the adapted characterisations of Penelope, Briseis, and Helen in contemporary women’s literature. These women of the Homeric epics have been the particular focus in contemporary adaptations of myths by female authors. Penelope is the eponymous protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and a minor character in Madeline Miller’s *Circe*. Though Briseis, as Blundell points out, ‘remains by and large a shadowy figure [in the *Iliad*], whose own responses to her treatment at the hands of her male masters are not recorded by [Homer]’ (Blundell 1995: 48), she has become a key figure in contemporary feminist

adaptations. This is evidenced by the many adaptations of her, specifically in Emily Hauser's *For the Most Beautiful*, Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*. Helen has been the focus of much reproduction and re-framing throughout history, in literature, drama, art, and theory, yet she is not a significantly adapted mythological woman in contemporary novels, by which I mean that she is only just beginning to be afforded the same adaptive focus in women's myth writing. On the other hand, feminist theory, poetry, and drama provide many interpretations of Helen in modern contexts. I will analyse Penelope, Briseis, and Helen as female perspectives within the prominent, male heroic epics, and consider how these ancient, mythological women can be read in terms of modern feminist theories. Specifically, this chapter will demonstrate how Penelope can be read in terms of domestic labour and class intersections; Briseis is a particularly useful figure when considering consent, especially as it is represented in romance literature; and Helen remains a key figure as a symbol of societal expectations of female beauty standards as well as to open up discussions around agency.

First, it is necessary to contextualise the landscape of feminist classical discourse as it pertains to the research herein undertaken. Sarah B. Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives & Slaves* was a groundbreaking piece of classical scholarship because it aimed to redress the fact 'that most of the standard references in the field of Classics did not include women in their purview' (Pomeroy 1975; 2015: xii). She does this by critically exploring the roles of women in Ancient Greek religion, in the Bronze Age and Homeric Epic, and their standing in the societies and literatures throughout Athenian and Roman ancient history. She opens with the gods and goddesses of Olympus, because classical mythology provides the earliest recorded demonstration of male-female relationships in Greek civilisation and, more pertinently, 'the myths of the past moulded the attitudes of successive, more sophisticated generations and preserved the continuity of the social order. Hence, we begin with myths about women both mortal and divine.' (Ibid., 1). Pomeroy analyses the goddesses as archetypal images of human women, as envisioned by men, arguing that the distribution of valued skills and characteristics among a number of goddesses (rather than their concentration in one goddess) is indicative of patriarchy (Ibid., 8). Since 'A fully realized female tends to engender anxiety in the insecure male' (Ibid., 8), desirable characteristics are shared out between the goddesses, to avoid the Olympian women posing a

threat to gods such as Apollo or Zeus, or to the male authors and mythographers of antiquity. 'The fact that modern women are frustrated by being forced to choose between being an Athena – an intellectual, asexual career woman – or an Aphrodite – a frivolous sex object – or a respectable wife-mother like Hera shows that the Greek goddesses continue to be archetypes of female existence' (Ibid., 9). Before the Olympians – Zeus' patriarchal government – Gaia, Ge, and earlier, prehistoric and unnamed mother goddesses were rulers. Pomeroy opines that second-wave feminists find the theory of female dominance in religion attractive because they seek to replicate that power; moreover, if women were not subordinate in the past, it proves that women are not subordinate by nature (Ibid., 15). Hence, the role of women in prehistory and antiquity is not only a topic of scholarly debate, but also a modern political issue. In her introduction, Pomeroy opines that the 'story of the women of antiquity should be told now, not only because it is a legitimate aspect of social history, but because the past illuminates contemporary problems in relationships between men and women', primary among these problems is the consistency with which misogynistic attitudes and the roles enforced upon women in Western society have endured from antiquity to present (Ibid., xii). This speaks to the core thesis of this chapter, that the role of women in Greek myth has shaped gender relations throughout Western history, both in terms of men's attempts to impose symbolic patriarchal order upon societies and in later feminism, where the women from Greek myth are revisited and excavated to parse out feminist thought.

Since Cixous' transformational reinterpretation of Medusa, much feminist attention has been paid to this monstrous mythical figure. As Natalie Haynes notes, there is an interesting feminist reading of Medusa's story wherein 'Athene's transformation of Medusa as an act of sisterly solidarity' (Haynes 2020: 89) in which Athena's transformation makes Medusa undesirable to the male gods who could rape her, thus saving her from further sexual assault. Medusa's ability to turn men to stone also arms her against future attackers. However, as Pomeroy puts it, 'Athena is the archetype of the masculine woman who finds success in what is essentially a man's world by denying her own femininity and sexuality' (1975; 2015: 4); Haynes agrees, 'anyone who spends time with Athene in almost any story told about her will struggle to see her as a cheerleader for other women' (Haynes 2020: 89). Since Athena is the archetype of

internalised misogyny, this interpretation of ‘sisterly solidarity’ lacks plausibility, yet it does speak to the generative potential for feminist re-readings of women in mythology. For Cixous, Medusa is laughing; for some feminists, she is protected by a powerful sisterhood; in Luciano Garbati’s statue, Medusa beheads Perseus as a deliberate subversion of Benvenuto Cellini’s famous sculpture. Haynes claims that Garbati’s sculpture epitomises women’s feelings about gender-based violence because women experience violence in their everyday lives, and then they see it normalised ‘everywhere from newspaper headlines to the walls of art galleries and museums’ (Ibid., 106). This mythical monstrous woman has been used to speak to a wide range of issues for feminists throughout the decades, epitomising how women from myth continue to be a fertile source for feminist thought.

Haynes examines Medusa in her text *Pandora’s Jar*, which considers women from Greek myth in their portrayals from ancient source texts, through their translations and receptions throughout history, up to contemporary pop culture. *Pandora’s Jar* is a literary project that aims to redress the reductive portrayals of mythical women, since we have made space in our storytelling to rediscover sidelined women’s narratives, looking at them beyond one-dimensional portrayals throughout the mythological tradition to consider these female figures as fully realised people: ‘They are not villains, victims, wives and monsters: they are people’ (Ibid., 3). The benefit of this is that the misogynistic tradition of reducing women in storytelling to archetypes is highlighted and destabilised. An example from Haynes’ work is her reinterpretation of Clytemnestra: ‘Clytemnestra is a byword in the ancient world, and ever since, for a bad wife, the worst wife even. But for wronged, silenced, unvalued daughters, she is something of a hero: a woman who refuses to be quiet when her child is killed, who disdains to accept things and move on,’ (Ibid., 171). Under Haynes’ treatment, Clytemnestra is no longer the archetypally bad wife, but the epitome of the good mother. The chapter on the Amazons in *Pandora’s Jar* is also particularly relevant, as she explains their incredible popularity in the ancient world, and how they differed significantly from male heroes. ‘[O]ne of the most important things about these women is their collective nature [...] It’s a stark contrast to the winner-takes-all mentality that pervades the male hero ethos in, for example, the Trojan War.’ (Ibid., 116). For Haynes, the Amazons are an interesting example in their (mis)treatment in classical reception, as they

exemplify instances where ‘an accurate translation has been sacrificed in the pursuit of making women less alarming (and less impressive) in English than they were in Greek’ (Ibid., 118). Robert Graves’ poem *Penthesilea* epitomises this, where he has Achilles commit necrophilia on the eponymous Amazon’s body, something that is not present in the mythic source texts where Achilles honours the Amazon as a worthy warrior. Haynes writes that Graves’ *Penthesilea* is a ‘succinct illustration of the way female characters in Greek myth have been marginalised by writers in the (relatively) modern world’ because ancient writers and artists had no issue with a warrior queen whose battle prowess was superior to most men’s, whereas Graves has to diminish the woman and alter the story into one of sexual degradation (Ibid., 142). Graves’ anxious humiliation of the Amazons to belittle their prowess contrasts to their treatment in more recent popular culture. Haynes proposes that Wonder Woman, as played by Gal Gadot in the Patty Jenkins film, is the ‘ultimate warrior’, whose philosophy also reflects society’s altered attitudes towards war because they actively try to avoid wars (Ibid., 138-9). Moreover, Haynes makes a case for interpreting Buffy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a modern-day, Californian Amazon narrative, since she is a peerless warrior and ‘The Chosen One [becomes] the Chosen Many’ (Ibid., 142-4) when women across the world are imbued with Slayer powers in the finale, speaking to the collective that is central to the Amazonian legend.

Layers of misogyny have been added into Greek myth by later writers, to lend a sense of history to their sexism, which was not there in the originals; a large part of *Pandora’s Jar* is focused on the ways in which female figures in Greek myth have been marginalised by modern writers. Haynes specifies that women have taken centre stage in the works of Euripides and Ovid, the latter of whom did the same thing as the authors within this chapter — addressing the male heroes from the perspective of the women that people their epics (Ibid, 285-6). Though, as Pomeroy cautions, ‘the dramatic importance and emotional influence of women should not at all be mistaken for evidence of their equality’ (Pomeroy 1975; 2015: 18). Though ‘the significance of Helen and the other royal women of the Bronze Age [...] is undeniable’, the political and social power of even the queens was a fleeting, often double-edged, blessing (Ibid., 18). Haynes provides evidence for the significance of women’s perspectives in Ancient Greek literature, but

this does not equate to equal social standing for the women of myth, or for women in Bronze Age Greece. Haynes concludes:

If Ovid could see the stories of Greek myth could be told just as well from women's perspectives as men's, how did we forget? When people ask why tell the stories that we know best from the *Odyssey* from Penelope's perspective, or Circe's perspective, they presuppose that the story "should" be told from Odysseus' point of view. Which means the answer to this question should always be: because she's in the damn story. Why wouldn't we want to hear from her? (Haynes 2020: 286)

Penelope, Circe, Briseis, Helen — they are all in the story of the Trojan War and its aftermath, it is their story as much as it is Agamemnon's, Achilles', Odysseus'. Thus, in *Pandora's Jar*, Haynes advocates for the potential in excavating the systematically side-lined female perspectives present in Greek myth, to gain a greater understanding of both the myths themselves and women's roles in literary tradition. This approach to Classics has much insight to give regarding the misogynistic archetypes applied to women in Western literature throughout the centuries, and how these traditions can be subverted for radical reappropriation by women writers.

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### **Penelope:**

Penelope is a key figure in feminist classicist discourse because, beyond being the 'epitome of the good and faithful wife' (Larrington 1992: 74), she symbolises the uncertainty and uncanniness of an *oikos* (the home, the society) without the patriarch. As Felson and Slatkin point out, the domestic plot of the *Odyssey* asks 'How will the patriarchal domestic economy work, or not work, when the patriarch is gone, perhaps never to return? Will it survive? What are the obligations of the wife?' (Felson & Slatkin 2004: 104). Penelope's personality and plot provide illuminating parallels with both her husband and Helen. Odysseus and Penelope are



unified by scheming, and Penelope – in the domestic sphere, rather than the adventurous one – ‘[keeps] everyone guessing about her innermost feelings and intentions’ (Wilson 2018: 4) in a way that is distinctly comparable to Odysseus. Like Helen, Penelope is ‘Much-courted’ by the suitors, despite being a married woman, which mirrors Helen’s marriage to Menelaus and her later theft by Paris; moreover, Ithaca, besieged with suitors, inexorably mirrors Troy (Ibid., 4). If Helen is one of Penelope’s narrative foils, so too is Clytemnestra; Penelope is the archetypally good wife, and Clytemnestra is the epitome of the bad wife. This is supported by Pomeroy’s interpretation of the women of the Bronze Age epics, wherein ‘Penelope wins the highest admiration for her chastity, while [...] the ghost of Agamemnon [...] describes Clytemnestra’s infidelity in reproachful terms’ (Pomeroy 1975; 2015: 21). For Pomeroy, ‘Homer’s attitude toward women as wives is obvious in his regard for Penelope and Clytemnestra’, and this has modern implications because ‘[e]ven the virtuous members of the sex are to be forever sullied by Clytemnestra’s sin. This generalization is the first in a long history of hostility toward women in Western literature.’ (Ibid., 21-2). Indeed, in *Pandora’s Jar*, Haynes writes that, when we read the idealised account of Penelope as a wife, ‘We are witnessing a misogynist tradition which dates back millennia: praise one woman in order to criticise another. Penelope is a model of virtue against which other women fall short’ (Haynes 2020: 284). Indeed, in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, Penelope laments that her story has become ‘A stick used to beat other women with’ (Atwood 2005: 2). While Helen’s weaving is a testament to all of the men dying for her infidelity, and ‘Clytemnestra [uses] her weaving prowess to create a trap for her husband,’ Penelope’s weaving is a plot to remain faithful, to ensure ‘her freedom from unwanted entanglements with the suitors: the literal saves her from the metaphorical’ (Haynes 2020: 276, 274). It is this reputation of the idealised wife that is weaponised to denigrate other women that authors must contend with when adapting Penelope.

Before analysing Atwood’s interpretation of Penelope in *The Penelopiad*, it is important to note that her rewriting owes a debt to Ovid’s. Acknowledgment of an ancient author who also wrote from Penelope’s perspective establishes the influences on Atwood’s characterisation of Penelope, as well as traces the literary tradition of rewriting myths from sidelined female perspectives back to its roots in antiquity. Ovid’s *Heroides I* is addressed from ‘Penelope to the

tardy Ulysses:’ and opens with a very clear intent ‘do not answer these lines, but come,’ (trans. Isbell 1990; 2004). ‘I am here / alone while you loiter in some foreign place’ (Ibid): Ovid’s Penelope is in Ithaca, impatiently awaiting her husband’s return, struggling with the suitors while Odysseus lives through the events of the *Odyssey*. Moreover, as Isbell claims, Ovid’s Penelope is not naïve, ‘Penelope writes this letter out of a deep suspicion that Ulysses is detained not merely by adverse winds and seas but also by his own dalliance with other women’ (Isbell 1990; 2004: 1), such as when she writes ‘perhaps / it is only love that detains you: / be sure that I know how fickle men can be’. It is noteworthy that ‘while Penelope can be seen as a veritable paradigm of virtue, [...] Ovid also takes pains to show another side to her’ (Isbell 1990; 2004: 2), namely her knowing impatience. Haynes concurs that Ovid portrays a highly nuanced character, ‘as women imagined by Ovid so often are’: in Ovid’s rewriting, ‘she is not merely a cypher of good wifely behaviour, but a woman with complicated feelings and demands of her own’ (Haynes 2020: 284-5). Atwood’s modern novella shares with Ovid’s ancient poem a ‘similar instinct – to create a three-dimensional Penelope we can see clearly,’ rather than the unplaceable figure we find in the Homeric epic (Ibid., 285).<sup>15</sup> Like Ovid’s poem, Atwood’s novella is in first person, to give Penelope a chance to speak in her own words, against her insufficient portrayal in Homer’s epic and the misogynistic tradition of using her myth to oppress other women.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood adapts mythology into a space for women’s stories, in spite of its typically patriarchal roots. This is in line with Weigle’s assertion that mythology is dominated ‘by male scribes, scholars, artists, and “informants” and thus concerns men’s myths and rituals. Far more is known about women in mythology, about the female figures who people male narratives, enactments, philosophies, theologies, and analyses, than about women and mythology or women’s mythologies’ (Weigle 1999: 969). Penelope becomes the ‘scribe [or] scholar’ of this new, feminine mythology, as demonstrated when she says ‘Now that the others have run out of air, it’s my turn to do a little story-making. [...] So I’ll spin a thread of my own’ (Atwood 2005: 3-4). The woman is no longer the other, the male mythographers and mythic protagonists of the past are ‘the others’; this is a gendered subversion wherein the men are silenced in the process of

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<sup>15</sup> Natalie Haynes also adapts Penelope in an epistolary form in *A Thousand Ships* which is directly influenced by Ovid’s *Heroides* and Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*. For further analysis, see below and Chapter 5: ‘Palimpsests: Paratexts and Intertexts’.

othering. Stating that the men – and the male traditions of myth – ‘have run out of air’ indicates silence in a number of ways. This ‘air’ refers to the breath of life that the dead poets lack and the dead languages that these masculine myths were spoken and written in. Moreover, the ‘air’ refers to the inflation of ‘male scribes, scholars, artists, and “informants”’ over their female counterparts, suggesting that they were previously “full of [hot] air”. ‘Atwood’s Penelope is fully aware that she is telling her story after, and in response to Odyssean receptions — but also, in a more basic sense, to the *Odyssey* itself’ (Hauser 2018: 114). The image of Penelope ‘spin[ning] a thread’ also has a double meaning in that it refers to her creating her feminised myth, but also refers to her most famous act in the *Odyssey*, wherein she weaved Laertes’ funeral shroud by day, promising the suitors that she would choose one to marry when it was completed, and undid her weaving by night (Homer, *Odyssey* 2:100). The title of the novella imitates the formation of the *Odyssey* after Odysseus, ‘stating quite unambiguously that this is the story of Penelope. It is, in other words, the “herstory” of the *Odyssey*’ (Hauser 2018: 116). Penelope becomes the hero with her own epic, much like Odysseus’ *Odyssey* or Achilles’ *Achilliad*. The title of the novel and its opening lines immediately establish Atwood’s vision of Penelope ‘as both revisionist feminist and revisionist narratologist [who] is determined to redress the wrongs done to her in the subsequent retellings of her story’ (Ibid., 116). *The Penelopiad*, then, is established as women’s revisionist mythology from the start, and the novella uses its position as the “herstory” of the *Odyssey* to engage with the contemporary feminist concerns of power balances, domestic labour and empowerment, and the double discrimination of class and gender in its adaptation of the Maids.

The power balance within the novel is constantly in flux and speaks to the focus on women’s experience. At the start, Penelope is oppressed by Sparta and Ithaca’s patriarchal cultures. When Odysseus wins Penelope’s hand in marriage, she is passed over to him as a prize. Her awareness of her own commodification is clear in her use of the simile, ‘I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat’ albeit one ‘in a wrapping of gold.’ (Atwood 2005: 39). The language here clearly communicates Penelope’s commodification within patriarchy. The ‘wrapping of gold’ refers to her dowry, the fiscal prize that Odysseus won when he won her. She is a commodity of her father’s to be auctioned off, and henceforth a commodity of her husband’s,

who is rewarded for winning the competition with a number of valuable things, including gold and Penelope. She also describes herself as ‘meat’, suggesting the dehumanised way that she is viewed in this patriarchal society; ‘meat’ also has a sexual overtone, suggesting that she is valued for her flesh, her body. Penelope goes on to describe the value placed on meat in antiquity: ‘meat was highly valued among us – the aristocracy ate lots of it, meat, meat, meat, [...] bread, bread, bread, and wine, wine, wine.’ (Ibid., 39). The repetition of ‘meat’, ‘bread’, and ‘wine’ has an offhand tone, indicating that although she is a thing of value, value is something that the aristocracy has an abundance of. Zajko claims that Penelope ‘complains vociferously about the cultural authority of her husband’s version of the events that shaped both their lives’ (Zajko 2011: 195), and the patriarchal authority within the context of the novella becomes symbolic of the powerful ‘cultural authority’ that Odysseus’ version of the myth has.

Penelope’s patriarchal oppression is not her only problem within *The Penelopiad*; she also has to compete with the other female characters and their internalised misogyny. Penelope’s mother-in-law, Anticleia, is described as ‘circumspect’ (Atwood 2005: 60), suggesting that she is wary and disapproving; the description of her as ‘prune-mouthed’ (Ibid., 60) both furthers this image (because it suggests an expression of disapproval) and indicates that the feeling is mutual from Penelope, who dislikes her mother-in-law’s spiteful tone. This mutual dislike between the two women indicates internalised misogyny, which refers to women’s assimilation of sexist ideologies and practices, and the replication of those practices even in the absence of men (see Bearman et al. 2009: 11). Though patriarchy is notably absent since Odysseus has taken all eligible men to war, the women still judge each other by inherited harsh, patriarchal standards. Moreover, Odysseus’ maid Eurycleia also takes issue with Penelope: ‘She left me with nothing to do, no little office I might perform for my husband, for if I tried to carry out any small, wifely task she would be right there to tell me that wasn’t how Odysseus liked things done’ (Atwood 2005: 63). The language of servitude here – ‘little office I might perform [...] small, wifely task’ – exemplifies the hyper-patriarchal cultural context of the narrative. This passive-aggressive power struggle leaves Eurycleia with the (relative) power in the dynamic, as she is able to serve Odysseus which, within this context, is the only form of power the women can attain. The class divide between Penelope and Eurycleia is made evident when one contrasts Penelope’s

significant dowry to Eurycleia's value. 'Odysseus's father had bought her, and so highly had he valued her that he hadn't even slept with her.' (Atwood 2005: 60) – while Penelope is pleased with her valuation as a 'sort of gilded blood pudding' (Ibid., 36), which combines the gold and meat metaphors discussed above, Eurycleia is 'delighted with herself' (Ibid., 61) for not being raped repeatedly at her owner's discretion. As Pomeroy notes, '[t]he availability of slave women facilitated a sexual double standard in epic society. Kings were heads of patriarchal households which included slave concubines' (1975; 2015: 26). Sexual double standards are central to the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus has multiple affairs while Penelope's fidelity is necessary (Wilson 2018: 40). More broadly, 'there is a marked absence of close female relationships,' in ancient literature, which tend to 'promote female rivalry over female friendship' (Morales 2008: 49-50). Thus, in reproducing the hyper-patriarchal culture and subsequent internalised misogyny, *The Penelopiad* shines a light not only on patriarchal authority in Bronze Age Greece, but also how relationships between men and women, and amongst women, are negatively affected by patriarchy.

The power balance within the novel shifts when Odysseus leaves for the Trojan War. Penelope takes on the typically masculine role of kingdom upkeep in his absence. This is empowering since Penelope is portrayed as successful, and she 'soon had a reputation as a smart bargainer' (Atwood 2005: 88). Here, the use of 'smart' forces a comparison between Penelope and Odysseus, as Odysseus is characterised by his wit and wiliness in myth, with Odysseus being widely held as the wisest of the Greek heroes (Morford et al. 2011: 523). The description of Penelope as 'smart' implies that her intellect is equal to Odysseus'. Furthermore, Penelope enjoys this office and flourishes in a masculine environment. For example, she '[makes] a point of learning about such things as lambing and calving, and how to keep a sow from eating her farrow' (Atwood 2005: 88). There is an indication of improvement here because she 'learns', but there is also a gendered nuance in the professional language she uses to describe a pig eating her young. She sees this as an economic loss, as demonstrated by the professional language of 'sow' and 'farrow', as opposed to a more emotive focus on the mother/child bond between the pigs. This is what Marshment calls the 'signifying codes of power', in which women's power is assessed and validated within a patriarchal framework, and a woman is considered "strong"

within patriarchal terms — namely, rich, ruthless and invulnerable (Marshment 1993; 1997: 133). Nevertheless, Penelope has developed an understanding of Ithaca's agricultural economy, and successfully works within those economies for profit. Penelope is thus emancipated from her gendered oppression when there are no patriarchs present, and is thriving without her husband to oppress her. This recalls Felson and Slatkin's questions about how the patriarchal domestic economy will operate in the absence of the patriarch, and the obligations of the wife (2004: 104). In the *Odyssey*, Penelope — ever the obedient wife — excels beyond expectations to build up Odysseus' estate for his return. Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, compares her to 'a virtuous and godlike king' for '[ruling] a mighty people with good laws' as well as her efforts in making the 'earth bear forth wheat and barley' and the 'sheep have lambs' — that is, maintaining the domestic economy in his stead (Homer, trans. Wilson, 2018: 19:111-115). In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's motivations are more nuanced, since the portrayal of Penelope as simply obedient is subverted, and she thrives in the absence of a patriarch.

Feminist research on housewives is uniquely valuable when considering Penelope's myths in modern contexts. Ann Oakley's sociological research on women and housework are pertinent to Penelope's emancipation. She argues that 'Women's domesticity is a circle of learnt deprivation and induced subjugation: a circle decisively centred on family life' (Oakley 1974: 233). Oakley's focus on the domestic sphere relates to the fact that, in Atwood's text, Penelope thrives in the agricultural industry of Ithaca, where she escapes her previous domestic oppression. The unsympathetic language Penelope uses to describe the separation of a mother pig and her child echoes Oakley's theory that 'Male-dominated culture has designated as female all labours of emotional connectedness' (Oakley 1984: 201). Penelope has linguistically stripped away the potential 'emotional connectedness' between herself as a mother and the sow, and this is possible because her culture is no longer male-dominated, since her husband has taken all of the patriarchal force to war. Oakley claims that 'The principal mode of developing this sensitivity in women is the gender-differentiated nuclear family. Women mother. Daughters are transformed into mothers. An autonomous sense of self [...] does not need to develop.' (Ibid., 201) and this is identifiable in Penelope's relationship with her son. Telemachus reaches maturity, and we see Penelope's characterisation as a shrewd, empowered businesswoman falter. She reflects that

‘Once they're taller than you are, you have only your moral authority: a weak weapon at best’ (Atwood 2005: 131). The word ‘weapon’ shows Penelope challenging the patriarchal demand on women for sensitivity implying that Penelope is aware that the power balance between her and her son is in flux, as the violent imagery presents them as both vying for, or battling over, power. Her description of Telemachus as ‘taller’ shows explicitly that he has grown to manhood, but it also gives him an oppressive, looming quality, as though he is towering over her. Furthermore, her use of the second person (‘you only have your’) extends the relevance of her assertion to all women whose sons transition from children to participating patriarchs. As Angela Davis expounds in *Women, Race & Class*, ‘Just as a woman’s maternal duties are always taken for granted, her never-ending toil as a housewife rarely occasions expressions of appreciation’ (Davis 1981: 200): the feminist concern with the devaluing of women’s (domestic and maternal) labour is elucidated in Atwood’s novella, using a familiar mythological framework. For centuries, Penelope has been cast as the epitome of the good wife and mother, yet modern discourses focused on housewives and domestic labour enable her to be recast as an industrious character, independent from her relationships with her husband and son.

As well as her talent for industry, Penelope is also empowered by a scheming nature. She plots against the suitors by weaving a funeral shroud by day and unravelling it by night to postpone the day she would have to answer their proposals. As Jasmine Richards explains in ‘Rereading Penelope’s Shroud’, Penelope’s act was central to the domestic plot of the *Odyssey*, yet it has been largely ‘overlooked in dominant critical approaches to the text’, though more recent feminist classical scholarship ‘has convincingly argued for the centrality of Penelope and her weaving to the plot of the *Odyssey*.’ (Richards 2019: 125). When recalling the plot, Penelope says ‘Finally, a scheme occurred to me.’ (Atwood 2005: 112). The word choice ‘scheme’ exemplifies her strategic nature, again comparing her to Odysseus, who is characterised as a schemer in the *Odyssey*, where he is called ‘polytropos’ (Homer *Odyssey* 1.11), which means ‘of many ways’ — a reference to his scheming and well-travelled nature (Morford *et al.* 2011: 543). Felson and Slatkin interpret Penelope’s shroud ‘scheme’ as putting her on-par with her husband, viewing ‘Odysseus and Penelope, in particular, as consummate schemers’ (Felson & Slatkin 2004: 103). By using the word ‘consummate’ here, Felson and Slatkin indicate that Odysseus

and Penelope's marriage is completed by their similarities as schemers. Haynes also agrees that Penelope and Odysseus are 'well-matched' and that 'deceit is their underlying characteristic' (2020: 265; 276). It is my contention that the interpretation of Penelope as equal in scheming to Odysseus is empowering, as it puts her on a par with a figure that remains famous for his intellect. Moreover, it is indicative of one way in which feminist work in classical studies can be adapted to feminist literary studies of the contemporary novel, since feminist classicist analysis of Penelope can illuminate the treatment of her in contemporary women's writing.

Atwood's characterisation of Penelope as an intellectual equal – or indeed superior – to Odysseus is later paralleled in Madeline Miller's *Circe*, in which the eponymous goddess meets Penelope after Odysseus' death, as well as in Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*, which includes epistolary chapters from Penelope. Miller, like Atwood, problematises the previously two-dimensional portrayal of Penelope, 'Loyal, songs called her later. Faithful and true and prudent. Such passive, pale words for what she was' (Miller 2018: 292). Here, there is an explicit critique of the patriarchal literature, or 'songs', that characterised her as 'passive, [and] pale' and Miller, like Atwood, presents an adaptation of Penelope that refuses to conform to this. As well as the explicit comparisons between Odysseus and Penelope that the narrator notes, such as the observation that 'There were none like him, yet there was one who had matched him' (Ibid., 271), there are also more veiled references to their similarities. For example, Penelope's scheming nature is alluded to when Circe observes that 'I can spot the spider in her web.' (Ibid., 281) which, like Atwood's text, draws a parallel between Penelope's skill in weaving a loom and weaving deception. This is made more explicit when Circe 'realised how little she [Penelope] had said' (Ibid., 275) after a long conversation between them, again indicating Penelope's quick-wittedness and ability to deceive. Penelope and Odysseus are also equalised in Circe's estimation when she narrates 'She would have made an archer, I thought. That cold-eyed precision.' (Ibid., 282) — since Odysseus was a famously skilled archer, she is equating their potentially equal skill in archery to further highlight their intellectual equality. This adaptation of Penelope by Miller echoes Atwood's through the destabilisation of Penelope's silence and passivity, an attribute so highly praised in the *Odyssey* but considered insufficient and a by-product of patriarchal mythmaking in these retellings. Instead, she is intelligent and



accomplished. Equally, in Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* Penelope's epistolary interludes where she writes to the journeying Odysseus also portray Penelope's intellect as equal to, or perhaps greater than, Odysseus'. She judges that her errant husband is 'not quite as clever as me' (Haynes 2019: 59) and goes on to critique some of his most famous deceptions, particularly his failed attempt to avoid going to war by sowing the fields with salt. Haynes' Penelope condescendingly, disappointedly concludes the letter with 'You did the best you could [...] And it was nearly enough' (Ibid., 60). Again, then, Penelope is reimaged not only as a 'consummate schemer', but a potentially greater one. These identifiable interpretations point towards a feminist Penelope that is being (re)constructed in contemporary novelistic retellings, characterised by being at least equally matched to Odysseus in terms of intellect, and one that objects to her modest portrayal in earlier literature. This interpretation is supported by recent feminist scholarship, that has advocated for the centrality of Penelope's plot to the *Odyssey*, despite it being overlooked in earlier classical scholarship.

However, there is a danger that this feminist Penelope emerges as a patriarch in female clothing, which is to say that she gains her emancipation at the cost of subjugating women less fortunate than herself. This is most evident in the case of the twelve Maids; in the *Odyssey* the Maids slept with the suitors, and Odysseus and Telemachus hang them upon the former's re-entry to Ithaca. In Wilson's translation, the events are portrayed thus: 'Sobbing desperately / the girls came, weeping, [...] the girls, their heads all in a row, / were strung up with the noose around their necks / to make their death an agony. They gasped, / feet twitching for a while, but not for long.' (Homer, trans. Wilson 2018: 22:446-474). Wilson's choices as a translator speak to the increasing pathos afforded to the Maids in more recent readings of the *Odyssey*. For one, she calls them 'girls' and centres their 'weeping' and 'agony'. By contrast, Fagles (1990) calls them 'women' and has Telemachus call them 'you sluts—the suitors' whores!'. Wilson's translation marks a departure from the tradition of including anachronistic, modern sexist terms that are unrepresentative of the original text (Wilson 2018: 43-4). Wilson's choice is particularly important because she calls them 'slaves' rather than 'maids'. As Madeline Miller explains, 'those women have been called the maids traditionally in translations, the word in Greek is female slave, [...] when we acknowledge that they are slaves, we have to acknowledge that these

women would have had no choice, and Odysseus – theoretically the hero – kills them anyway’ (Miller & Guru-Murthy 2012: 36:00). In calling them ‘Slaves’, Wilson underlines their absolute lack of agency in the crime that they are hanged for. As Pomeroy notes, ‘slave concubines [were] available for [a King’s] own use or to be offered to itinerant warriors to earn their support’ (1975; 2015: 26), so the suitors, from a Bronze Age perspective, exploited Odysseus’ property, which is of course to discount the experiences of the women. This is encapsulated in the courtroom scene in *The Penelopiad*:

*Penelope*: [...] they were raped without permission.

*Judge (chuckles)*: Excuse me, Madam, but isn’t that what rape is?

Without permission?

*Attorney for the Defence*: Without permission of their master, (Atwood 2005: 181-2)

The court interlude of *The Penelopiad* thus spells out the issue that Odysseus and Telemachus have with the suitors’ assaults, which is a far cry from the problem of the maids’ lack of agency and consent. This is a key example of what Morford *et al.* note as ‘the work of feminist scholars [that] has led to greater flexibility and often [...] greater sensitivity in modern readings of classical literature’ (2011: 17), as we are seeing an increased sensitivity and pathos afforded to the underprivileged women in myth.

In *The Penelopiad*, the Maids are used to navigate the intersection between class and gender-based oppression. The structure of the novel is one way in which the class difference between the eponymous Penelope and the nameless maids (except Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks, who is named merely to give some personalisation to the maids). The maids’ narrative comes in the form of “Chorus Lines” and, in classical Greek drama, the choruses were comprised of groups of actors who would comment upon the happenings in the play and pass judgement, as though they were a jury consisting of common everymen, and were distinguished from the characters by the passivity of the chorus and the activity of the actors (EB 1998). This establishes a class distinction between Penelope and the Maids before their perspective is even given because – in being placed in a Chorus – they are framed in advance as average citizens. The

chorus line gives the Maids a platform to interrupt and disrupt Penelope's narrative, which allows her privilege to be highlighted and interrogated.

This class intersection within the Chorus Lines is particularly evident in the first interruption, entitled 'The Chorus Line: A Rope Jumping Line' (Atwood 2005: 5). This follows directly after Penelope's introduction, where she expresses her desire to tell her own story: 'Now that all the others have ran out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making' (Atwood 2005: 3). However, this previously empowering metaphor of asphyxiation is darkened by the Maids' first Chorus Line, where they introduce themselves:

we are the maids  
the ones you killed  
the ones you failed

we danced in the air  
our feet twitched  
it was not fair (Atwood 2005: 5)

The air that Penelope previously found liberating is now oppressive and asphyxiating to the Maids, thus setting in motion a metaphor which describes upper-class women profiting while lower-class women not only continue to struggle, but are further oppressed by their richer counterparts. The poignancy of 'air' is further accentuated by its rhyme with 'fair', which highlights the socioeconomic disparity between the women — while Penelope gains the air to speak, they are suffocated, because of their double discrimination as poor women. This scene draws attention to double discrimination, a term used to describe 'sexism intermingled with other forms of prejudice', including racism, homophobia, ablism, or – in this case – classism (Bates 2018: 157). Many prominent feminists are privileged (able bodied, white, and financially stable) and, as a result, feminist discourse has often been blind to the class intersection with feminism, such as the facts that women's work is undervalued and underpaid and women from different

socioeconomic backgrounds typically have very different access to education (McKelle 2014: np.). Therefore, class-blind feminism can lead to furthering hegemonic capitalist patriarchy rather than dismantling it (Ibid., np.), which is identifiable in the dynamic between Penelope and the Maids because she socially and financially profits while they are ‘failed’.

Penelope’s privilege is exemplified in “The Chorus Line: If I Was A Princess, A Popular Tune”. When she marries Odysseus, she reflects that she ‘could hardly wait to get away from the Spartan court’ because she ‘hadn’t been very happy there,’ (Atwood 2005: 49); she remembers that her father tried to kill her, and her cousin Helen mocked her. Initially, this invokes pity for Penelope, but this reflection is immediately followed by “The Chorus Line: If I Was A Princess, A Popular Tune”, where Penelope’s suffering is put into perspective by addressing her privilege. The Chorus Line opens with the lines ‘If I was a princess, with silver and gold, / And loved by a hero, I’d never grow old’ (Ibid., 51). Here, we are reminded of Penelope’s privilege in terms of her social standing, wealth, and immortalisation in history, which starkly contrasts to the Maids who ‘make the soft beds in which others do lie’ (Ibid., 52). Princesses such as Penelope have the socioeconomic privilege, here symbolised by the ‘soft beds’, while the maids only have servitude. In both the Chorus lines “A Rope Jumping Line” and “If I Was A Princess, A Popular Tune”, Penelope’s privilege is highlighted, as her problems of being silenced and bullied are contextualised with a class lens, in which we are reminded that she is a princess, while the Maids are dually oppressed by gender and class, and their ending is far more tragic as a result.

However, there are a number of ways in which the class divide between Penelope and the Maids is breached. Hilde Staels argues that the incongruity in Penelope’s language complicates the class divide between the eponymous character and the Maids. Staels recognises a comparison between ‘Atwood’s “noble” Penelope incongruously [...] us[ing] vulgar speech’ and ‘the maidservants who use vulgar speech in the chorus lines’ (Staels 2009: 107) — this shared linguistic technique points towards the shared experiences of the women in *The Penelopiad*, regardless of class distinction. Staels further argues that this use of vulgar language not only indicates an equalising kinship between the female characters that remedies ancient class distinctions between Penelope and her maids, but also serves to dethrone the Homeric epic (Ibid., 107). In Staels’ interpretation, ‘Atwood’s burlesque first-person narrators undermine high

Homeric style by using a trivialising transgressive speech’ (Ibid., 107). Penelope and the Maids are seen not as opponents in class warfare, but united in their challenge to exclusionary traditions in Classics. Penelope’s vulgarity – such as when she calls her cousin Helen a ‘septic bitch’ (Atwood 2005: 131) – and the Maids’ vulgarity – for instance, when they recall their rapes by the suitors, ‘hoist our skirts at their command / For every prick and knave’ (Ibid., 126) – work alongside one another to ‘[create] a discordance between a noble and low register’ (Staels 2009: 107). The women’s vulgarity not only unites them, but works to dethrone the elevation of the Homeric epic, and patriarchal traditions within Classics as a whole.

While Staels argues that the vulgar language unifies the women within *The Penelopiad* beyond class restrictions, vulgar language cannot in itself level the class divide between Penelope and the women she owns. The vulgarity is an act of parody, and an allusion to the literary tradition of parodying epic poetry. This tradition arguably began with Homer himself, who was originally attributed to writing the *Batrachomyomachia*, or “The Battle of the Frogs and Mice” — a parody of the *Iliad* and the Trojan War. As Rose indicates, although the mock-epic may have been written instead by Pigres, it can still be categorised as Homeric by the era in which it was written and its form as an epic poem. The poem is distinguished as parody by its ‘imitation of form with a change to content’ (Rose 1993: 15) which is, broadly speaking, the definition of ancient parody. Rose goes on to trace traditions of parody from ancient to modern (post-Renaissance) to postmodern literature and concludes that the techniques and devices of parody may have changed, but parodying epics is a literary tradition that can be traced through the ages (Ibid., 278). *The Penelopiad*’s vulgar language can therefore be understood as parodic because, despite the fact that it does not conform to the form of the epic, the novel’s mirroring of the *Odyssey* and debasement of its characters (the mockery of Odysseus by Penelope and the Maids; the mockery of Penelope by the maids; and Penelope’s debasement by her vulgarity) establishes the novel as parodic. Yet, ‘unambiguously comic works such as Aristophanes’ *Frogs* [show that] the use of parody may aim both at a comic effect and at the transmission of both complex and serious messages,’ (Ibid., 29). Therefore, this parodic reading of *The Penelopiad* does not diminish its political impact, but rather can be understood as a tool deployed to denote ‘complex and serious messages,’ particularly in terms of gender and class. Evidently, parody is

part of a long-held tradition when it comes to the classical epics and, further to this, ‘parody is a witty translation’ (Schlegel 1957: 118, fr. 1108 in Maguire 2009: 174) that ‘transforms a host text without obliterating it’ (Maguire 2009: 174). Thus, reading *The Penelopiad* in terms of parody makes the novella an active participant in the classical tradition, the most recent in a tradition of parodying epic that begins with the works of Aristophanes and Ovid.

The Maids’ intellectual growth constitutes another way that the class divide between Penelope and the maids is breached. Staels views the twenty-first century courtroom Chorus Line as an example of the anachronisms within the novel which dethrone the Homeric epic, arguing that the ‘boundary between the time of the ancient epic and that of the contemporary novel is [...] crossed when the maids summon twelve angry Furies to take revenge on Odysseus during the twenty-first-century trial’ (Staels 2009: 106). The court scene in “The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids” is also an example of the Maids’ intellectual progression from bawdy songs to lectures and courtrooms, which is how the maids ascend beyond their class subjugation within the novel. The Maids’ Chorus Lines begin with quite simple forms, such as “A Rope-Jumping Rhyme” where the recurring chorus of ‘we danced in the air / our bare feet twitched / it was not fair’ (Atwood 2005: 5) is a key example of this simplicity. The ABA rhyme scheme, the single syllable words, and the lack of capital letters and punctuation all exemplify this simplicity. By contrast, towards the end of the novel, the Chorus Lines progress from simple, often bawdy, songs to “The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture” and “The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids”.

In “The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture”, the Maids present a nuanced interpretation of themselves as ‘twelve moon-maidens, companions of Artemis, virginal but deadly goddess of the moon’, making their hangings ‘ritual sacrifices, devoted priestesses doing [their] part’ (Ibid., 164). Rather than being murdered by the oppressive patriarch who was reclaiming his kingdom, the Maids’ deaths become ritual sacrifice for a goddess cult. The Maids reinforce this by interpreting Penelope as ‘our High Priestess’ (Ibid., 165) so that their number grows from twelve – as in ‘twelve months, [...] month comes from moon’ (Ibid., 163) – to thirteen, to match the number of lunar months, furthering their interpretation of the Maids as the members of a Moon Cult dedicated to Artemis. This lecture becomes a metatextual analysis of

the novel itself, and the Maids ‘deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap’ (Ibid., 166). This colloquial language, reminiscent of modern anti-feminist arguments, or ‘trolling’ (see Bates 2018: 1-24), relates back to the discourse surrounding parody. The Maids’ use of this phrase is ironic, as it stands starkly in juxtaposition with their otherwise academic language; here parody is used to discredit anti-feminist criticism by making it seem uneducated in comparison to the Maids’ erudition. The Maids become academics reading the myth of Penelope – and *The Penelopiad* – through an intersectional feminist lens, in the same way that Margaret Atwood herself has rewritten Penelope’s myth as a feminist re-imagining.

To sum up, Penelope is a renewed source of interest for feminists, who advocate for the importance of the domestic plot of the *Odyssey* and the significance of her weaving. Moreover, Atwood’s novella is the foundation, not only of rewriting Penelope as a schemer equal to Odysseus and a character who objects to her modest reputation, but also the starting point of this current trend of feminist adaptations of Greek myth. Adapting Penelope also affords an opportunity to meaningfully engage with the double discrimination of class and gender, as her myth is inextricable from the Maids who were murdered under her care. In *The Penelopiad*, the Maids’ intellectual progression allows them not only to ascend past their class restrictions, but also to actively shape their own distinct critical discourse to highlight their oppression.

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### **Briseis:**

While Penelope remains a famous figure of Greek mythology, recognisable as Odysseus’ loyal and patient wife, Briseis has fallen into comparative obscurity. As Isbell indicates, in the *Iliad*, Briseis is ‘scarcely developed and she is little more than a pivot around which the fabled wrath of Achilles is developed’ (Isbell 1990; 2004: 19). The fact that Briseis is relatively forgotten in contemporary culture makes her a prime candidate for feminist reimaginings. In ‘Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction’, Susan Sellers theorises that ‘Feminist rewriting can [...] be thought of in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and a task of construction - of bringing into being enabling alternatives’ (2001; 2011: 189). Sellers stresses the importance of finding a balance in retellings that involves

‘keeping and benefitting from those elements which are still potent for us, while discarding or revitalising those which are dead, deadly, or simply no longer appropriate’ (Ibid., 188). Briseis’ myth falls into the latter category, as her comparative obscurity (when considered in relation to, for instance, Penelope, Helen, or Clytemnestra) means that her myth is ripe for ‘revitalising’, and adapting her is ‘a task of construction’ more than one of exposition or revisitation. The obscurity of Briseis accounts for the divergences in her reinterpretations. While Atwood and Miller’s Penelopes were clearly comparable, Emily Hauser, Madeline Miller, and Pat Barker all interpret Briseis in very different ways, in terms of her background, her relationship with Achilles, and her ending. The key questions that arise when adapting Briseis include what background to give her when there is so little offered in ancient texts, whether she could ever consent to a sexual relationship with Achilles, and how to end her story since her fate is also a matter left unresolved by Homer.

In the *Iliad*, Briseis’ background is only mentioned once, and it is focused on the experiences of ‘The brilliant runner Achilles’ who ‘lay among his ships, / raging over Briseis, the girl with lustrous hair, / The prize he seized from Lyrnessus— / After he had fought to exhaustion at Lyrnessus,’ (Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Fagles, 2:784-787). This scene is dedicated to Achilles’ present heartbreak at losing Briseis to Agamemnon and his previous victory. In the *Iliad*, Achilles recalls that he ‘toppled the vaunting spearmen Epistrophus and Mynes, / [...] All for Briseis’ (2:789-790). Pat Barker’s Briseis in *The Silence of the Girls* has the backstory that is the most faithful to the *Iliad*, as she is the Princess of Lyrnessus, married to Prince Mynes (Barker 2018: 6-7). This early adherence to Homer’s text highlights that later parts of her story – particularly what happens to her after she is returned to Achilles – are left unwritten in Homer. Similarly, in *For the Most Beautiful*, Hauser presents Briseis as the princess of Lyrnessus, wife of Prince Mynes (Hauser 2016: 43, 64) and, further to this, makes her the princess of Pedasus before her marriage. Though this is not in the Homeric version, Hauser explains in the endnotes that ‘Lyrnessus clearly lay between Pedasus and Thebe in Homer’s description of the geography of the Troad [the peninsula on which Troy was built]’ (Ibid., 469). This provides a backstory for Briseis before her marriage, which makes geographical and socio-economical sense. Therefore, as well as providing the perspective of Briseis during the events of the *Iliad*, since ‘despite their



vital role in setting up the plot, Briseis and Krisayis [Chryseis]<sup>16</sup> are subsequently rarely mentioned' (Ibid., 455 [endnote]), Hauser also provides a convincing backstory for Briseis, which Homer overlooked. This excavation of the woman's narrative of the Trojan War is in-line with the aims of feminist revision in which the previously overlooked woman's stories are explored. As Morford *et al.* explain, 'Feminist critical theories have led to many new [...] interpretations of classical myths. They approach mythology from the perspective of women and interpret the myths by focusing especially on the [...] situation of their female characters' (2011: 16-7). Overall, the amount of detail afforded to Briseis' personal (pre-Achilles) history in Barker and Hauser's novels speaks to the foregrounding of women's stories from Greek myth in contemporary feminist adaptations.

By contrast, in *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller's Briseis has a different heritage: Patroclus narrates that 'she was an Anatolian farm girl' (Miller 2011: 215). This characterisation of Briseis as a farm girl, as opposed to a princess, is reinforced by her physical appearance, as Patroclus 'saw how dark her eyes were, brown as the richest earth,' and describes her skin as 'a deep brown' (Ibid., 214-5). While Achilles and Patroclus are coded as caucasian, Briseis is not; the repetition of 'brown' and 'dark' in her physical description establishes her as a woman of colour. In framing Briseis explicitly in racial terms, Miller's text provokes a parallel between antiquity and more modern examples of slavery. It is true that much less detail is afforded to Briseis in *The Song of Achilles*, indicating that retelling the narratives of the female characters that Homer overlooked is not the primary motivation for Miller's text.<sup>17</sup>

Since there is only one line that refers to Briseis' background, and her character is so underrepresented in the *Iliad*, this makes her a rich resource for contemporary adapting authors. The gaps in Briseis' story leave plentiful space to create a new narrative for her — this is what Maguire, in relation to Helen's appearance, calls 'the blank space of nonrepresentation', that is, a blank to be filled in by later thinkers who revisit her (2009: 40). Briseis' blank narrative is extreme in comparison to the other women within the scope of this chapter, Penelope and Helen, whose myths are more complete in the Homeric epics. Briseis is a slave and a foreigner,

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<sup>16</sup> Hauser chose this translation of the character's name, rather than the more anglicised Chryseis, to avoid confusion for the reader, for whom this spelling may render it too similar to Briseis; she maintains that 'the translation Krisayis is, in fact, equally true to the Greek' (Hauser 2016: 455 [endnote]). Hauser's literature can therefore be categorised as general or romance fiction, but it is evidently informed by her academic research.

<sup>17</sup> This will be further explored in Chapter 3: 'Mythic Masculinities' and Chapter 4: 'Queering Myth'.

potentially also a woman of colour, compared to Penelope and Helen, who are Greek and royalty, therefore accounting for her narrative being overlooked in ancient sources. The adapting potential for Briseis' story is particularly prevalent in her divergent relationships with Achilles in these different texts.

In *For the Most Beautiful*, Emily Hauser presents the most dissimilar iteration of Briseis and Achilles' relationship, as she portrays it as a romantic, consensual one. The story opens with a prophecy that "He who seeks Briseis' bed shall then her brothers three behead." (Hauser 2016: 45). This causes trouble when her family is trying to find the princess an appropriate husband, and causes more problems still when Achilles raids the land and, true to the prophecy, kills her three brothers, as well as her father and her husband. Yet, when Briseis sees Achilles kill her entire family, she focuses on 'His eyes glitter[ing] in the dark, the skin of his arms and chest tight over smooth muscles, [...] His strangeness [that] was painfully gorgeous, [and] his slim height' (Ibid., 133). Here, the focus on Achilles' sexually alluring physical features, such as his eyes, muscles, and height, demonstrates Briseis' attraction to him upon first sight, covered as he is in the blood of his victims, namely her family and the people of Lyrnessus. The portrayal of Achilles and Briseis' relationship as mutually passionate has its roots in ancient literature. In *Heroides* III, Ovid has Briseis recount their mutual passion, 'You will remember when my arms touch your neck; / the sight of my breasts will stir your heart' (Ovid, trans. Isbell 1990; 2004). Although, Isbell notes that, for Ovid's Briseis, 'the attraction identified as love is dangerously close to the fear of abandonment' and that their relationship is notably not 'that of two lovers made equal by the intensity of their affection' (Isbell 1990; 2004: 19-20). For Ovid, Briseis' feelings for Achilles are necessarily informed by her uncertain future as Achilles' prize in Agamemnon's camp and her subjugation under a man who killed her family and is at once her 'lover and lord' (Ovid *Her.* III). Hauser's choice to have Briseis consent, to portray their relationship as a romance, is perhaps a response to what Pomeroy calls the 'grim picture' of the 'endless catalogue of rape in Greek myth' (1975; 2015: 12). A consenting Briseis does not become one of the 'endless catalogue' of victims of sexual violence in Greek myth.

Further to the above, Pomeroy offers 'the erotic fantasies of modern women' as another perspective from which to view myths about rape (Ibid., 12). She suggests that 'women

frequently enjoy the fantasy of being overpowered, carried away, and forced to submit to an ardent lover' so perhaps 'Greek women dreamed of being Leda enfolded by the soft, warm caress of Zeus,' (Ibid., 12). Under this interpretation, Briseis consenting to the conquering Achilles becomes a sexual fantasy, though one that admittedly is 'a symptom of masochism, [and] the result of women's repression by society' (Ibid., 12). This jarring theory from Pomeroy is perhaps accounted for because the misapprehension that violence was welcome in sexual initiation was still ingrained in law until the 1970s (Sanyal 2019: 11). It is therefore evident that Hauser's choice to portray Briseis and Achilles' relationship as a romance recalls troubling and outdated perspectives on sexual violence, namely that it can be explained away by women's sexual fantasies. This discussion gestures towards a significant contention in classical scholarship, that which Morford *et al.* in their introduction to feminist classicist scholarship call the 'fertile and seminal topic' of the theme of rape (2011: 19). 'What are we today to make of the many classical myths of ardent pursuit as well as those of amorous conquest? Are they religious stories, are they love stories, or are they in the end all fundamentally horrifying tales of victimisation?' (Ibid., 19-20). Put simply: how do we contend with the prevalence of rape in Greek myth and literature? In the case of *For the Most Beautiful*, the omnipresence of rape in Greek myth is apparently rectified by changing the central relationship to one shaped by mutual lust and affection.

Hauser also perpetuates troubling traditions in romance literature when it comes to consent. Brownstein points out that 'The heroine [in the romantic tradition] may say or even think she is of no importance; people may try to use her as a pawn, a mere means to their ends' (1982: 35). Romance heroines often lack agency beyond choosing who to marry and, despite often being the protagonists, their (sexual and social) desires are secondary to what society and the male characters demand. The trope of problematic consent in romance literature is particularly prevalent in contemporary contexts, because the '#MeToo movement has sparked a reckoning about power, sex, and consent that has already reached deep into the entertainment industry, inspiring conversations about how to build a better popular culture' (Faircloth 2018: np.). Although romantic and erotic fiction was initially 'marked by consent that was questionable at best and totally absent at worst', the genre has progressed to the point where 'Navigating consent [must be] an essential element of the romance novelist's craft' (Ibid., np.). Because of

contemporary cultural discourses surrounding consent and power dynamics, romance novels ought to reflect the increasing demand for informed consent. As Sanyal explains in *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo*, ‘#MeToo isn’t just about sexual crimes but about a much wider discussion of sexual ethics’ (Sanyal 2019: 181). Can Briseis consent in a way that encompasses the sexual ethics of this, a post #MeToo, era? In *For the Most Beautiful*, Briseis consents to sex with Achilles ‘Because nothing else made sense, except the closeness of his body against [hers...] and that [they] were together’ (Hauser 2016: 253). The typically romantic language is intended to suggest a modern romance, and it is arguable that this portrays a sex-positive feminist message in which Briseis is making her own choice. However, when Achilles takes Briseis as his war prize and sex slave, he says “‘I shall not force you, [...] No one should make love because they have to. [...] But remember this, Briseis, [...] You *will* come to my bed. I shall not wait forever.”’ (Ibid., 187-8). Achilles tells Briseis that he won’t rape her, but that she ‘*will*’ – in which the ‘*will*’ is italicised for emphasis – have sex with him, and that his patience has limits. This is the man who killed her entire family, razed her city, and has taken her as a bed slave. While the language of romance is an attempt to recast Achilles and Briseis’ mythic relationship in terms of modern romance literature, the coercive consent suggests that this is an outdated model of romantic literature, ‘marked by consent that was questionable at best’. In summation, Briseis’ consent ‘doesn’t break with gender scripts of women as passive recipients of men’s violent desires’ (Sanyal 2019: 105), and therefore fails to redress the litany of sexual violence in classical and romance literature.

In terms of power dynamics, Achilles is literally Briseis’ owner, and therefore she could not truly consent, since she does not have the power to withhold consent. The National Sexual Violence Resource Centre (NSVRC) clarifies that ‘consent can be complicated when one partner holds more power than the other’ (NSVRC Online 2019: 1) and lists a number of examples of power imbalances. Relevant to Briseis and Achilles, the NSVRC specifies that ‘Someone may have more social privilege than their partner – [...] White privilege, male privilege, and other unearned advantages are part of the power some of us bring to relationships’ (Ibid., 1). Achilles has an excess of privilege, because not only is he a man in a society where women had no agency, but he is also the leader of the Myrmidon army and a key hero of the Greek army, while

Briseis is a prisoner of war. In terms of modern conceptions of consensual relationships, Briseis and Achilles' relationship in *For the Most Beautiful* is problematic, in terms of the social understanding of sexual violence as well as in regard to its categorisation in the romance genre. As Hinds argues, a reception is not automatically feminist because it has a female narrator; if motifs of sexual violence and systemic oppression are ignored or glossed over in the retelling, misogynistic tropes that can lead to actual violence are perpetrated, rather than remedied (Hinds 2019: np.). Hauser's novel cannot therefore be categorised as a feminist adaptation of Greek myth simply because Briseis is a narrator. The choice to have Briseis consent to Achilles is indicative that the novel chooses romance over redressing the recurrent themes of coercion to violent rape that have persisted throughout the centuries.

However, the genre identification of Hauser's novel as a romance is complicated by the academic endnotes. It concludes with an "Author's Note", in which she comments on the silencing of Briseis and Chryseis despite their necessity in the opening of the *Iliad*, considers whether the *Iliad* is solely mythological considering the archaeological evidence that confirms Troy's existence and Homer's accuracy in locating it, and asks how faithful her own text is to Homer's. Hauser notes that 'all the main events and facts come from the *Iliad*' (Ibid., 457 [endnote]) but she has created the backstories, characteristics, and endings for Briseis and Chryseis due to their lack thereof in the *Iliad*. Further to this, Hauser provides an explanation of the Bronze Age Calendar that she deploys in the novel, and a Glossary of Characters, in which she justifies her use of the Trojan names for the gods by referencing the Hittite texts and the Mycenaean Linear B tablets (Ibid., 461 [endnote]). Hauser herself has a doctorate in Classics from Yale University, and is a Lecturer in Classics and Ancient History at the University of Exeter<sup>18</sup> (Emily Hauser Online 2019: np). Her academic background accounts for the geographical and social accuracy of Briseis' backstory, and her research into women's literature and classical reception led to her writing *For the Most Beautiful* to complete the unfinished stories of Briseis and Chryseis (Hauser 2016: 455 [endnote]). There is a fundamental tension between the novel's problematic romance tropes and Hauser's academic background and erudite

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<sup>18</sup> Hauser's PhD thesis investigates women in classical literature and contemporary women's writing in English. For further analysis, see Chapter 5: 'Palimpsests: Paratexts and Intertexts', where I consider her treatment of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia*.

endnotes which indicates that, although Hauser's interpretation of Achilles and Briseis' relationship is problematic, her work is valuable to this research due to its historical accuracy over feminist concerns — a marked contrast to other texts within the scope of this chapter, that sacrifice accuracy to prioritise feminist interpretations.

In the "Authors Note", Emily Hauser states that Briseis and Chryseis' experiences as women in wartime can be generalised to 'female prisoners of war' throughout history which 'makes us reflect on the experience of war for everyone' (Ibid., 456 [endnote]). Similarly, Pat Barker's intention in *The Silence of the Girls* was to use the ancient story to bring awareness of 'issues such as the Rohingya women and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is rightly called the rape capital of the world. I was very much aware of rape as an instrument of war' (Barker & Brand 2018: np.). Briseis' experience as a rape victim and slave during the Trojan War therefore can be used to narrate women's experiences in wartime throughout history. Barker's novel does engage specifically with the classical tradition, because the novel opens with 'Great Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles ... how the epitaphs pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called him "the Butcher"' (Barker 2018: 3). This opening specifically engages with the classical tradition by quoting Achilles' epithets from the *Iliad*, therefore asserting that Barker's novel is not interested in preserving Achilles' legend — it is focused on women's experiences in wartime. Yet Barker also recounts that 'the #MeToo movement was happening when I was in the very final stages of editing the book, and I had this extraordinary thing where I had written a book about the Bronze Age and suddenly it sounds more and more topical, every day,' (Barker & Brand 2018: np.). As Morford *et al.* note on the phenomenon of feminist revisionist myth more generally, 'Feminist authors too are creating new versions of traditional tales designed to illuminate their point of view about political, social, and sexual conflict between men and women in our world today' (2011: 17). In the case of Barker's treatment of Briseis, Briseis' experiences not only relate to women who are sexually abused during wartime, but the sexual exploitation of women in contemporary society more generally. The following analysis of Briseis' experiences in Barker's novel as unflinchingly brutal is not only Barker's interpretation of Briseis' myth, but also a generalisation, confronting the long history of women's violent sexual oppression within patriarchy.

The candid portrayal of ‘rape as an instrument of war’ in *The Silence of the Girls* is illustrated when Achilles chooses Briseis as his ‘prize of honour’ (Barker 2018: 28). Briseis remarks ‘What can I say? He wasn’t cruel [...] He fucked as quickly as he killed, and for me it was the same thing. Something in me died that night’ (Ibid., 28). The idiom ‘What can I say?’ asserts the inescapable fact of the matter; unlike Hauser and Miller, who attempt to rewrite Briseis’ rape to preserve Achilles’ honour, Barker is showing the brutal reality of captured women in wartime, that they will be dehumanised, raped, and brutalised. This bleak reality is initially supplemented by the matter-of-fact tone, but the equating of rape and death, and the short clauses, shows the emotional and physical horror of rape. Briseis continually refers to herself as a slave – a sex slave, a bed slave, an enslaved symbol of Achilles’ honour – as well as comparing herself to the kings’ assets and dogs, because she is aware of how she is valued and commodified. This is exemplified in Briseis’ reflection 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’ (Ibid., 38). This demonstrates the recurrent theme of dehumanisation in the novel, and the use of the female pronoun asserts Barker’s intention to focus on the lived experiences of enslaved women in war encampments. She also compares her relative luck at being Achilles’ prize to the fortunes of ‘the common women around the campfires’ (Ibid., 48), who are repeatedly brutalised and then have to fight the stray dogs for scraps and sleeping spaces. In a related manner, Barker’s adaptation does not forswear the grotesque realities of life in war encampments, as we see in gruesome detail the filth of the living conditions: ‘I noticed a rat running between piles of rotting food. [...] Blood erupted from its mouth; [...] maggots [were] busy underneath its skin.’ (Ibid., 66-7). The visceral imagery not only foreshadows the plague that infects the Greek war camps, but also reveals the disgusting realities of war encampments, both literally – in terms of the filth – and ideologically in terms of the abuse of women.

Simone Weil’s *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* provides a useful framework for the analysis of *The Silence of the Girls*. Weil wrote the essay in 1940 after the fall of France, and she uses her analysis of the *Iliad* to comment on the trauma and brutality of martial violence. The core thesis of the essay is that:

The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force (Weil 1940; 1965: 6).

For Weil, force converts men into things in two principal ways, either literally (they are made into corpses), or emotionally (they become pitiless monsters). The *Iliad* lays bare this 'last secret of war' in its similes, since men are either likened to fire, flood, wild beasts, or other blind causes of disaster, or they become frightened animals, trees, water, sand, or anything else in nature that is subject to violent external forces (Ibid., 22). In her close analysis of the epic poem, Weil notes that 'there is not a single man who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force' (Ibid., 11). The poem opens with Achilles weeping with humiliation and grief for losing Briseis to his commander, and a few days later that same commander is weeping, and he must humble himself in vain (Ibid., 12). She also insinuates the pointlessness of war by tracing the daily progress of the Trojan War, calling it 'a continual game of seesaw' — moment to moment, the victor and the defeated change posts, seeming to forget their previous feelings of invincibility or hopelessness (Ibid., 15-6). In the *Iliad*, 'the death of Hector would be but a brief joy to Achilles, and the death of Achilles but a brief joy to the Trojans, and the destruction of Troy but a brief joy to the Achaeans': this illustrates the futility of war, and that violence obliterates anybody with whom it has contact, both its employer and victim (Ibid., 17). To return to Briseis, Weil asks 'what does it take to make the slave weep?' (Ibid., 10) since they have already lost everything, and answers that the slave can only feel and express their own loss when their master feels loss, hence why Briseis mourns Patroclus. 'To lose more than the slave does is impossible,' writes Weil, which resonates with Briseis' first person account in *The Silence of the Girls*. While Barker utilises the *Iliad* to speak to gender-based violence in wartime, Weil previously used the *Iliad* to capture the feelings of futility and desperation in occupied France during the Second World War. Barker's novel is therefore continuing the tradition of Weil's essay — that of using the epic poem to negotiate power and violence in light of contemporary issues.

In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon takes Briseis from Achilles, and when he later returns her, he swears he has not touched her, 'he never mounted her bed, never once made love with her,'



(Homer *Iliad*, 19:210). In both Hauser and Miller's adaptations, that remains true. Again, Pat Barker departs from this: her Agamemnon 'prefers the back door' (Barker 2018: 48). This euphemism undermines his ultimate power, since the enslaved women mock him with this when they are alone. In an interview, Barker remarked that the conversations between women are significant because they reflect the ubiquitous ways that 'women have always gotten together to speak about men in a kind of ribald, passive-aggressive way, because they have no actual power' (Barker & Brand 2018: np.). Agamemnon's proclivity for anal sex demonstrates that the women view him as a sadistic sexual deviant, which is furthered by the identity of his favourite prize, who is 'the youngest of us, Chryseis, [who] was fifteen years old; the [sweet] daughter of a priest,' (Ibid., 48). The youth and sweetness of Chryseis is emphasised to portray Agamemnon as the most sadistic rapist in the Greek army. Indeed, when Briseis remembers being seized by Agamemnon, she narrates that 'Achilles cried when I was taken away. *He* cried; *I* didn't. [...] / *But I cried that night.*' (Ibid., 110), which serves to simultaneously demean Achilles' legend as a hyper-masculine hero, show that she does not love Achilles, and show her inarticulate trauma. Perhaps the most demeaning action we see in the novel is carried out by Agamemnon, as Briseis describes: 'inserting a finger between my teeth to prise my jaws apart, he worked up a big gob of phlegm – leisurely, taking his time about it – and spat it into my open mouth' (Ibid., 119). This is an unthinkable act of ownership, domination, and dehumanisation — it is never more clear than in this moment how much privilege he has versus how little agency she has. It is a common trope amongst these adaptations that Agamemnon is the most irredeemable. While Achilles is cast as a 'Butcher' or, more often, a tragic hero, Agamemnon is a politician, a warmonger, a sexual deviant, and a monster. This depiction is quite a departure from Agamemnon's characterisation in the *Iliad*, where he is chosen by the gods to lead the Greeks. Instead, the recurring trope that portrays Agamemnon as irredeemable owes more to his portrayal in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where he has earned *dikē* (punishment) for sacrificing Iphigenia; the sack of Troy with its attendant atrocities; and the inherited crimes of his father (Ruden 2016: 49). Clytemnestra calls him 'that polluted criminal' (Aeschylus, trans. Ruden: l.1419), and it is this iteration and condemnation of Agamemnon that survives in contemporary retellings. I propose that the familiarity of the figure of a corrupt, profiteering politician to modern readers, and more recent anti-war sentiments, account for this condemning interpretation. Overall, although Barker's

portrayal of Briseis' experience is the most upsetting to read in terms of women's experiences of brutalisation, rape, and dehumanisation, it is also the account which affords Briseis the most opportunity to tell her own story, without focusing on Achilles' legend and reputation.

Barker's novel prioritises women's abuse, and in this it sharply contrasts to Hauser's novel that presents a romanticisation of Achilles and Briseis' relationship, regardless of the fact that he literally owns her. In *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller's adaptation of Briseis is also dubious in that it completely desexualises and sanitises the relationship between Achilles and Briseis in order to further accentuate the romance between Achilles and Patroclus. Achilles and Patroclus rescue Briseis from the soldiers who seek to brutalise her which starkly contrasts to the other women in the Greek camps who are dressed in rags and have to serve the people who murdered their families, then 'At night they served in other ways, and I [Patroclus] cringed at the cries that reached even our corner of the camp' (Miller, 2011: 218). This is challenging because it completely sanitises Briseis' story to keep Achilles' legend untarnished — it places more value on his character than on her suffering. Briseis' captivity is told through the lens of Achilles' and Patroclus' heroism in saving her, and the women's experiences of being raped and brutalised instead focuses on Patroclus' discomfort at this. In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, philosopher Kate Manne coins the term 'Himpathy' to refer to 'the flow of sympathy away from female victims towards their male victimizers' (2018: 23). Manne points to the "“golden boy”" narrative that surrounded Brock Turner as evidence of 'the excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence' (Ibid., 197). This is a useful framework when considering Miller's treatment of Briseis, because Achilles is specifically exonerated from the crime of rape, to present a more sympathetic romantic lead. Briseis' victimhood is completely unwritten to further highlight the romantic relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Of course, adaptations can be selective, choosing which elements of the stories to include to fit their aims; they do not have to incorporate all the original stories. Both Sanders and Hutcheon emphasise this in their texts on adaptation. Sanders states that 'the rewrite [...] invariably transcends mere imitation, serving instead in the capacity of incremental literature' (Sanders 2006: 12), demonstrating this idea of adapting authors selectively rewriting in order to meet the aims of 'not replication as such, but rather complication, expansion rather than contraction' (Ibid., 12). Hutcheon also asserts that this selective nature is a successful part of adaptations, in

that ‘the appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty’ (Hutcheon 2006: 114). This emphasises the concept that, though adapting authors benefit from the familiar mythic templates, their divergences from the originals are an essential part of the adaptation.

In the *Iliad*, Briseis’ story has no ending: she is returned to Achilles by Agamemnon after the death of Patroclus, but after she is recorded mourning for Patroclus she is forgotten by Homer. Before the adaptations analysed here, ‘Briseis remain[ed] by and large a shadowy figure,’ (Blundell 1995: 48); she had fallen into relative obscurity in classical reception, because her backstory and emotional reactions to the plot of the *Iliad* were not recorded by Homer. Her ambiguity and marginality contrasts to the focus that Homer affords to his male heroes, as well as to the more socially privileged female figures such as Penelope, who ‘occupies very often the centre of the stage’ (Ibid., 51) in the *Odyssey*. Penelope is rewarded for her twenty years of patience with her husband’s return, whereas Briseis’ suffering is never rewarded or finished because her narrative is never completed. The open-endedness of Briseis’ myth has led to divergent endings for Briseis in modern adaptations, raising the question of whether Briseis is finally afforded any agency in these novelistic retellings.

In *For the Most Beautiful*, Briseis gains some agency at the end of the narrative. Briseis mourns Achilles, thinking ‘*Mynes. / Patroclus. / Achilles. / [...] husband, friend, lover.*’ (Hauser 2016: 419), wherein she is mourning all of the men she has lost, regardless of the fact that the third man killed the first, and then enslaved her, abetted by the second. After this, Briseis sees Aeneas’ exodus from Troy with ‘A river of *people*’ (Ibid., 430). Here, Briseis is making use of the only power that she has as an enslaved woman, by observing the escape and electing not to inform the Greeks. Her empowerment is exemplified by her bold statement to Agamemnon: ‘You will never have the Troy you think to gain. And, Agamemnon, [...] you will *never* have me’ (Ibid., 443). This exclamation is empowering because Briseis is an enslaved woman who is challenging her owner and engaging in political discourse. She also regains her bodily autonomy by denying Agamemnon the ability to ‘have’ her, to claim her in the same way he seeks to claim Troy; she is refusing to allow her ‘rape [to be used] as an instrument of war’. She does this by throwing herself onto Achilles’ funeral pyre (Hauser 2016: 444), an act of reclaiming her body

and future from her oppressors as she ‘would make [her] own fate.’ (Ibid., 444). This act acknowledges the brutal patriarchal tradition of throwing alive women onto their husband or owner’s funeral pyres, and Briseis reclaims this as her power over herself.

Similarly, in *The Song of Achilles*, Briseis dies at the end. Briseis tries to swim away from Achilles’ brutal son, Pyrrhus, who has hit her and threatens to rape her:

she pulls further and further from the shore. The only man whose spear could have reached her is dead. She is free.

The only man but that man’s son.

The spear flies from the top of the beach, soundless and precise. Its point hits her back  
(Miller 2011: 344)

Briseis’ fate is consistent with Miller’s previous depiction of her as a conduit to show Achilles’ greatness. The brutality of Pyrrhus contrasts with their aforementioned desexualised rescue of her, and Pyrrhus’ skill with the javelin is attributed to Achilles. Rather than focusing on Briseis’ plight, her murder is narrated through the lens of Patroclus’ shade, whose love for Achilles overshadows her suffering, and thus her murder is used as a way to highlight Achilles’ skills. Once again, Miller’s aim to focus on the legend of Achilles: his romance with Patroclus sidelines Briseis’ narrative, placing more importance on the men’s reputations than the women’s chance to tell their stories. Yet, Pyrrhus’ most famous victim is the Trojan king Priam, as told in the *Aeneid*: ‘Neoptolemus [...] drags the old man / straight to the altar, quaking [...] sweeping forth his sword’ (Virgil trans. Fagles: 2:679-684). If the same Greek warrior kills Briseis, then it is instead arguable that she is afforded new prominence, equal to that of the Trojan King. Pyrrhus kills Briseis and Priam with the same ease and casual brutality; in killing Priam ‘Neoptolemus / degrades his father’s name’ (Ibid., 1:679-680). Thus killing Briseis becomes an act which brings equal shame and Briseis becomes as central as Priam to the legacies of the Trojan War.

By contrast, in *The Silence of the Girls*, Briseis survives in a number of ways. Literally, she outlives Achilles, marries Achilles' charioteer, and leaves Troy with him. Moreover, she is afforded a sequel in Barker's recent *The Women of Troy* (2021).<sup>19</sup> She also survives in terms of her pregnancy and her story. Before Achilles dies, he impregnates her, and she views this as a way that she has reclaimed her body, concluding that 'this flesh, this intricate mesh of bone and nerve and muscle, belonged to me. In spite of Achilles, in spite of my aching hips and thighs' (Barker 2018: 279). Raping local women is considered a typical aspect of warfare in the same way that pillaging property is; men's possessions – gold and women – are claimed like their land. However, Briseis asserts that her body 'belong[s] to me' and therefore, despite the physical atrocities that she has experienced, she cannot be conquered in the same way that Troy has been. This is particularly poignant because Briseis is pregnant at this point, a fact alluded to when she cradles her belly and her 'aching hips and thighs'. Ophardt argues that the commodification of reproduction strips women of their body autonomy during their pregnancies and, throughout history, women have been valued for predominantly reproductive purposes (Ophardt 2016: 79). Yet this concept is subverted in Briseis' narrative because she had no bodily autonomy to begin with, due to her status as a war prize and sex slave, and therefore her pregnancy re-establishes her body autonomy.

Additionally, Briseis considers her literary afterlife as a form of survival, which is evident when she contemplates the vital role women play in oral history:

*We're going to survive — our songs, our stories. They'll never be able to forget us.  
Decades after the last man who fought at Troy is dead, their sons will remember the  
songs their Trojan mothers sang to them.* (Barker 2018: 296)

While the Greeks can "claim" these women, marry them and impregnate them, they are still 'Trojan', which is to say, they still have their identities separate to the ones that the invading armies prescribed them. Also, despite the Greeks conquering Troy, Trojan heritage will continue – not only with Aeneas – but with the Trojan women who have been taken, and in the Greeks' future lineage because of the children that they have with the captured Trojan women. However,

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<sup>19</sup> See 'Conclusion' for further details on this text's relevance to this thesis.

Barker's Briseis does not romanticise the masculine domination of literature as she bitterly reflects that the surviving narrative will be 'His story. *His*, not mine.' (Ibid., 324), here referring to the fact that the surviving stories of the Trojan War will be remembered by men and about men. Indeed, in the sequel *The Women of Troy* (2021), both Briseis and Neoptolemus struggle to contend with Achilles' looming, posthumous legend. Furthermore, the phrasing 'His story' orally becomes "history" which, when followed by the italicised '*His*', suggests a reference to "Herstory". Herstory was first coined over 50 years ago by feminist activist Robin Morgan in her creative writing anthology *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970) and refers to women's often overlooked positions in history. Herstory is particularly significant here, because Briseis' role in this ancient story and in later receptions was minimised and relatively forgotten. Also, when considering the erasure of women in history, Briseis criticises the sanitisation of the epics in order to preserve the heroic reputations of the men: 'They won't want to know we were living in a rape camp' (Barker 2018: 324). Briseis' ending in *The Silence of the Girls* overcomes the historic oppression of women's voices and thus counters the patriarchal notion that "'*Silence becomes a woman.*'" (Ibid., 294) while also giving Briseis a narrative where she survives and reclaims her body autonomy.

The variations in Briseis' adaptations are particularly illuminating when considering the range of different approaches to reimagining mythic women. Sue Blundell states that Briseis is featured in the *Iliad* as 'a piece of property – as stolen goods – rather than a human being' (1995: 48). Though Blundell disparages Homer's oversight, the 'shadowy' obscurity and overall lack of detail afforded to Briseis in the *Iliad* makes her a prime candidate for retelling, since she plays such a central role in furthering the plot, yet is not fleshed out as a character. Novelistic character is therefore a transformative element, as it allows for a more detailed reconstruction of the figure from myth. Ultimately, the disparities between the representations of Briseis in *For the Most Beautiful*, *The Silence of the Girls*, and *The Song of Achilles* suggests that it is the more underdeveloped female characters that are most fertile for feminist adaptation.

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## Helen:

While Penelope and Briseis have different degrees of fame in modern reception, they are both evidently key figures in contemporary feminist adaptations of classical myths. Helen (of Sparta/Troy), remains perhaps the most famous woman of Greek mythology, surviving in men's writing throughout history. As Hughes reminds us:

Dante, Fra Angelico, Chaucer, Leonardo, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Spenser, Dryden, Goethe, Jacques-Louis David, Rossetti, Gladstone, Yeats, Berlioz, Strauss, Rupert Brooke, Camus, Tippet and Ezra Pound: all have kept the idea of Helen alive. Cultures have created their own Helens, consistent with their own ideals of beauty. She is irresistible because she is recondite. [...] Because Helen is elusive, her appeal endures. She is prodigious, part of the cultural, and the political, make-up of the West. (Hughes 2005: 7)

Helen's beauty and elusiveness that allures male writers has become a thorny issue for female writers, as there is a danger of perpetuating misogynistic stereotypes, particularly pertaining to beauty ideals and vilifying women. Although Helen is a source of adaptive interest in contemporary feminist drama and poetry, she has been less attractive to contemporary female novelists, since poetry allows for more enigmas while novelistic narrative demands more comprehensive realism.

Before analysing Helen as potentially unadaptable in contemporary feminist novels, it is important to consider the theoretical focus afforded to Helen in feminist classical scholarship. In *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore*, Bettany Hughes provides a study of Helen as a real character from history, which was a heretofore neglected angle (Hughes 2005: xxxv). She summarises Helen's legend: the woman who has persevered for millennia as a symbol of beauty, as well as a reminder of the terrible power that beauty can wield, responsible for a double enmity between East and West, *and* put on the earth by Zeus to rid the world of its superfluous population (Ibid., 2). This is how Helen is remembered: as a household name for physical perfection and the cost that such beauty demands. Hughes' methodology is particularly

interesting; she combines ancient literary sources with archaeology, ‘piecing together Helen’s life-story from her conception to her grave [...] follow[ing] in her footsteps across the Eastern Mediterranean’ (Ibid., 6). Hughes explores the *praxis* of Helen, imagining how she was experienced in antiquity and later, as people observed the priestesses of her cult, scratched lewd graffiti about her onto walls, and as she was enshrined into the rhetoric of politicians and philosophers (Ibid., 9). Helen’s implacability is acknowledged and accounted for: ‘She is difficult to categorise for good reason; a pursuit of Helen across the ages throws up three distinct, yet intertwined guises. When we talk about her, we are in fact describing a trinity’ (Ibid., 10). The titular trinity – *Goddess, Princess, Whore* – accounts for the lack of consensus in attitudes towards her throughout the nearly three millennia of her legend. For Hughes, the ‘most familiar’ Helen is the regal one, the Spartan princess with divine paternity who was fought over by heroes (Ibid., 10). Helen was not, however, ‘just a “sex-goddess” in literary terms. She was also a demi-god,’ who was worshipped across the spiritual landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean (Ibid., 11). The third Helen is the whore, ‘the beautiful, libidinous creature irresistible to men; the pin-up, golden-haired, phantom Helen, [...] an erotic eidolon [...] an idol of female beauty and sexuality, both lusted after and despised’ (Ibid., 11). Hughes cites the *Odyssey* calling her a ‘shameless whore’ (4:145), although in Emily Wilson’s translation Helen states that ‘They made my face the cause that hounded them.’ (4:148) — rather than have Helen lambast herself as a ‘whore’ or ‘bitch’, Wilson places the onus back on the men that *chose* to go to war. This is a rejection of the anachronistic ‘bitch’ that, in our culture, is ‘used as an insult term only for women, and it implies a kind of malice that is imagined specifically for women’ (Wilson 2018: 44). Even in translating Helen, there are palimpsestuous layers of rhetoric which speak to, and engage with, what Bettany Hughes would call her trinity of guises.

Laurie Maguire’s *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* also provides an innovative critical approach to Helen, because it positions itself as ‘a literary biography of Helen of Troy’ (Maguire 2009: ix). Maguire deliberately separates her work from Hughes’ by specifying that it is not a biography of Helen in the Bronze Age or an exploration of whether she had a historical existence or was a mythical figure (Ibid., ix). Instead it is focused on the literary afterlife of Helen, on the ‘28 centuries of poetry, drama, novels, opera, and film’ (Ibid., ix). Maguire’s specific interest is not in Helen’s “real” life, but in literary depictions of her, ‘how literature deals



with her beauty, her personality, how it blames her or tries to rescue her from blame, how it deifies her or burlesques her; in short, how it represents her' (Ibid., ix). Maguire takes a thematic approach to Helen's biography, or literary afterlife, considering how the following issues, that are central to her legend, have presented themselves in representations of Helen throughout history: the narrative nature of myth; beauty; Helen's abduction; blame; Helen and the Faust tradition; and parodic tradition.

On the topic of her beauty, Maguire considers the dual difficulties of narrating and staging absolute beauty. 'One of literature's recurrent tactics when faced with extremes is omission' (Ibid., 39): throughout the history of narrating Helen, authors have balked at the challenge of describing her beauty, such as Thomas Heywood, who declines to describe Helen's beauty because it would demand 'a world of paper and an age to write' (Heywood canto 10.32, sig. Z2v in Maguire 2009: 39). When authors do attempt description, they displace the description, describing 'not the object, but another object,' such as the flower to which they compare her (Ibid., 39). There is also 'the blank space of nonrepresentation', which Maguire considers 'narrative's most innovative tactic', acknowledging Helen's irrepresentability with blank space (Ibid., 40). Similarly, when staging Helen, productions face the problem of literally having to choose a face that could feasibly launch a thousand ships. Some productions choose to rely on familiar archetypes of beauty, such as the 1995 National Theatre production of *The Women of Troy* that had Helen as a Marilyn Monroe lookalike, or they choose not to give her a face at all, showing only her back or body, relying on the same 'blank space' as authors (Ibid., 43). In Hughes' words, 'of course, the wonderful irony about the most beautiful woman in the world is that she is faceless' (2005: 3); there is a consensus, then, amongst Helen theorists, that it is impossible to provide a literal face to fit the legend of Helen's face. Due to the subjectivity of beauty, audiences will necessarily be disappointed when Helen, who is supposed to be an absolute beauty, does not match their personal preferences. For example, a review of the 1990 RSC production of *Troilus and Cressida* reported 'the spectators' disappointment was audible . . . it wasn't that she wasn't beautiful. It was simply that she wasn't enough', or the *New York Times* film critic's reaction to Diane Kruger's portrayal of Helen in the Hollywood film *Troy*: 'she isn't sufficiently fabulous-looking to be convincing as the face that launched a thousand ships' (Rutter 2000: 233; McGrath, in Maguire 2009: 36). 'Helen is beyond language [...]: as the paradigm of

beauty she is absolute' (Maguire 2009: 65) — it is an impossible task for mythical adapters to present Helen's absolute beauty, although of course the indirectness of literature means it is an easier task than in the visual arts.

Hughes and Maguire agree that writing Helen is a complicated matter, due in part to the centuries of debate surrounding her agency. Put simply, either Helen is an evil seductress entirely to blame for the thousands of deaths in a decade-long war, or she completely lacks agency because she was stolen and then used as an excuse for a war about trade. In the chapter on 'Blame' in *From Homer to Hollywood*, Maguire expounds that Helen is always either held accountable for the Trojan War, or her accountability is reduced at the cost of her agency (Ibid., 109). Her story is therefore either one of elopement or abduction, so Helen is either a guilty adulteress, almost entirely to blame for the Trojan War, or she is an innocent victim, unable to be held accountable for any of her actions (Ibid., 109). Hughes agrees that 'For two and half millennia [...] tradition recognised a feistier heroine. Not just a woman of straw, but a dynamic protagonist, a rich queen. A political player who [...] controlled the men around her', though in relatively recent history she has morphed into a vacuous, submissive, passive prize, as exemplified by Kruger's Helen in *Troy* (Hughes 2005: 140). This 'feistier' Helen does not necessarily engender respect — once Helen is the active agent of her fate, rather than the passive partner, men rush to label her a whore (Ibid., 143). Hughes credits this slut-shaming to the increasingly Christianised world from the 2nd century AD onward, where 'Helen has become just another nail in the coffin of womankind' as the Church used Helen as part of their systematic 'demonising [of] women and their sexual power' (Ibid., 144). When considering Helen's agency, it is important that it is not equated to liberation, because 'Helen, as an active partner in her own abduction, is not Helen the empowered woman but Helen the dangerous slut' (Ibid., 144). Maguire agrees that 'A tactic used in both defences and accusations of Helen is the granting of sexual agency' (2009: 124) — Helen's consent rescues her from victimhood, but it does not necessarily rescue her from blame. Maguire traces literary instances where (1) Helen is an active participant in her own abduction, such as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Euripides' *Women of Troy*, and the anonymous *Excidium Troiae*; (2) Helen is defended by blaming someone else, such as in the cases of Hesiod's *Cypria* that blames Aphrodite, or Quintus of Smyrna's *War at Troy* that blames Paris, or the *Ars Amatoria* in which Ovid mockingly blames Menelaus for being too dull,

thus encouraging his wife's adultery; (3) there is joint culpability — Helen sometimes shares the blame with Aphrodite, and in later writers such as Euripides, Herodotus, and Isocrates, there is a *felix culpa*, as they admit that Helen's adultery had military and trade benefits (Ibid., 110-12). In Homer, Helen's morality is presented ambiguously: no one is a harsher critic than herself, yet 'Paris says he "carried [her] away" (3.444) and Hector accuses him of taking Menelaus' wife (3.53) (both of which could imply abduction)' (Ibid., 114). Homer is less interested in blame than in emotional crises, and his Helen 'is willing and passive, to blame and not to blame' (Ibid., 114-5). For O'Gorman, Helen's myth is an obvious choice when considering the women's history in warfare, since women's position as the implicit cause of wars ("this is all for you") is explicit in the case of Helen: she is at once the reviled cause of war and the sanctified object of military protection (O'Gorman 2008: 196; 208). Helen's contentious blame has been an inextricable part of her myth since its conception, and it is within this tradition that contemporary adaptations of Helen necessarily operate.

There is another tradition that places the blame with Aphrodite. Although depictions of Helen as a rape victim or a scheming seductress have become the more favoured interpretations for writers and artists, there is also the literary tradition that begins with Sappho, which renders Helen a woman helpless against the powers of Aphrodite, whose divine will is abetted by Paris (Hughes 2005: 139). It is this tradition that Jennifer Pullen draws upon in her short story 'A Bead of Amber on her Tongue', that follows the dual narratives of Aphrodite and Helen; Pullen's Helen narrates that 'The gods will have their way; her existence is a testament to that' and the Sapphic tradition is specifically alluded to in the line 'Sappho is my favourite poet' (Pullen 2019: 42-3). She 'forgives' Paris for winning her in the Judgement of Paris, and she finds emancipation in the machinations of gods and men, concluding that 'perhaps the gods can move humans like goblets on a table, but they can't control the way the wine sloshes, spills. The small things, like her thoughts, her feelings,' (Ibid., 43). This poses a question about the problem of adapting Helen in 21st century women's writing: is it better, more *feminist*, to write a Helen who has agency but therefore shoulders the blame for the Trojan War, or a Helen who is blameless, but a disempowered victim of her own beauty? Further questions include: Did she love Paris? Did she choose to go to Troy? Did she want the war? What side did she want to win? Did she want to return to Menelaus, Sparta, and her daughter, Hermione? Did she have any autonomy? These are

some of the many questions that adapting authors must consider when rewriting Helen. Helen's mythology is in some ways too big to adapt, and the questions of her agency and blame have concerned authors throughout the nearly three millennia of her mythos.

This fame is explored in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, when Achilles and Patroclus discuss Helen. Patroclus' numerous questions, 'Do you think she went with Paris willingly? [...] So you think she did it on purpose? To cause the war?' (Miller 2011: 222) aligns with this idea that there are perhaps too many questions about Helen's agency to adapt her. Additionally, Achilles and Patroclus theorise what could have motivated her to go to Troy in a distinctly Socratic method:

"Maybe she really fell in love with Paris."

"Maybe she was bored. After ten years shut up in Sparta, I'd want to leave too."

"Maybe Aphrodite made her."

"Maybe they'll bring her back with them." (Ibid., 223)

The repetition of 'Maybe' shows the polyphony that surrounds Helen's myths; each of these hypotheticals refers to specific versions of the Helen story. When discussing Helen, Miller's Achilles 'put[s] on his best singer's falsetto. "A thousand ships have sailed for her."' (Miller 2011: 222), which alludes to the sheer volume of myths that surround her, as demonstrated by his imitation of a bard telling her story.

Achilles' comment paraphrases the playwright Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, in which the eponymous Faustus says of Helen 'the face that launch'd a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium— / Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss' (Marlowe 1604: 1.163-4). Interestingly, this line is again paraphrased by Carol Ann Duffy in her poem 'Mrs. Faust', in which the modernised Faust remarks 'The face that launched a thousand ships. / I kissed its lips.' (Duffy 1999: 1.93-4). In 'Helen and the Faust Tradition', Maguire states that it is apparently 'impossible to write about Helen of Troy without invoking Marlowe's lines' but Marlowe's lines are, crucially, not addressed to Helen herself, but to a demonic eidolon (Maguire 2009: 175). The most famous quotation about Helen is not about Helen, showing again her recondite nature. Yet this image, repeated throughout history, also

speaks to the volume of mythology surrounding Helen. In Margaret George's novel *Helen of Troy* (2006), the eponymous protagonist is haunted by these words from her future, which is to say that she is haunted by her future legacy:

. . . *And burnt the topless towers of Ilium*. The words twined themselves around my mind. *Topless towers of Ilium* . . . someone else framed those words, and whispered them to me then, someone who lived so long afterward that he saw Troy only in his dreams, but he saw it clearer than anyone [...] . . . or perhaps Troy was always only a dream. (George 2006: 283)

Here, Helen is afforded insight into her future reputation; much like Le Guin's Lavinia being haunted by the future ghost of Virgil, George's Helen is haunted by Marlowe's famous lines about her.<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that Helen meekly accepts her legend: in a direct subversion of Marlowe's lines, spoken by Dr. Faustus and echoed in Helen narratives ever since, George's Helen narrates: 'Paris. I kissed his lips,' (Ibid., 229). Helen thus becomes the active agent in her fate, rather than an object to be stolen or kissed or described through ekphrasis. George's novel is distinctive from its contemporaries because it retells Helen's myth as a love story between Helen and Paris, and while Helen is made aware of the Faustian tradition that will become inextricable from her mythos, she rejects any retelling that strips her of her agency.

These questions, by their very nature of being about Helen, cannot be answered because 'Helen's essence is her unknowability' (Maguire 2009: 175) and, indeed, Helen is present by her absence in the texts previously explored in this chapter. In Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, Briseis compares her situation to Helen's because Helen's 'fate was decided without her knowledge' (Barker 2018: 131) when Paris and Menelaus duelled for her, and Briseis 'sat there like a tethered goat, knowing my fate was being decided on the other side of that door' (Ibid., 150) when Agamemnon and Achilles both fight to claim her after Chryseis leaves. Here, the parallel language demonstrates the similarities of their situations, but while Helen is in the royal court of Troy, Briseis is enslaved ('tethered') and dehumanised ('goat'). Similarly, after Briseis is blamed for the rift between Agamemnon and Achilles, she reflects on 'a legend – it tells you

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 5: 'Palimpsests: Paratexts and Intertexts'

everything, really – that whenever Helen cut a thread in her weaving, a man died on the battlefield. She was responsible for every death.’ (Ibid., 129).<sup>21</sup> Once again, the actions of men are blamed on a woman, despite the woman’s complete lack of agency. Briseis is a slave in the Greek camps, and she is blamed for being the *thing* that the King of the Greeks and the Best of the Greeks are fighting over; Helen cannot participate in the war, despite the fact that it will decide her fate, and the only thing she can do is weave to document the events.

In the same way that Helen is used in Barker’s novel to accentuate Briseis’ suffering, she is presented as a bully and oppressor of Penelope in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*. In the chapter title ‘Helen Ruins My Life’ (Atwood 2005: xi), Penelope intends to show how she has been negatively affected by Helen’s actions, but instead it shows the childish, whiny characterisation of Penelope, which the handmaids mock in their choral interludes. Furthermore, when Penelope calls her ‘Helen the lovely, Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes’ (Ibid., 131), this presents Penelope as unsympathetic, unwilling to consider the possibility that Helen was not a consenting captive, because it suits her own purposes better. In both Barker and Atwood’s novels, Helen is merely used to accentuate the narratives of the women they are adapting, thus exemplifying how Helen’s story has been exploited to blame her for others’ sufferings. With the shift to female perspectives in mythic literature, the focus is no longer on how men blame her for the atrocities of war, but how women blame her for their experiences in the war.

Atwood’s representation of Helen in *The Penelopiad* significantly contrasts to her role in Atwood’s earlier poem ‘Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing’. In the poem, Helen is reimagined as a stripper, who monetises her exploitation: ‘*Exploited*, they’d say. Yes, any way / you cut it, but I’ve a choice / of how, and I’ll take the money.’ (Atwood 1995: 1.17-19). Here, Helen is aware that she will be sexualised and objectified regardless of her profession, which is a sex-positive empowerment of the mythical woman. This sex-positivity can be weaponised as well as monetised, as demonstrated by the final lines of the poem: ‘You think I’m not a goddess? / Try me. / This is a torch song. / Touch me and you’ll burn.’ (Ibid., 1.81-84). The ‘You’ that

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<sup>21</sup> Maguire interprets Helen’s weaving in the *Iliad* as ‘her refusal to become a minor character in Achilles’ story’ (2009: 11). Interpreting Helen weaving her own tapestry as her writing her own story interestingly echoes Penelope ‘spin[ning] a thread of [her] own’ in *The Penelopiad*. See Chapter 5: ‘Palimpsests: Paratexts and Intertexts’ for further analysis.

Helen is addressing is clearly patriarchy, both in terms of the internalised misogyny of ‘women / who’d tell me I should be ashamed of myself’ (Ibid., 1.1-2) and the patriarchal aggressors. The latter are exemplified in the second stanza, where the repetition of ‘rape’ and ‘murder’ demonstrates the prevalence of the issues of violence against women. Helen is not only depicted as physically above the men (she is dancing above them on the countertop) but she is also elevated to the role of ‘goddess’ by her beauty and power, and she uses this empowerment to hold men accountable and threaten them with violence in retaliation. In Hughes’ tripartite model, this Helen is both a whore (because she is a sex worker) and a goddess. As a countertop dancer, Helen has more body autonomy, since she can demand that the men not touch her, unlike in the Ancient Greek context where she was a commodity to be taken by her husband, stolen by Paris, and won back.

Modern poetry affords Helen an opportunity to be adapted by portraying her story without the narrative demand for comprehensiveness and realism — poetry is a form that can empathetically explore Helen’s situation without necessarily engaging with the complex questions of Helen’s blame. For example, Carol Ann Duffy’s poem ‘Beautiful’, traces the legends of women who were deemed to be beautiful by their patriarchal society, specifically Helen, Cleopatra, Marilyn Monroe, and Princess Diana (see Judge 2021: np.). In each of the four sections, Duffy begins by outlining their iconic beauty and ends with their downfall. Helen is described as ‘divinely fair, a pearl, drop-dead / gorgeous, beautiful, a peach, / a child of grace, a stunner,’ (Duffy 2003: 1.3-5). The list form is deployed to show the many legends surrounding her, and the different phrasings suggest a cacophony of voices from high and low culture describing her. This is echoed at the end of the section, where ‘Some said [...] Some said [...] Some swore [...] Some vowed’ (Ibid., 1.49, 54, 58, 62) alludes to the oral history of myths in general, the polyphony of diverse myths surrounding Helen in particular, and the dangers of rumours that are circulated about beautiful women. Furthermore, the increasingly sinister nature of the rumours – from being ‘smuggled / on a boat dressed as a boy’ (Ibid., 58-9) to being hanged, or metamorphosed into a bird and forever caged – form a critique of the toxic publicity that Helen, here an archetype of beautiful celebrities, is subjected to. Poetry lends itself well to dealing with Helen’s legacy, because it does not have to concern itself with novelistic devices

such as characterisation, motivation, or plot, allowing it to focus instead on asking questions about her relation to and complicity with the discourses of women's oppression.

Drama brings another set of possibilities and limitations to reinterpretations of Helen's mythos. For example, Ellen McLaughlin's adaptation of Euripides' *Helen*, like Atwood and Duffy's poetry, deploys both modern and mythological anachronisms. The modern anachronisms include its setting in '*A hotel room in Egypt. It's a fairly upscale hotel, perhaps with a dash of colonial Victorian detail*,' (McLaughlin 2005: 133) and the references to magazines and television, as well as mythological anachronisms. The most notable mythological misplacement in time is Helen's conversation with Io, whose myth is from the early Golden Age, while Helen is at the end of the Bronze Age. In this conversation, the two women discuss how their beauty led to abuse and vilification, and bond over the experience of 'Having to live inside a body which was so desired and yet so detested' (Ibid., 146). The alliteration of 'desired' and 'detested' emphasises how these two experiences are inextricably linked for these mythic women, yet the references to modern-day items like televisions and magazines broaden the message so it speaks to the demand for, and vilification of, women's beauty throughout history. As Bettany Hughes puts it, 'Helen was put on earth to catalyse desire. And for three millennia she has been hated for it: [...] She is a woman blessed or cursed' (Hughes 2005: 309). In these adaptations of Helen, we are provided with prolific examples of women throughout history who have been dually blessed and cursed by their beauty. Additionally, Io and Helen discuss internalised misogyny, as Io 'admit[s], I've kind of hated you myself since I was a girl, [...] Every magazine, every movie, all those images of you. They were some of the first ways I ever learned to feel bad about myself.' (McLaughlin 2005: 146). Here, two mythical women from the opposite ends of the classical chronology are discussing how patriarchal media teaches young girls to hate their bodies and make them compete with one another, which is another example of how anachronisms are used in these adaptations to make modern feminist points using ancient mythical women.

Ellen McLaughlin is an American playwright who has adapted ancient Greek drama. Though McLaughlin herself is not comfortable with the term "adaptations," which she says tends to involve knowledge of the original languages (Ibid., xiii), I would argue that this is not an accurate understanding of adaptations which do not demand linguistic knowledge. While Emily Hauser and Madeline Miller are Classics scholars, many of the authors in this thesis, such as



Margaret Atwood and Pat Barker, rely on translations of ancient texts to create their adaptations (Beard 2005, np.; Armistead & Barker 2019: np.). Despite McLaughlin's reservations regarding the label "adaptations", she believes that 'Every age will find its use for these stories. But the stories will never cease to be relevant' (McLaughlin 2005: xviii), which clearly shows her intention to adapt the ancient texts in modern contexts. McLaughlin is aware of the power of anachronisms, because 'Io is one of the most ancient examples of the mortal girl raped by Zeus. [...] I liked the notion of these two icons of exceptional female fate conversing with each other' (Ibid., 126), and she views them as 'bookends' — the beginning and end of women being punished for their beauty in mythology (Ibid., 127). McLaughlin's characterisation of Helen is 'an odd conflation of every modern notion of beauty bound to celebrity from Jackie through Marilyn to Diana, as much as she is the quintessential Helen of myth.' (Ibid., 124). Hence, McLaughlin utilises both mythic and non-mythic anachronisms to draw a wider conclusion about the destructive nature of beauty within patriarchy for women, which has an interesting correspondence with Duffy's poetic adaptation of Helen. Though McLaughlin refers to Jackie Kennedy while Duffy refers to Cleopatra, they both identify Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana as modern women who had fates identifiable with Helen. Aligning these women's fates shows that Helen's story can demonstrate the real harm caused to women deemed too beautiful and too powerful in patriarchal societies.

Anne Carson's *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (2019) is a dramatic version of Euripides' *Helen* that also aligns Helen and Marilyn Monroe. As the title suggests, the two figures of beauty are conflated; indeed, the opening monologue, delivered by Norma Jeane Baker (the only cast member), claims that the Trojan War 'was caused by Norma Jeane Baker, / harlot of Troy' (Carson 2019: 7). Like Helen in Euripides' play, Norma Jeane disputes this claim due to the eidolon: 'That was all a hoax. / A bluff, a dodge, a swindle, a gimmick, a gem of a stratagem. / The truth is, / a cloud went to Troy.' (Ibid., 7). The long list of synonyms for 'hoax' is juxtaposed against the short enjambment used to relay the 'truth'. This imitates the polyphony surrounding Helen's role in the war, as well as Euripides' acquittal of her in the *Helen*. Once again, the comparison is made between Helen and Marilyn Monroe to demonstrate the construction, and then subsequent vilification, of beautiful women in the public psyche throughout history. This is clear in the lines:

Rape  
is the story of Helen,  
Persephone,  
Norma Jeane,  
Troy.  
[...]  
Oh my darlings,  
they tell you you're born with a precious pearl.  
Truth is,  
it's a disaster to be a girl. (Ibid., 17-8)

The repetition of '[t]ruth is', as well as the devices of enjambment, lists, and omitted capital letters, reinforce that this an opportunity for maligned women deemed too beautiful to live to share their truths. The universality of this message is communicated via temporal and spatial displacements, such as setting the play in an amalgam of Troy and Los Angeles, while Arthur/Menelaus is king of Sparta and New York, and the Greek Army is conflated with MGM media. The analogues are not only drawn between Marilyn and Helen, since Persephone is also used as evidence; specifically, Persephone as she is portrayed in a poem by the Modernist Stevie Smith. The line '*I was born good, grown bad*' (Ibid., 17) becomes a refrain throughout the play. By engaging with the classical tradition in this manner, a sense of universality and authority is provided to Norma Jeane's message.

This message is also reinforced in the HISTORY OF WAR LESSON interludes in the play, which offer pseudo-pedagogical and philological analyses of war. In the second lesson, 'τραῦμα / "wound"' (Ibid., 14), a pedagogical approach is taken. The statement 'Euripides makes a hero out of Helen, who was brutalized by merely staring at war too long' is followed by 'TEACHABLE MOMENTS' (Helen's response to Menelaus' violence against unarmed people) and 'DISCUSSION TOPICS' (to compare and contrast being speared and depressed) (Ibid., 14). In the third lesson, 'ἀρπάζειν / "to take"', philology is used to encompass the message of the text: 'if you possess a woman [...] or occupy a city, you are a *taker*'. ἀρπάζειν comes into Latin

as *rapio*, from which the English language gets *rape* — all are ‘words stained with the very early blood of girls, with the very late blood of cities’ (Ibid., 19). The conflict of the Trojan War, and all Western wars since, become indistinguishable from gender-based violence. The fifth lesson, ‘παλλακή / “concubine”’, explains the Ancient Greek definition of dirt as something out of place<sup>22</sup> and the linguistic relationship between the noun for ‘concubine’ and verb ‘to sprinkle’. This provides the ‘TEACHABLE MOMENT’ in the *Iliad* when Helen is weaving the events of the war, and Homer uses the verb ‘sprinkle’ to describe the embroidery (Ibid., 32). This implies that, on a linguistic level, there is a condemning connection between Helen being out of place (she is, therefore, dirt) as a Trojan concubine, and her sprinkling death into her tapestry. In light of this, the end of the play where Norma Jeane is knitting ‘every detail’ of the fall of Troy (including ‘every pointless prayer’ and ‘every bone that broke / in the baby they tossed over the wall on the last day’) (Ibid., 51-2) becomes an amplification of the dirty business of war, and a laundering of her own reputation as she focuses on telling her story and hoping to see her daughter again. Therefore, although the novels thus far discussed in this chapter have apparent difficulties in adapting Helen, she remains an important woman to adapt, and is reimagined in contemporary poetry and drama.

Conversely, Natalie Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships* actually stages Helen’s resistance to adaptation within the corpus of contemporary feminist myth writing. *A Thousand Ships*, itself named after Helen’s legend, affords Helen a space to tell her story, to absolve herself of some blame, while also actively engaging with the adaptive difficulties and reluctances that come with adapting Helen, particularly in the 21st century. When the Muse is giving the story to the poet, she says ‘I’m offering him the story of *all* the women in the war. Well, most of them (I haven’t decided about Helen yet. She gets on my nerves)’ (Haynes 2019: 41). Calliope is giving the poet the story of some of the most central (Penelope, Clytemnestra, Hecuba) and most obscure (Oenone, Laodamia, Creusa) women from the Troy stories, but Helen – the catalyst who has been a rich subject of art and literature throughout the millennia – ‘gets on [Calliope’s] nerves’.

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<sup>22</sup> Carson expands on this definition of dirt as something out of place in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), a hybrid text of short poems and verse essays. In ‘Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity’, she repeats the metaphor of poached egg on one’s plate as not-dirty, while poached egg on the floor or a book page is dirty (Carson 2000: 148; Carson 2019: 32). For the Ancient Greeks, women were simultaneously polluted, pollutable, and polluting, due to their their wet (and therefore unhygienic) bodies and minds, their potential for defilement, and their insatiable sexual appetites (Carson 2000: 138-161).

She is undecided on whether Helen gets a place in this otherwise comprehensive account of ‘all the women’ affected by the war, its precedents, and its aftermath. As Maguire indicates, although ‘Helen is strangely absent (emotionally, physically) from the story she has initiated’, she is the ‘narrative motor’ (Maguire 2009: xi), and the story cannot be told without her. Hence, Helen does get to voice her side of the story in *A Thousand Ships*, but she is not afforded her own chapter and has to appear in one of the chapters on *The Trojan Women*. Helen’s voice is interrupted by an unsympathetic Hecabe, who objects only to the ‘Trojan’ moniker when the Greeks call Helen ‘The Trojan whore’ and explicitly tells her ‘I blame you’ (Haynes 2019: 133, 135). Thus, Helen’s vilification – as it is portrayed in Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* and informed by modern conceptions of internalised misogyny – is presented in *A Thousand Ships*.

Despite this, Haynes’ novel does give Helen space to share her story. Helen allocates blame more equitably; if her ‘crime was to be seduced’, she must surely share that crime with her seducer and fellow adulterer: ‘Paris was a married man, [...] Why does everyone always forget that? [...] Paris came to me, remember?’ (Ibid., 135). Similarly, her boorish first husband is allotted some blame, and ‘Which of us can refuse Aphrodite? [...] A god’s power is far greater than mine’ (Ibid., 136-7). As outlined above, Sappho blamed Aphrodite and Ovid blamed Menelaus, so Haynes’ Helen distributes the blame among all of the characters that deserve a share. Haynes’ Helen does consent to Paris (inasmuch as anyone can consent when the gods are controlling their actions), but she does not submit to her reputation as a solely blameworthy whore. Helen in *A Thousand Ships* owes much to Euripides’ Helen in *The Trojan Women*, who (as Haynes writes in *Pandora’s Jar*) ‘is nowhere near as accepting of either sole or major responsibility for the war’, and Euripides writes her ‘a legal defence, given in verse’ to overturn her impending death sentence (2020: 66). Moreover, in *Helen*, Euripides ‘makes the most exculpatory move of any ancient writer: he totally rewrites her story, thus mounting a full-scale defence of Helen’ (Maguire 2009: 119), as we saw above with McLaughlin’s rewriting of Euripides’ *Helen*. Haynes draws upon her informed opinion that ‘Euripides is one of the greatest writers of female voices in antiquity and, frankly, in the history of theatre’ (2020: 189) in her novelistic retelling, continuing his tradition of giving Helen an opportunity to defend herself. On a related note, Haynes’ Helen has a sarcastic tone when she continues in the Homeric tradition of self-flagellation “‘I, who destroy everything I touch, polluting and ruining with my very

existence?” Helen said, eyebrows arched’ (Ibid., 134) and we see what Hughes called the ‘feistier Helen’ of pre-Christian literature, when she uses her seductive demi-godhead to demand respect from Odysseus who was previously mocking her (Ibid., 209-210). Also, it is narrated that ‘She was hard to describe’, yet Haynes does offer a description of Helen as ‘so tall and fair that she seemed like a swan among ordinary birds [...] her golden hair, her pale skin, her dark eyes,’ (Ibid., 133). For Haynes, the central stake in the story is that Helen’s defence is as established in the mythic tradition as Helen’s blame, and to exonerate Helen is to challenge the misogynistic trend that vilifies beautiful women and blames them for suffering.

It has therefore been established that Helen poses some adaptive challenges, as evidenced by her notable absence in Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls*, her unsympathetic portrayal in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, and the acknowledgement of these difficulties in Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships*. Despite this, she is beginning to be revisited in women’s revisionist myth writing. Claire Heywood’s *Daughters of Sparta* (2021) is a novel of the interconnected lives of sisters Helen and Klytemnestra, which indicates that the increasing vogue to revisit the women of Greek myth is also finally making space in contemporary women’s storytelling for Helen’s narrative. In this text, Paris seduces Helen, but the scales quickly fall from her eyes as she realises that ‘she had only ever been his prize, like that poor beautiful creature he wore about his shoulders’ (Heywood 2021: 282). In comparing herself to the leopard hide that Paris wears as a cape, she fully acknowledges that he views her as little more than an adornment and a testament to his status; Paris says directly to her that ‘you are *my* woman, I won you and I took you. The most beautiful woman in the world is mine,’ (Ibid., 282) which is a stark acknowledgement of her objectification, accentuated by the language of possession that Paris chooses. In Heywood’s novel, it is Klytemnestra who voices the debates surrounding Helen’s agency:

She feared for Helen. She must be so afraid, taken from her home, raped by a foreign man. But if she had not been raped, if she had left willingly... The thought was not much better. *Oh Helen. What have you done?* (Heywood 2021: 196)

Klytemnestra does not know whether Helen consented to going with Paris, but what distinguishes this from when, for example, Atwood’s Penelope or Miller’s Achilles pose these

questions, is that Klytemnestra's questions come from a place of love. The use of pathos as a rhetorical device, emphasised by the italicised rhetorical question, emphasises the distinctive tone of sisterhood in this novel. This sisterhood distinguishes the novel from other adaptations of Helen, because it provides a more empathetic perspective on her story. Moreover, the novel reframes Helen's choices so that they are no longer defined by men. For example, she chooses to marry Menelaus so that she will be 'sisters twice over' (Ibid., 65) with Klytemnestra (since their husbands are brothers so they will be both sisters and sisters-in-law) and geographically closer to her sister, so that they are more likely to see one another. In doing this, the novel prioritises their closeness with one another over their infamous marital and extramarital relationships. Thus, the Trojan War is reclaimed as, in Weigle's (1999: 969) terms, a women's mythology.

Overall, Helen is a difficult woman to adapt in a way wholly unlike the difficulties that the adapting authors face when considering Penelope or Briseis, mostly due to her continued fame. Nevertheless, she can evidently be utilised to navigate modern feminist discourses, such as women's portrayals in the media, sexual violence, objectification, and sex work. Moreover, the most recent iterations of feminist thought on women in myth are revisiting Helen as a source of adaptive potential, drawing particularly upon the Euripidean Helen while also acknowledging the difficulties that come with adapting Helen in 21st century women's writing. Self-awareness is necessary in contemporary Helen discourse because, as Maguire argues: 'When narrative fails to achieve closure, literary criticism steps into the breach. Interpretation provides one of the strongest forms of closure, turning blanks and discontinuities into connected meaning' (2009: 18). Though narrative sometimes fails to make Helen knowable, literary criticism, such as the work of Laurie Maguire and Bettany Hughes, indicates how Helen can be accessed in the 21st century beyond novelistic, poetic, or dramatic reinterpretations. Moreover, to access Helen is to open up discussions about the representation of sexualised women in patriarchal systems and the real dangers that they face: Helen's entreaty for Menelaus to spare her life and her equitable redistribution of the blame becomes a critique of the fetishisation and vilification faced by women deemed too beautiful throughout history, from Cleopatra to Diana.

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It is evident that being the most famous woman from classical mythology does not translate to being the most adaptable, as demonstrated by the relative sparseness of Helen's representation in these novels. Meanwhile, the comparatively forgotten character of Briseis has become the most adapted woman, most prominently in Emily Hauser's *For the Most Beautiful*, Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*. In fact, the obscurity surrounding Briseis, both in ancient and contemporary texts has allowed authors to create novels which are both faithful to the ancient texts and original, as shown by the vastly divergent representations of Briseis in the novels. Penelope's fame can be placed between Helen's and Briseis', and she is rewritten in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Madeline Miller's *Circe*, and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*. Therefore, she has been transformed from her memory of 'the epitome of the good and faithful wife' (Smith 1992: 74), into an active schemer and key critic of her prominent husband. Atwood and Miller both ask 'what was Penelope really up to?' (Atwood 2005: xxi), both in Ithaca and after the *Odyssey* ends because, although she is remembered, her 'story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water' (Ibid., xxi). Because she is not the primary focus of Homer, her motives and actions remain obscure enough for the authors to recreate her in innovative ways. Evidently, excavating and reinterpreting the women of the Greek epics is one of the most significant ways that contemporary female authors are adapting myth for feminist purposes. This recalls Angela Carter's much-quoted line:

Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. **I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode** (1983; 1998: 26 [my emphasis]).

New readings of old texts are at once destructive – of outdated, oppressive traditions – and constructive, as they offer infinite regenerative potential for new stories, new perspectives, in familiar frameworks. New wine in old bottles. The wealth of potential for creative reading can perhaps be best indicated in a case study that considers how one myth can be re-read and

developed for a myriad of ‘explosive’ purposes, which is the goal of the following chapter, focused on revisions of *Antigone*.



## **Chapter 2: Antigone's Afterlives**

Ali Smith's *The Story of Antigone*, Salley Vickers' *Where Three Roads Meet*, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, and Natalie Haynes' *The Children of Jocasta* are all contemporary prose adaptations of Antigone's myth. Despite using the same source material, their approaches differ substantially. This chapter will therefore form a case study of this specific figure from Greek myth in contemporary literature, illustrating how the same myth can be utilised for diverse purposes, with very different questions emerging as a result of the varying adaptations. Then, I will focus on one specific decision that adapting authors make when revisiting Antigone: her age. While Sophocles has Ismene as Antigone's younger sister, there is a trend amongst more recent adaptations to cast Antigone as the rebellious younger sister. This trend began with Jean Anouilh's play *Antigone* (1944), written during the Nazi occupation of France, and can be traced to present-day novels, leading one to question why certain authors choose to cast Antigone as either a wilful youth or an older extremist (Haynes 2017: np.). Antigone's shifting age speaks to the specific issue of power at play in the myth: portraying her as the younger sibling means that she would attract less scrutiny, and therefore she would have more freedom to rebel, though of course this would mean that she would have to fight harder to be heard. This specific question of age will supplement the broader questions asked in this chapter. Building on the questions posed by earlier feminist analyses of Antigone – 'why [...] do we continually return to this figure in our attempts to grapple with the struggles and crises of our own times? [...] what can we learn from her?' (Söderbäck 2010: 2) – this chapter will argue that to adapt Antigone is in itself an act of feminist (re)writing.

Sophocles' *Antigone* opens with the heroine on the brink of a decision: should she obey the political laws set by Creon, or the religious laws that demand burial rights for the deceased? As Natalie Haynes summarises: 'So Antigone must decide: does she obey her conscience and bury Polynices – the punishment for which is the death penalty – or does she obey the law and leave her brother to be picked apart by dogs?' (2017: np.). Antigone decides that the laws of the cosmos far outweigh the politician's decrees, and she resolves to preserve she and her brother's eternal souls despite the corporeal consequence of death that she faces: 'These laws, I was not about to break them, / not out of fear of some man's wounded pride, / and face the retribution of

the gods' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles *Antigone*: 1.509-11).<sup>23</sup> Antigone, despite her youth, cursed heritage, and lack of hope for a future, stands up against this misogynistic despot for moral justice. Since taking this stance in ancient Greek myth and literature, Antigone has remained a figure of revolution. In Hegelian aesthetics, Greek tragedy – such as Sophocles' *Antigone* and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* – exemplify beauty in its most concrete form, because free individuals proceed to action, leading to conflict and, finally, to resolution; the conflict between Antigone and Creon in the *Antigone* is an example of individuals moved to act by an ethical interest, or *pathos*, in the relationship between the family and the state (*Aesthetics*, 2:1213–14 in Houlgate 2021: np). Throughout the centuries, 'This courageous woman, the fruit of incest, has fascinated philosophers in the nineteenth century, inspired playwrights in the twentieth century, and intrigued feminist thinkers and activists for decades' (Söderbäck 2010: 2). It is the last of these groups and their reproductions – the modern feminist preoccupation with, and adaptations of, Antigone – on which this chapter will focus.

Why is Antigone a continued figure of interest and interpretation for theorists and novelists alike? Casting Antigone as a revolutionary figure against despotic, misogynistic control has its roots in antiquity. According to Lefkowitz and Romm, Sophocles' play is centred around moral obligation, pitting the individual against the state, as well as woman against man, since 'Creon is angry not only because Antigone did not abide by [his laws] but also because he cannot stand being disobeyed by a woman' (Lefkowitz & Romm 2016: 275-6). They point to his initial condemnation of both sisters to death despite Ismene's innocence and his infamous comment that his son, heretofore engaged to Antigone, will find 'other women, other fields to plow' as evidence for the 'misogynistic streak' in Creon's character (Ibid., 276). It is these threads of morality against a corrupt patriarch that have been rewoven by later writers.

In *Antigone Rising*, Helen Morales asserts that Antigone's myth has become 'one of the most meaningful for feminism and for revolutionary politics. She has become an icon of resistance. Of pitting personal conviction against state law. Of speaking truth to power' (Morales 2020: x). This is because Antigone embodies the enduring 'glamorous appeal' of a "girl against

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<sup>23</sup> Anne Carson notes that Antigone and Creon's opposition is not simply ideological, it is linguistic: they 'stand opposed to one another instinctually, in the very morphology of their language, in the very grain of the way they think and speak' (Carson 2015: np.). Even on a linguistic level, Sophocles positions Antigone and Creon as opponents.

the world”” (Ibid., xiii). Morales draws a parallel between Antigone’s (ancient and fictitious) courage and endurance in her girlhood, and the bravery of the (contemporary and real) Iesha Evans, Malala Yousafzi, and Greta Thunberg, labelling them all as having ‘the spirit of Antigone’ (Ibid., xii). In making this comparison, Morales demonstrates how myths can be utilised and politicised in the modern day, in the service of radical politics. As Charlotte Higgins writes in her review of Morales’ text, ‘Creative misreadings and deliberate subversions are in fact central to the classical tradition’ (Higgins 2020: np.), beginning with the works of playwrights and poets such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Ovid. From ancient civilisations to today, ‘creative readings, even misreadings, of classical texts and stories can be immensely generative’, and this is the case with Antigone particularly, who ‘has often been creatively misread to provide a model for female activism’ (Ibid., np.). This idea of misreading myths for their generative potential is an interesting one, since to ‘misread’ suggests that there is a specific correct reading that one is recognising and rejecting — which is contrary to the widely-held understanding that there is no one correct version of a myth. However, here the suggestion is that to alter the myth is to galvanise it; myths are characterised by their mutability, and they exist to be repurposed and repoliticised. If Sophocles and Euripides began the classical tradition of creatively rewriting Antigone’s myth, it has continued through Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, and Jean Anouilh, to the present work of Natalie Haynes, Ali Smith, Kamila Shamsie, and, to a lesser extent, Salley Vickers. Though these authors have all found in the myth the same “‘girl against the world””, there remain many opportunities for generative ‘misreadings’. Julia Kristeva expresses the mutability of myth by amplifying Antigone as an enigma, asking ‘Who are you Antigone?’ (2010: 215), and answering that she is an ‘unfathomable, indefinable figure; lacking a fixed identity in your very authenticity; you escape yourself, Antigone’.

Ali Smith’s *The Story of Antigone* was published as part of Pushkin Children’s Press’ ‘Save the Story’ campaign. Much like the Canongate Myth Series, Pushkin publishers aimed to create ‘a library of favourite stories from around the world, [...] by some of the best contemporary writers’ (Pushkin Press, in Smith 2011: 99). The Pushkin Press series has some significant distinctions from Canongate’s, most notably that their stories are for ‘today’s children’ (Ibid., 99) and that they are not limited to mythic retellings. In summary, ‘Save the Story is a mission in book form: saving great stories from oblivion by retelling them for a new, younger generation’

(Ibid., 99) — a familiar mission within the scope of this thesis. So it is important to recognise that, unlike the other texts in this chapter, *The Story of Antigone* retells the myth of Antigone specifically for children. My analysis is shaped by an awareness of this intended audience and the ‘Save the Story’ mission; it is informed not only by analysis of the main body of the text but also with the mock interview at the end between Smith and the crow/narrator.

The feminist relevance of Smith’s children’s story lies in its encouragement to young people to realise the political power of their voices. Smith’s Antigone loudly entreats her sister to “‘SHOUT IT AS LOUD AS YOUR VOICE WILL GO!’” (Smith 2011: 19). This is clearly an adaptation of Sophocles’ Antigone, who boldly states ‘shout it from the rooftops. I’ll hate you / all the more for silence — tell the world!’ (trans. Fagles, 1.100-101). Moreover, this exclamation by the Antigone of the children’s story sheds light on the appeal of Antigone’s myth for children, since she stands up for justice, even though she is a powerless child. This interpretation is supported by the use of capital letters and an exclamation mark in Antigone’s speech, since it gives the impression of her shouting as loud as possible, therefore demonstrating that the relevance of the story for children is to motivate them to use their voices against injustice.

The intended child reader of Smith’s adaptation is apparent in the storytelling method since Antigone’s actions are narrated by a crow, first to a dog and then to her nest of chicks. Anthropomorphised animals as storytellers are a cornerstone of children’s literature, such as E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952) and Richard Adams’ *Watership Down* (1972): ‘animals that talk can let us in on another world which we may not be able to see without their help’ (Markowsky 1975: 461). While Markowsky refers to the talking rabbits allowing their young readers access to Robert Lawson’s *Rabbit Hill* (1944), Smith’s talking crow provides us with a bird’s-eye view into ancient Thebes and imparts a sense of otherness and humour to the narration. Crow’s defamiliarisation of the actions, motivations, and histories of humans (or the ‘still-alives’ as Crow calls them [Smith 2011: 27]), provides the reader with an outsider perspective on humanity. Markowsky cites humour based in caricature as one of the key reasons that children’s authors use anthropomorphism; Smith uses the caricature of the greedy, scavenging crow to offset the gruesomeness of battle, such as how the crow describes people as ‘food specifically for crows’ (Ibid., 14). The crow has a strong dose of irony and macabre humour, such as when she tells the story of Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother, ending the tale with ‘Caw.

Hilarious.’ and that of the battle of the Seven Against Thebes and Eteocles and Polynices’ death at each other’s equally-matched hands with ‘Priceless.’ (Ibid., 27; 29). This also works to reshape the most gruesome, sensational elements of the story for children, such as incest and murder that are also, crucially, the most familiar aspects of the myth. Smith also uses the caricature of a stupid dog as the crow’s audience; while the crow is a witty storyteller blessed with a full vocabulary, the dog is not so fortunate: ‘ArooooOOOOoooo [...] “Arf,” the dog said’ (Ibid., 23-5). The crow’s acerbic wit is demonstrated at the dog’s expense, ‘Dogs. Stupid *and* sentimental. [...] Cretin, the crow thought’ (Ibid., 23-5), and used to establish the crow as the storyteller and the dog as the rapt, but unintelligent, listener. Therefore, ‘the animal[s are] used to express attributes commonly assumed to represent the creature’ (Markowsky 1975: 461), though the crow and the dog are also used to embody two of the key themes of Antigone’s myth: decay and loyalty, respectively. While most of the adaptations discussed here engage with these issues, Smith’s adaptation is distinctive in its use of animals to relate some of the more gruesome themes of the myth in child-friendly ways. This demonstrates that the myth can not only be adapted for young audiences, but also that the important motifs of loyalty and standing up for what is right can be related to children via the Antigone myth.

*The Story of Antigone* is significant for this research, not only due to the feminist implications, but also due to the story’s self-consciousness about storytelling and adaptation. The epilogue sees the crow repeat the story to her anthropomorphised chicks: “‘Tell us again! Tell us again!’ [...] The nest was full of hungry fledglings still wet from the egg, who’d all woken with their hungry mouths (and ears) wide open’ (Smith 2011: 87). Here, the chicks mirror the children reading the story and, more broadly, the story itself being told ‘again!’, this time for children. Furthermore, the fledglings in the epilogue excitedly take over telling the story from their mother: “‘Tell us again the story of the still-alive girl who cared about her dead brother,’” (Ibid., 90). Smith’s story therefore self-consciously reflects on the phenomenon of storytelling: it fits the Save the Story mission of retelling stories for younger generations within the novel itself and then envisions the next step, which is that generation continuing the story.

*The Story of Antigone* ends with an interview, in which Crow asks Ali Smith questions about Antigone and adaptation. Smith answers Crow’s opening question ‘So, where does the story of Antigone come from?’ (Ibid., 93) with information about Ancient Greece and Sophocles, which

Crow follows with a particularly telling question: ‘So you are adapting this story from Sophocles’ adaptation of the story in ancient mythology in turn?’ (Ibid.,94).<sup>24</sup> When Crow suggests that adaptation is ‘like stealing’ (Ibid., 95), Smith explains to Crow (and also to the reader) about the dissemination of knowledge and storytelling: ‘It’s the way most stories get told, over time. It’s one of the ways stories survive’ (Ibid., 95). This is uniquely relevant to this thesis, since the adaptation of historic sources is inevitable and ensures the survival of the story, and the goal of this thesis is to investigate the layers within this, looking particularly at the significant differences in contemporary adaptations, where the myth has been reworked for feminist purposes. Thus, Smith not only adapts Antigone’s myth from Sophocles’ adaptation, but actively engages with the concept of adaptive tradition with the intention of explaining it to younger readers in the fictitious interview. Furthermore, when Crow asks ‘why did you add us?’ (Ibid., 96) Smith makes explicit the rationale behind anthropomorphising crows and dogs. She explains that ‘the imagery in the original drama is *full* of crows and dogs’ due to the question of ‘what happens to a body when you leave it unburied’ (Ibid., 96). Here, the unburied body is a metaphor for the story itself, as they are both things that change over time (decay in the case of the body, adaptation in the case of the story), but which is still important to people, as demonstrated by Antigone’s actions in burying the body and by the authors who retell these myths. If Polynices was left unburied, his body would become ‘carrion for the birds’ (Sophocles, trans. Fagles, *Antigone*: 1.230) — it is this physical indignity as well as the fate of his eternal soul that Antigone saves her brother from. Ultimately, Ali Smith’s adaptation of Antigone’s myth is intended for children, yet the story provides justification for mythic adaptation in contemporary literature, and suggests that a story in which ‘a small powerless girl stands up to an all-powerful-seeming king,’ (Smith 2011: 94) would be inspirational and politically motivating for young people throughout the generations.

While Smith’s novel, as its title suggests, centres around Sophocles’ drama of Antigone’s story, Salley Vickers’ contribution to the Canongate Myth Series, *Where Three Roads Meet*, focuses on the myth of Antigone’s father Oedipus and, more specifically, Sigmund Freud’s

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<sup>24</sup> Smith is taking Sophocles’ version of the myth as her starting point, which is understandable due to it being the most familiar ancient version of the story, but – as Crow elucidates – Sophocles is just one version of the myth. This is further explored below, in the analysis of Natalie Haynes’ *The Children of Jocasta*, which purposely decentralises Sophocles’ adaptation.

psychoanalytic interpretation. She used to be a practising psychotherapist, and believes that ‘Oedipus is a central myth for psychoanalysts, [but] Freud's not read it correctly’ (Feay & Vickers 2007: np.). Vickers maintains that because Oedipus is an adult when he has sex with his mother, he does not have an Oedipus complex, and that Freud fails to account for Laius and Jocasta, whose attempted infanticide ought to be for psychoanalysts a ‘very interesting feature of this myth’ (Ibid., np.). Laius and Jocasta’s actions are more illuminating for Vickers than Oedipus’, since they acted with knowledge that they were the parents of the baby, while Oedipus and Jocasta acted without knowledge of their maternal connection. Thus, her novel is formed of a Socratic – albeit anachronistic – dialogue between Tiresias and an ailing Sigmund Freud in Hampstead in 1938, wherein Tiresias critiques Freud’s interpretation of the myth. Antigone is barely discussed by Tiresias and Freud, and Freud’s daughter Anna, who is conflated with Antigone, exists in the text merely to silently interrupt the men’s discussions, demonstrating that she is not the focus of Vickers’ adaptation. After this analysis, I shall consider Vickers’ Antigone/Anna in relation to Antigone’s potential for Psychoanalysis, particularly as theorised by George Steiner and Judith Butler, both of whom were building upon Lacan’s interpretation of Antigone as a model of pure desire in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1986: 328-9; in Miller 2007: 1).

When dealing with Antigone, Freud and Tiresias focus on her role as a dedicated daughter, which is to say the Antigone of *Oedipus at Colonus*, rather than as a figure of political dissent, as she is in the *Antigone*. Indeed, the few times that the two men mention Antigone focus on her loyalty to Oedipus: ‘The daughters who stood by him? [...] Antigone and Ismene. Especially Antigone’; ‘Antigone and Ismene refused to be parted from their father’; ‘Antigone, had his stubbornness and refused to leave him’ (Smith 2007: 177; 178; 179). The repetitive language in their descriptions of Antigone and Ismene – and ‘Especially Antigone’ – demonstrates that the aspect of her character they are focused on is her dedication to Oedipus. This relates to their overall focus on Oedipus in the novel, as his daughters only command interest insofar as they relate to their father. This is manifested in the noticeable lack of attention the two men afford to Eteocles and Polynices, merely mentioning that ‘the boys never came to any good’ in contrast to their sisters who ‘were cut from a different cloth’ (Ibid., 179). Since Eteocles and Polynices were not loyal to their father they are not deemed relevant for in-depth discussion by Freud and

Tiresias; in the same way, since Oedipus' daughters stayed with him, they are a source of dialogue, but only in relation to their degrees of relative dedication to their father. Antigone in the role of loyal daughter is closest to her character in *Oedipus at Colonus*, where she is described by Oedipus as having 'volunteered for grief, / wandering with me, leading the old misery, [...] Hard labour / but [she] endured it all,' (Sophocles trans. Fagles, *Oedipus at Colonus*: 1.377-382). This emphasis on the Antigone of *Oedipus at Colonus* is made explicit in *Where Three Roads Meet* when Oedipus' death is described: 'When Oedipus was very old, and more rancorous than ever, he arrived one day, in the company of his stalwart daughter Antigone, at Colonus,' (Smith 2007: 182), wherein Antigone is again characterised by her devotion to her ailing father. Furthermore, the novel ends with the epigraph '*He died, as willed, in a foreign land, / his eternal resting place in quiet shade, / his passing not unmourned*' (Ibid., 195), which is a line spoken by Antigone towards the close of *Oedipus at Colonus*. To use Antigone's epitaph as an epigraph demonstrates her role for Oedipus, Tiresias, and Freud which is to loyally attend her father. There is a definite valorisation of loyalty to the father figure in this text, indicating that the Antigone that Tiresias and Freud are discussing is the Antigone of *Oedipus at Colonus* – the dedicated daughter – rather than the political dissenter of *Antigone*.

Vickers conflates Antigone with Freud's daughter Anna in *Where Three Roads Meet*. Much like 'stalwart' Antigone, Freud's daughter Anna followed him to England as he escaped the persecution of the Nazis and cared for him as he died of cancer; as Vickers puts it in the preface to the novel, Freud moved to Hampstead 'along with the constant Anna (referred to by Freud as his "Antigone")' (Vickers 2007: 10 [preface]). This similarity is made explicit in the narrative, such as when Freud says Anna is 'a brave girl' and Tiresias agrees that 'It is good to have a courageous daughter' (Ibid., 17). Here, Tiresias' vague language in his agreement broadens the scope of the men's sentiments to apply to both Anna and Antigone, thus highlighting the two daughters' similarities.<sup>25</sup> This comparison is made more explicit when they discuss 'The

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most oppressive portrayal of a female figure by Tiresias and Freud is in their dealing with the Sphinx, which they describe as 'a lion-bodied, sharp taloned brazen-winged, snake-tailed, smug-faced, ravaging woman, be she ever so pitiless' (Vickers 2007: 93). The language used to describe the Sphinx deliberately mirrors derogatory language often applied to women, most notably 'brazen', 'smug', and 'pitiless'. Griselda Pollock argues that Freud's preoccupation with Sphinxes (as demonstrated by his ownership of numerous Sphinx-related artworks) is indicative of Psychoanalysis' interpretation of the feminine as something monstrous and uncivilised (Pollock 2008: 90). Pollock argues that Freud invokes the Sphinx to portray a 'horrible image of the maternal body as a monster or



daughters who stood by him? [...] Especially Antigone' and Freud exclaims 'Like my Anna!' (Ibid., 177). Freud and Tiresias also reduce Anna to her father's carer: 'my daughter will bring in my tea tray at five'; 'I can eat nothing, barely drink, but Anna insists' (Ibid., 28; 155). Anna's recurring role in providing her father with afternoon tea recalls Antigone's role in *Oedipus at Colonus*, where she is has 'never a second thought / for home, a decent life, so long as your father / had some care and comfort' (Sophocles trans. Fagles, *Oedipus at Colonus*: 1.382-4). Anna's caretaking also plays a structural role in the novel as her silent interruptions cause the breaks in dialogue that account for the chapters. Much like their descriptions of Antigone, Freud and Tiresias are repetitive in their accounts of Anna's interruptions: '... ah, I am sorry, this will be my daughter with the tray and the best china. [...] I have talked enough, Dr Freud. But I'll return'; 'Your daughter will be arriving soon with the sacred tray. [...] Enough words for today, Doctor'; 'The sacred vessel is about to arrive. [...] I'll be back, Doctor' (Smith 2007: 39; 57-8; 107). Anna is treated as an interloper by the men, despite their increasingly elevated language in describing the afternoon tea, from it being simply a meal to a 'sacred tray' and a 'sacred vessel'. With this religious language, the dinner tray becomes a sacred object, paralleling Freudian tradition with the mythic tradition, in the same way that Anna is equated with Antigone. The conflation of these two women indicate that the primary concern of this adaptation is not Antigone at all, but rather a dialogue about the reception of myth in Psychoanalysis, and the Anna/Antigone figure is used mainly as a structural device.

While in Freud and Tiresias' Socratic dialogue Anna and Antigone's voices are notably absent, Antigone is becoming an increasingly important figure in post-Freudian Psychoanalysis. This focus began with Jacques Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, where he argues against the reductive interpretation of Antigone as 'really a tender and charming little thing' (1986; 1992: 262). Instead, he offers her as a character defined by *Até* (delusion, ruin, folly), going on to characterise Sophocles' Antigone as 'something uncivilized, something raw' (Ibid., 263). Ultimately, Lacan argues that Antigone represents a kind of 'fierce presence' (Ibid., 265) in direct contravention to milder interpretations of Antigone, or those that sideline her in favour of her father's myth. The Lacanian model of Antigone is an important challenge to

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enclosure' (Ibid., 105) and that, in Freud's model of Psychoanalysis, 'the feminine, like the Sphinx, still remains outside the realm of the truly human' (Ibid., 90).

Freudian Psychoanalysis, which sidelines Antigone in favour of her father's myth. It is Antigone as a 'tender and charming little thing' that is picked up on in Vickers' Freudian retelling of the Theban Cycle. Moreover, Lacan's exploration of Antigone's 'fierce presence' marks a theoretical shift back to Antigone, rather than Oedipus, in psychoanalytic thought, which has been taken up by George Steiner and Judith Butler.

In *Antigones*, George Steiner attempts to answer the same question as this chapter: 'Why are the "Antigones" truly *éternelles* and immediate to the present?' (2011: ix). Steiner notes that, though 'Sophocles' *Antigone* had held pride of place in poetic and philosophical judgement for over a century', Freudian Psychoanalysis has caused critical, interpretative focus to shift to the *Oedipus Tyrannos* in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Ibid., 7). *Oedipus Tyrannos* perhaps suited Freud's psychoanalytic goals better than *Antigone* due to its overt focus on sex. As Chase confirms in 'Oedipal Textuality: Reading Freud's Reading of *Oedipus*', 'Freud uses the drama of Oedipus to tell a story about psychic development and to describe the status of sex in human existence' (1979: 54). Chase specifies that Freud has read Sophocles' Oedipus, rather than just adopting the general semantics of the Oedipus legend (Ibid., 54). Chase theorises that Freud's infamous reading of the Oedipus myth is an interpretation, and that the Sophoclean myth can be utilised to recontextualise Freud's interpretation. This is a thesis similar to Vickers' in *Where Three Roads Meet*, which is a revisitation of the Oedipus myth based on the belief that Freud has fundamentally misunderstood the myth (Feay & Vickers 2007: np.). By virtue of being an interrogation of Freud's interpretation, *Where Three Roads Meet* is focused entirely on Freud/Oedipus, with Antigone/Anna being marginalised and silenced. Yet, Steiner's work indicates that 'an "Antigone" [is] lodge[d] ineradicably and via incessant replication in our private and public sensibilities' (Steiner 2011: 127). Steiner concludes that one can observe in Antigone 'and in the spell which she has cast on the western imagination, [...] countless dreams and symbolic representations' (Ibid., 128), thus demonstrating the potential of Antigone for psychoanalytic interpretation. Vickers' sidelining of Antigone can therefore be accounted for due to her marginalisation in psychoanalytic thought; Lacan and Steiner's consideration of Antigone's enduring appeal, however, indicates that it is Antigone, rather than Oedipus, who is the more innovative figure for post-Freudian psychoanalysis.

In *Antigone's Claim*, Judith Butler builds on Steiner's 'controversial question that he does not pursue: What would happen if psychoanalysis were to have taken Antigone rather than Oedipus as its point of departure?' (2000: 57). They track Antigone's 'postoedipal' (Ibid., 57) fate, arguing that her life and death is just as defined by incest as Oedipus', if not more so. Butler asserts that 'Antigone's father is her brother, since they both share a mother in Jocasta, and her brothers are her nephews, sons of her brother-father,' and that her relationship with her late brother Polynices is incestuous, being a replacement for the father and husband that she can never have (Ibid., 57). Butler uses this as a springboard to make a case for Antigone to become a figure for Queer Psychoanalysis, because she 'fails to produce heterosexual closure for that drama, and that this may intimate the direction for a psychoanalytic theory that takes Antigone as its point of departure' (Ibid., 65). They concede that Antigone does not 'achieve another sexuality' besides heterosexuality, but she does 'deinstitute heterosexuality by refusing to do what is necessary to stay alive for Haemon,' and, in refusing to become a wife and mother and in 'embracing death as her bridal chamber' she subverts the heteronormative expectations for her gender (Ibid., 65). Therefore, although Antigone has been marginalised by Freudian psychoanalysis, as suggested in *Where Three Roads Meet* by Anna/Antigone's interloping silence, post-Freudian psychoanalytic thinking continues the centuries-long tradition of replicating and reinterpreting Antigone.

Ali Smith focuses on Antigone's myth in *The Story of Antigone* and Salley Vickers' *Where Three Roads Meet* disputes Freud's interpretation of Oedipus' myth at the expense of Antigone. In *Home Fire*, Kamila Shamsie harnesses the issues of moral turmoil and political dissent in Sophocles' *Antigone* to highlight Islamophobia and citizenship issues faced by present-day British Muslims. *Home Fire* is an atypical contemporary adaptation of Greek Mythology: Antigone and her mythos are never mentioned within the text, instead the stories and characters are echoed and re-framed:<sup>26</sup> Oedipus becomes Adil Pasha, Antigone becomes Aneeka, Ismene becomes Isma, Polynices becomes Parvaiz, and Creon becomes Karamat. What is in a name? Research by Richard Alford proved that naming practices help to construct and reflect conceptions of personal identity and cultural signifiers, such as kinship organisation, cultural

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<sup>26</sup> Yet we know that this is an adaptation of Antigone due to the novel being marketed as such by both the authorial and editorial paratexts. For further analysis of this, see Chapter 5 'Palimpsests: Paratexts and Intertexts'.

difference, and religious systems. '[N]ames connect us to our family, to our language, and to our traditions' and colonial practices have often included renaming colonised peoples as an act of domination and violence (*Facing History and Ourselves* 2018: 1:iii). Hence, in renaming the figures from the Theban Cycle in her retelling, Shamsie indicates the cultural identities at stake in the novel and the British Muslim identity politics central to *Home Fire*. Adil Pasha, Shamsie's Oedipus, was radicalised and, a generation later, his son Parvaiz follows his father's footsteps into ISIS. Meanwhile, the Home Secretary Karamat Lone is 'Striding Away From Muslim-ness' (Shamsie 2017: 52) to rise to political power. Lone strips Parvaiz of his citizenship and does not let the 19 year-old boy come home when he realises the error of his ways, leading to tragedy and suffering, particularly for Aneeka and Isma, or Antigone and Ismene. I will analyse Shamsie's reconfiguration of Antigone as Aneeka and Ismene as Isma and, from there, her reinterpretation of Sophocles' drama as commentary upon modern-day British citizenship.

Shamsie's reimagined Antigone, Aneeka, faces a similar choice to her hermetic foremother. Aneeka must reconcile her dual identity as a young British woman and a Muslim. For Antigone, the turmoil lies in natural versus political law because Creon decrees that Polynices' body should not be buried, in direct defiance of the laws of the gods. Unlike Creon, Antigone declares her respect for divine law: 'These laws, I was not about to break them, / not out of fear of some man's wounded pride, / and face the retribution of the gods' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles, *Antigone* 1.509-11). Similarly, Aneeka goes to Karachi to retrieve her brother's body after he is killed trying to escape ISIS, to protest Lone's leaving Parvaiz stateless in death:

In the stories of wicked tyrants, men and women are punished with exile, bodies are kept from their families—their heads impaled on spikes, their corpses thrown into unmarked graves. All these things happen according to the law, but not according to justice. I am here to ask for justice. I appeal to the prime minister: Let me take my brother home.  
(Shamsie 2017: 224-5)

Like Antigone, Aneeka defies man-made laws that oppose moral justice both in word and deed. The generalised phrasing at the beginning of Aneeka's monologue not only outlines the parallel between Aneeka and Parvaiz and Antigone and Polynices, but also comprises a more universal

philosophising about immoral laws and power-hungry politicians of the sort advanced by Antigone.

Aneeka selectively wears a headscarf on the grounds that ‘I get to choose which parts of me I want strangers to look at’ (Ibid., 72). She wears the headscarf in public, but takes it off to have sex with Eamonn, demonstrating her freedom to choose when she wears the headscarf as part of her identity as a young British Muslim woman. The discussion of headscarves by contemporary British Muslim women largely centres on their choice to wear a headscarf, in direct opposition to the misconception that covering hair necessarily involves oppression (see London 2021: np; Killian 2019: np.). A number of factors influence this choice, however. Chris Allen *et al.* interviewed British Muslim women in collaboration with Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) to produce the report “‘Maybe we are hated’: The experience and impact of anti-Muslim hate on British muslim women’ in 2013. Their research found that ‘Muslim women who are visible [wearing the hijab, niqqab, or other Muslim-specific clothing] are, on many occasions, the group that is targeted the most’ (Allen et al. 2013: 5). Muslim women are more likely to be subjected to Islamophobic attacks, especially when wearing the niqqab or other religion-specific clothing (Siddique 2013: 1), indicating that this choice is not always straightforward for women. Aneeka’s Auntie Naseem says ‘In my days either you were the kind of girl who covered your head or you were the kind who wore makeup’ (Shamsie 2017: 64). Evidently, Aneeka is both the kind of girl who covers her head (a Muslim) and the kind of girl who wears makeup (sexually active). The self-determination in Aneeka’s choice to be both is most stark when she asks ‘Leave this on?’ (Ibid., 71) and wears her hijab during sex with Eamonn. In fetishising the symbol of modesty, Aneeka reconciles these two ostensibly disparate sides of her life and identity. This echoes Antigone’s refusal to choose marriage with Haemon over death as her marital bed — while Antigone refuses to conform to the heteropatriarchal demand for marriage, Aneeka refuses to conform to Naseem’s definitions of Muslim womanhood.

By contrast, Isma consistently wears a hijab as a symbol of her faith, which is one way in which she is identifiable with Sophocles’ Ismene. Her conformity with the laws of Islam mirrors Ismene’s conformity with Creon’s laws of Thebes. The Qur’an decrees that women should cover their heads for modesty (Qur’an 7:26; 24:31; 33:59) and Isma chooses to conform to that;

similarly, Ismene says to Antigone ‘think what a death we’ll die, the worst of all / if we violate the laws and override / the fixed decree of the throne,’ (Sophocles, trans. Fagles, *Antigone* 1.70-2). Although Ismene did not participate in her sister’s crime, she allies herself with Antigone, calling to be martyred alongside her: ‘I share the guilt, / the consequences too’ (Ibid., 1.603-4). Likewise, Isma wants to fly to Karachi to share Aneeka’s martyrdom: ‘I want to be with her, that’s all’ (Shamsie 2017: 236). The same conversation with Karamat Lone demonstrates Isma’s quiet activism:

“Why sociology?” he said. [...]

“I wanted to understand why the world is so unfair.”

“Shouldn’t your God give you those answers?” he said, surprised by the slight teasing of his own tone.

“Our God did, in a roundabout way.”

“How’s that?” he said. [...]

“For starters, He created Marx.” (Ibid., 237)

Mentioning Marxism to the Conservative Home Secretary undermines his political values, but there is a more subtle critique within the exchange. When Lone mocks Isma’s faith (‘your God’) she retaliates with a reminder of his Muslim upbringing (‘Our God’). Lone apparently misses the subtle rejoinder and has no significant response to her Marxist comment, demonstrating the power of quiet activism that is often overshadowed by more overt, performative activism, as exemplified by Antigone and Aneeka.

Kamila Shamsie has said that ‘*Antigone* [...] has, at its centre, the question, what is the relationship of state to citizen?’ (Major & Shamsie 2018: np.). Creon decrees that Polynices cannot be buried in Thebes, and condemns his body to rot outside the city, something which would not happen in modern Britain – ‘We have hygiene laws, if nothing else’ (Ibid., np.) – but interpreting this decree as ‘you have no claim to this land, you have no place here, living or dead’ (Ibid., np.), clarifies the parallels between ancient myth and modern politics. While in Ali Smith’s story, the unburied body is a metaphor for the body of the text, for Shamsie the unburied body becomes symbolic of the state and citizenship. Parvaiz, Shamsie’s Polynices, experiences

having ‘no claim to this land’ in both life and death, in his radicalisation and posthumous statelessness. When Creon issues an edict that Eteocles deserves burial rites while his criminal brother does not, he is decreeing that Polynices has ‘no claim to this land [...] living or dead’. In *Home Fire*, IS recruiters target Parvaiz, first by mugging him to make him think about ‘How he hated this life, this neighbourhood’, and then by brainwashing him against Britain and its ‘emasculated version of Islam, bankrolled in mosques by the British government’ (Shamsie 2017: 123; 131). Likewise, Creon states in *Antigone* that Polynices ‘returned from exile, home to his father-city / and the gods of his race, consumed with one desire— / to burn them roof to roots—who thirsted to drink / his kinsmen's blood’ (Sophocles, trans. Fagles, *Antigone* 1.223-6). A figure who leaves his ‘father-city’ only to return with the intention of destroying it maps quite easily onto modern narratives of radicalisation, with young men leaving the U.K. to join the Islamic State and considering their previous homeland the enemy. Hence, Shamsie draws a parallel between the ancient drama and modern politics in order to demonstrate how citizenship and state enemies have been sources of anxiety to civilisations throughout history.

Shamsie’s fictitious government clearly mirrors this political landscape, with the real-world 2014 Immigration Act being reflected in the text’s forthcoming ‘Immigration Bill [that will] make it possible to strip any British passport holders of their citizenship in cases where they have acted against the vital interests of the UK’ and the Home Secretary stating that ‘citizenship is a privilege not a right or birthright’ (Shamsie 2017: 198). Karamat Lone makes Parvaiz stateless, thereby sending the message that ‘you have no claim to this land, you have no place here, living or dead’. Karamat states that ‘the day I assumed office I revoked the citizenship of all dual nationals who have left Britain to join our enemies’ (Ibid., 188). He refuses to allow Parvaiz’s body to be repatriated back to Britain for burial, stating ‘we will not let those who turn against the soil of Britain in their lifetime sully that very soil in death’ (Ibid., 188). This resonates with Creon’s decree that makes the burial of Polynices illegal. Similarly, Aneeka is not made literally stateless but the Home Secretary does in effect strip her of her ability to return to Britain, since she could not return with her Pakistani passport without applying for a visa, her British passport having been seized by authorities. This is comparable to Creon’s ruling to entomb Antigone, which effectively sentences her to death without having to publicly kill her. In both the Sophoclean drama and the contemporary novel, this “ruling” is supported by public opinion. The

Chorus school Antigone ‘You went too far [...] attacks on power never go unchecked’ (Sophocles, trans. Fagles: 1.942, 960), while Twitter acts in much the same way as a Greek Chorus to reflect public opinion in Shamsie’s novel, and support Karamat: ‘#WOLFPACK Just started trending’ (Shamsie 2017: 190). This ruling is only overturned on the advice of Tiresias in Sophocles’ play, and Karamat’s wife, Terry (a conflation of Creon’s wife Eurydice and Tiresias): ‘Look at her, Karamat: look at this sad child you’ve raised to your enemy,’ (Ibid., 254). Thus Shamsie adapts Sophocles’ *Antigone* to portray institutional Islamophobia in modern Britain, with Karamat’s Conservative government being aligned with Creon’s draconian rulership. Antigone retains significance in mythic adaptation and, while feminist politics are not explicit in Shamsie’s adaptation, the figure of a young girl standing up to despotic rule has once again been utilised to address real-world injustices.

Thus far, I have demonstrated the differences in Antigone’s adaptations by contemporary authors. *The Story of Antigone*, *Where Three Roads Meet*, and *Home Fire* are united specifically by their adaptations of Sophocles’ work. By contrast, in *The Children of Jocasta*, Natalie Haynes decentralises Sophocles’ version of the myth. In the ‘Afterword’, Haynes recalls ‘being startled to find out there were other versions of the myth’ (2017: 327) and cites Homer’s reference to “‘beautiful Epicaste, mother of Oedipus’” (Ibid., 327) in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus journeys to the Underworld. Haynes points out that Homer’s version of the Oedipus myth is relayed in just ten lines of verse, but it differs from Sophocles’ version (Ibid., 327); in the *Odyssey*,<sup>27</sup> the myth is centred on Epicaste and, though it refers to her suicide, there is no mention of the auto-enucleation. As Haynes asks, ‘when did Epicaste become Jocasta?’ (Ibid., 327). There are notable differences between Haynes’ adaptation of the Theban myth and Sophocles’, such as the reversals of fates for Oedipus’ children and the centring of the previously

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<sup>27</sup> ‘... I saw  
fine Epicaste, Oedipus’ mother,  
who did a dreadful thing in ignorance:  
she married her own son. He killed his father,  
and married her. The gods revealed the truth,  
to humans; through their deadly plans, he ruled  
the Cadmeans in Thebes, despite his pain.  
But Epicaste crossed the gates of Hades;  
she tied a noose and hung it from the ceiling,  
and hanged herself for sorrow, leaving him  
the agonies a mother’s Furies bring.’ (Homer, trans. Wilson 11:271-281)



marginalised Jocasta and Ismene as protagonists. Haynes' *Antigone* also differs from Sophocles' in other ways, such as in her altered ambitions to marry and become queen, as well as her ultimate, tragic fate.

In *The Children of Jocasta*, Polynices and Eteocles mutually kill one another and their posthumous fates are flipped, as Polynices receives funeral rites, while Eteocles is left unburied and deemed an enemy of the state (Haynes 2017: 230); more significant, though, is the sisters' interchange: Ismene buries her brother's body, instead of Antigone (Ibid., 276-8). Ismene's action compared to her historic inaction relates to Bonnie Honig's theory in *Antigone, Interrupted*. In much the same way that Haynes believes that Antigone 'shines so brightly that Ismene gets lost in the glare' (Ibid., 330), Honig maintains that Antigone's 'strident act renders the subtle invisible' (Honig 2013: 177), referring to the burial. She suggests that Antigone and Ismene are in a sorority of conspiracy (Ibid., 151) and that Ismene does, in fact, bury Polynices, as evidenced by Polynices being buried 'twice over' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles *Antigone*: 1.539) and Ismene's confession. Honig asks 'Why has no one for hundreds of years or more taken [Ismene] at her word? She confessed' (Honig 2013: 164). For Honig, destabilising the previously 'settled' belief held in *Antigone*'s reception that Ismene 'is an anti-political character who lacks the courage or imagination to act when called upon to do so' would be immensely more generative than simply repeating Antigone's 'possibilities of political reception' (Ibid., 151-2). This relates to my contention that the individual feminist appeal of *The Children of Jocasta* lies in its excavation of sidelined female characters in Antigone's myth, namely Ismene and Jocasta. Ismene's appeal for feminism lies in redressing her reductive portrayal as the silent, scared sister. In light of Honig's theory, Haynes' *The Children of Jocasta* is the next step for feminist reinterpretations of the Theban Cycle: to refocus attention on the overshadowed sister of Antigone.

As Luce Irigaray argues in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 'Ismene seems indisputably a "woman" in her weakness, her fear, her submissive obedience, her tears, madness, hysteria' (Irigaray 1974; 1985; 2010: 102). For Irigaray, identification with the revolutionary resistance of Antigone is the clear feminist route, so she continues the tradition of othering Ismene to amplify Antigone's activism (see Goldhill 2008: 159). This epitomises Ismene's surviving reputation, which is subverted in Haynes' novel. Under the obscurity of Antigone's shadow, Ismene is free

to defy Creon without suspicion; Haynes' Ismene capitalises on the assessment of her as a submissive younger sister to carry out the deed of burying Eteocles.

Ismene reflects that 'It never occurred to any of them to wonder if I might have had anything to do with it. I was still the youngest child, the one they could overlook' (Haynes 2017: 298). This offers great insight into the potential power of political invisibility given the nervous, obedient Ismene portrayed by Sophocles, Lacan (1959), and Žižek (1989); moreover, this is far more insightful than the youthful Ismene at the beginning of Haynes' novel. Here, Ismene speaks to the way she has been 'overlooked' both within, and outside of, the novel, in receptions of Antigone, as a potentially political agent. Ismene begins the novel naïve and often uncertain – 'I wanted to ask why, [...] I couldn't remember what had happened' (Haynes 2017: 45) – but by the end manages to exploit her invisibility to oppose an oppressive ruler.

Ismene is one of two autodiegetic narrators in *The Children of Jocasta* along with her mother, Jocasta. *The Children of Jocasta* is a bildungsroman for Jocasta who begins as a fifteen-year-old bride to an ageing King Laius, and becomes the visibly older wife to a young Oedipus, his 'flawless skin' contrasted with her wrinkles that '[bore] the marks of every time she had bent every finger' (Ibid., 162). Moreover, she grows from a young girl who experienced madness due to the "loss" of her first child and was plagued by 'terrible, suffocating uncertainty' (Ibid., 98) to a politically savvy queen who asserts her power over the Theban Elders that were capitalising on her madness: 'You were the Secretary of the Treasury. Now you're just a rude old man who used to be important,' (Ibid., 159). *The Children of Jocasta* is a coming-of-age story for the two most overlooked women of the Theban Cycle: Ismene, who 'gets lost in the glare' (Ibid., 330) of her sister's brilliance, and Jocasta, whose 'part of the narrative [...] has traditionally been overlooked' (Ibid., 328).<sup>28</sup> Hence, whilst there is a long history of Antigone being rewritten for feminist aims, with contemporary authors using the figure of Antigone to speak to issues as far-ranging as Islamophobia and the political potential for children's voices, *The Children of Jocasta* proves that the Theban Cycle has further potential for feminist authors, since Jocasta and Ismene can be as politically motivated as Antigone.

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<sup>28</sup> Liz Lochhead's play *Thebans* (2003) also gives new prominence to Jocasta in her Scots language revision of the Theban Cycle.

Haynes' interpretation of Antigone as a character is founded on her romance with Haemon and her desire to be queen. She is often engaged in romantic sentiment while Ismene uncovers the plot unfolding in the castle: 'holding hands with our cousin Haem [...] My sister will surely marry Haem [...] Ani went wherever Haem was, wherever they could meet in private' (Ibid., 66; 69; 89).<sup>29</sup> Antigone's Sophoclean single-mindedness is refocused on romance, rather than a young girl standing up to an unjust patriarch. Ismene clearly considers Antigone to be vapid due to her constant preoccupation with her appearance, as opposed to Ismene's focus on education: 'What if she needed [the maids] to help her change her dress or rearrange her hair? We couldn't all run around the palace like barbarians, she would say' (Ibid., 7). Though Ismene judges her sister to be shallow, Antigone is instead revealed to be rather opportunistic and politically calculating. Immediately after the death of their brothers, Antigone mentions being crowned and Ismene asks 'How long after she saw our brothers dead did she decide she should succeed them?' (Ibid., 212). Moreover, Antigone's tragic hanging in the Sophoclean drama becomes a calculated risk for Haynes' Antigone, for whom the 'dramatic gesture' was a means to assure support: "'I will be queen of Thebes, Isy. I am the rightful heir. The throne is mine.'" (Ibid., 304). This 'gesture' was apparently calculated correctly by Antigone as she is greeted by the Theban crowd that 'began shouting her name, and calling her Basileia, Anassa, queen' (Ibid., 305). This is a far cry from Sophocles' Antigone who stoically accepts that she is married to death: 'no wedding-song in the dusk has crowned my marriage— / I go to wed the lord of the dark waters' (Sophocles trans. Fagles, *Antigone*: 1.907-8). Haynes' characterisation of Antigone is mediated through the lens of her more subtle sister, recasting Antigone's activism as performative and overwrought in comparison to Ismene's more understated act. *The Children of Jocasta* is comparable to *Where Three Roads Meet* since Antigone is not the primary focus of either adaptation, though while Vickers' novel sidelines Antigone to interrogate Freud's interpretation of Oedipus, Haynes' novel looks beyond Antigone to the women whose voices are suppressed by her stridency.

Ultimately, Antigone is not the only figure of the Theban Cycle who is 'meaningful for feminism and revolutionary politics' (Morales 2020: x); evidently, Ismene and Jocasta can also

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<sup>29</sup> In Ismene's narration, she uses nicknames for herself and her siblings in the form of name abbreviations: Eteo, Polyn, Ani, and Isi. While Shamsie renamed the mythic figures as an act of cultural revision, Haynes' use of shortened names speaks to Ismene's bildungsroman in *The Children of Jocasta*.

break out of the oppressive system, particularly once an adapting author looks beyond Sophocles' version of the myth. While Antigone has remained a vociferous figure in the face of injustice, there is still work to be done excavating the voices of the women silenced by Antigone's actions, particularly Ismene. Haynes' divergent reinterpretations of the sisters raises the question of whether the lauded strong female voice is, in turn, silencing other women. Evidently, there are stereotypes assigned to Antigone's character in *The Children of Jocasta* that one might consider unhelpful in terms of empowering portrayals of women (the romantic lead, the shallow girl concerned primarily with her appearance, the calculating ambition). In light of Haynes' novel, these stereotypes become a plausible discussion of who are the silencers and who are the silenced. As we have seen with Penelope's silencing of the maids, and the primacy of privileged, royal voices (Penelope, Clytemnestra, and Helen) over slaves such as Briseis and Eurycleia, the question of 'who is being silenced by this voice?' is a vital one when adapting mythical figures.

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Henceforth, this chapter will critically examine Antigone's age in mythic literature and contemporary adaptations. First, one must ask why it is important to consider this shifting tradition. Put simply, why does Antigone's age matter? Haynes suggests that changing Antigone's age marks a 'move away from the earliest incarnations of the myth' helping to 'ground the novel in the here and now, rather than allowing it to slide into melodrama,' (2017: np.). This suggests that Antigone as a young rebel is a more identifiable figure in a modern setting and in terms of form, in a realist novel rather than a tragic play. More than this, taking into account the central contention of this chapter – that to adapt Antigone is political by definition – Antigone's age is important because it speaks to the issue of power at play in these reproductions. Rebelliousness is a mainstay of feminist activism, and recasting Antigone as the younger sibling increases her powerlessness in contrast to the state's power, therefore amplifying her rebellion.

In Greek myth, Antigone is the older and Ismene the younger sister, but this is rarely the case in contemporary adaptations. The trend of reimagining Antigone as the younger sister began

with Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, and is continued in Ali Smith's *The Story of Antigone* and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*. While Natalie Haynes does make Antigone the elder in *The Children of Jocasta*, she also makes Ismene become Antigone in terms of her actions, thus somewhat maintaining the modern move towards recasting Antigone as the youngest of Oedipus' children. This chapter will conclude by analysing Antigone's age in these adaptations, and investigate what the recasting of her as the younger sister tells us about the position that Antigone holds in contemporary attitudes.

In Sophoclean drama, Polynices is explicitly the older brother but the nature of the seniority between Antigone and Ismene is less clear. In the *Antigone*, the sisters' ages are only referred to in terms of how young they both are. Creon refers to them as 'those two young girls' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles, *Antigone*: 1.865); in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Antigone greets Ismene as 'dear sister, dear Ismene, [...] my own sister' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles, *Oedipus at Colonus*: 1.347-9) with no reference to age. Yet Ismene refers to herself as 'the third' (Ibid., 1.358) after Oedipus and Antigone, thus insinuating that she is the youngest. In the *Antigone*, the titular character's motivation for burying Polynices stems from piety and a sense of duty, 'I will lie with the one I love and loved by him— / an outrage sacred to the gods!' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles, *Antigone*: 1.87-8), while Ismene refuses to participate owing to her youthful fear of authority and death: 'we're underlings, ruled by much stronger hands, / so we must submit in this' (Ibid., 1.76-7). For Sophocles, Antigone is the older sister, acting as an 'extremist' (Haynes 2017: np.), motivated by familial duty and piety.

Furthermore, Haynes points out that the shift in Antigone adaptations that make her the younger sister begins with Jean Anouilh who imagined Antigone as 'not the dutiful older sister, but rather the young rebel' (2017: np.). Anouilh's drama does follow Sophocles' in some respects, for instance when Anouilh's Ismene says 'Antigone, be sensible. It's all very well for men to believe in ideas and die for them. But you are a girl!' (Anouilh, trans. Galantière 1946: 13), which echoes Sophocles' Ismene saying 'Remember we are women, / we're not born to contend with men' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles, *Antigone*: 1.74-5). The most notable divergence on Anouilh's part, however, is the shift in the sisters' ages. Antigone becomes the almost petulant child in 'Little Antigone gets a notion in her head — the nasty brat, the wilful, wicked girl;' (Anouilh, trans. Galantière 1946: 11) while Ismene is a frustrated older sister: 'Listen to me

Antigone. [...] I'm older than you are. I always think things over, and you don't. You are impulsive. [...] Whereas, *I* think things out' (Ibid., 11). Anouilh's Ismene is explicit in both her assessment of her sister as a wilful youth and herself as a more measured, reasonable elder: 'There you go, frowning, glowering, wanting your own stubborn way in everything. Listen to me. I'm right oftener than you are' (Ibid., 11). Anouilh's drama also diverges from Sophocles' in its omission of Tiresias and the introduction of a Shakespearean-inspired Nurse, but in this exchange between Antigone and Ismene Anouilh has 'followed Sophocles in his choice of scenes' (Conradie 1959: 11). For Fleming, this 1944 play is a canonical aspect of Antigone's reception, though there is a tension between those who see Antigone as an analogue for the French resistance and Creon as Nazi occupation, and those that interpret the play as collaborationist propaganda (Fleming 2008: 164-8). Fleming concludes that the play throws into stark relief the complication of casting Antigone as the poster-girl for feminism, yet '[f]ew now, if any, are concerned with Antigone's lapse into fascism' (Ibid., 186). Anouilh's play marks the beginning of the trend of rewriting Antigone as the younger sister, to emphasise her political prowess (whether in the service of far-right or more liberal ideologies), which can be traced through the novels discussed here.

Anouilh's version is alluded to in Hollie McNish's dramatic adaptation of *Antigone*. This adaptation was commissioned by Storyhouse as part of their *Originals* series, which invites writers to retell stories from across the ages to reflect on living in the present era (Clifton 2022: np.). In the opening scene, Antigone says to Ismene:

And I know what you're gonna say already, Izzy.

Oh Antigone! Calm down

Oh Antigone, life isn't easy!

Oh there goes Antigone, daydreaming again! (McNish 2021: 11).

Here, Antigone specifically anticipates the words of Anouilh's condescending Ismene, suggesting an engagement with the history of adapting *Antigone* for later eras. Moreover, this signals that, in the same way that Anouilh was writing in the context of Nazi occupation, McNish is writing with the contemporary political climate in mind. McNish makes explicit the connection

between Creon as an unjust and power-hungry ruler and former US president Donald Trump: ‘as I watched Donald Trump’s final speeches as US president [I thought] that’s just like Kreon’ (Ibid., xi). She presents this in the play by mirroring Trump’s speech patterns, exemplified by Creon’s repetition of ‘great’ when describing Eteocles as a ‘Brave soldier, loyal citizen, such a great, great man’ (Ibid., 31). This is not the first time Creon’s demagoguery has been used to critique fascist politicians. In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf said that Creon’s politics were ‘typical of certain politicians in the past, and of Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini in the present’ (Woolf 1938: 109). The Sophoclean drama ‘could undoubtedly be made, if necessary, into anti-Fascist propaganda’ and Woolf notes an ideological symmetry between Antigone and ‘Mrs Pankhurst, who broke a window and was imprisoned in Holloway’ (Ibid., 109). For McNish, like Morales, Antigone’s characterisation hints toward Vanessa Nakate, Malala, and Greta Thunburg, since she is ‘very opinionated, believes deeply in her Gods [which, in Nish’s version, are the Earth and the Environment] but can be found annoying to listen to all the time by some people’ (McNish 2021: xxi). Antigone’s potential for left-wing political activism is exemplified in the play when she quotes the linguist and activist Noam Chomsky: ‘Obedience will always be the easiest option, Izzy / – that doesn’t make it right’ (Ibid., 21). Finally, although McNish’s play alludes to Anouilh’s earlier adaptation, it does not make explicit who is the elder between Antigone and Ismene, and the only casting note for Ismene’s character is that she ‘Must be good at crying!’ (Ibid., xxii). Despite this apparently regressive characterisation of Ismene, McNish relates that part of the initial appeal of the play for her was that it passes the Bechdel test — two named female characters speak to each other about something other than a man (Ibid., xii). This is not the only motif within *Antigone* that remains relevant; McNish lists the position of women in society, the unjust power of monarchy, the effect of power on men’s egos, the importance of speaking up against injustice and the difficulty in safely doing so (Ibid., xii) as some of the aspects of the play that remain potent.

Natalie Haynes is the only author within the scope of this chapter who maintains *Antigone* as the elder sister. When Jocasta is pregnant with Ismene, she reflects on the temperaments of her older children: ‘Polynices did everything noisily, even breathing. Eteocles was quieter, [...] Antigone raged at the slightest provocation. [...] This one was nowhere near as restless as the other three had been.’ (Haynes 2017: 177). The dramatic irony is rich here, with the polarised

differences between Polynices and Eteocles foreshadowing their conflict and mutualistic deaths, while Antigone's rage and Ismene's comparative calmness allude to their responses to despotism. Moreover, Haynes' novel follows Sophocles' plays in Oedipus' preference for his daughters. This is central to *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which he offers love to his daughters and curses to his sons; his 'dearest, sweet young girls!' versus 'That son I hate! [...] Equals, twins in blood' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles: 1.1256; 1332; 1556). This is also present in Haynes' novel: 'Oedipus loves having daughters [...] He prefers Ani to either of the boys' (Ibid., 180). Though Haynes' novel purposely differs from Sophocles' version of the myth in a number of significant ways, the birth order of Jocasta's children and Oedipus' opinions of them are two ways in which her novel is aligned with Sophocles' dramas. These similarities suggest that Haynes' novel is a direct response to the ancient sources, rather than a continuation of 20th–21st century reception trends.

By seeming to address the ancient texts directly, Haynes' novel can cut to the issues of empowerment and political activism at play in the myth. Despite the fact that Antigone is the older sister in Haynes' novel, she is only Antigone (or 'Ani') in name, while Ismene is Antigone in action because she buries their brother. If Ismene is Antigone in action, Haynes' Ani nonetheless retains some of her Sophoclean characterisation, for instance when she calls for her brothers to be buried together: 'Neither of them will rest easily if they are separated in burial. They were together in life and together in death. Let them be together again now, and forever' (Haynes 2017: 255). In her role as the pious older sister, Haynes' Antigone reminds the Thebans that the 'sins of the living should be punished in life, but not after death. The limits laid down by the gods were quite clear' (Ibid., 255). In this version, Antigone is arrested for her speech, thus providing enough distraction for Ismene to bury their brother, which later leads to Antigone being crowned queen. While the enduring appeal of Antigone's myth is due in large part to the image of a girl shouting for justice, Ismene's understated actions in Haynes' novel suggest that there is also transformative power in quiet resistance, as much as there is in performative activism.

In *The Children of Jocasta*, Antigone remains the older sister, but she and Ismene share the mantle of being "Antigone" in word and action, and share the burden of her characterisation as simultaneously pious and dutiful, wilful and rebellious. This recalls Honig's interpretation of the



*Antigone*, both sisters bury their brother, though Antigone is the only one to face the consequences, thus creating ‘sororal conspiracy’ between them:

If Ismene did it, and if Antigone sacrificed herself for her sister, then we have here the story of two women partnered in their difference – one brazenly bold, the other possessed of a quieter courage – both plotting and conspiring in resistance to overreaching sovereign power but acting also in love or loyalty for each other. (Honig 2013: 170)

Thus, the Theban Cycle offers more than one model of female activism, one of which has been largely overlooked for centuries. Antigone embodies Audre Lorde’s belief that ‘what is most important [...] must be spoken’, while Ismene challenges the idea that ‘silences [must] be broken’ (Lorde 1977; 2019: 40; 44), since she epitomises quiet activism. In analysing the age of the sisters, one can therefore access the enduring appeal of this myth for feminism.

In Ali Smith’s *The Story of Antigone* and Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, Antigone is unequivocally the younger sister. In Smith’s children’s story, Antigone is ‘the younger one’, and ‘The more she talked, the more the older one, her sister, looked scared, looked around her, looked like she wished with all her heart that the younger one would be quieter’ (Smith 2011: 13). Smith’s Antigone is akin to Anouilh’s, a wilful, headstrong young girl, frustrated with her more timid older sister. In Anouilh’s play, Ismene says ‘I’m an awful coward, Antigone’ (Anouilh, trans. Galantière 1946: 12), and in Smith’s story she ‘pulled her hand away. She backed away from her sister’ (Smith 2011: 16) in shock and fear. Smith’s decision to cast Antigone as the younger sister relates to the target audience of her story, a modern child being more receptive to a young rebel rising up against the older authority, rather than a girl acting out of duty to her gods and kin.

Antigone as the younger sister to Ismene is taken to the extreme in *Home Fire*, where Aneeka (Shamsie’s Antigone) is significantly younger than Isma (Ismene). In fact, due to their age disparity and their being orphaned, Isma raised Aneeka and her twin Parvaiz, thus blurring the line between sibling and parent. Isma, thinking of Parvaiz, narrates ‘Her baby, her brother, the child she’d raised’ (Shamsie 2017: 41), and she describes Aneeka to Karamat Lone as ‘my sister. Almost my child’ (Ibid., 235). This fogging of the parent/sibling relationship is the only way in

which the incest so prevalent in the Theban Cycle is present in Shamsie's novel; Isma's parental description of her siblings echoes Oedipus' description of Antigone and Ismene as 'My sisters, yes, their father's sisters!' (Sophocles, trans. Fagles *Oedipus at Colonus*: 1.600). Therefore, in having the Antigone analogue be substantially younger than the Ismene, *Home Fire* alludes to the central theme of incest within the myth, without having it subordinate citizenship and morality. As well as the incestuous implications, Aneeka and Isma's ages also contribute to their characteristics and motivations, much like in the works of Anouilh, Smith, and Haynes. In Isma's estimation, nineteen-year-old Aneeka is 'A woman-child, a mature-immature' (Shamsie 2017: 47). Shamsie's Antigone, then, is somewhere between the older Antigone, motivated by a sense of justice and duty, and the younger Antigone, the headstrong rebel. This 'mature-immature' age is evident in Aneeka's impulsiveness in going to Karachi, thus effectively ending her citizenship in Britain, alongside her eloquent demand for justice. Upon her arrival in Karachi, Aneeka narrates that 'Here she would sit with her brother until the world changed or both of them crumbled into the soil around them' (Ibid., 210). This sentiment communicates her mature dedication to her brother and justice, as well as her immature ambitions to change the world. The alternative, 'crumb[ling] into the soil', works on both levels, as it could be a youthful flair for the dramatic or a realistic calculation of their fates.

Conversely, Isma is very much a mature woman, as portrayed by her matter-of-fact statement 'I want to be with her, that's all' (Ibid., 236) that, in contrast to Aneeka's, does not seek to change the world or end it, but simply states her desire. In response, Karamat Lone figures that Isma is 'Not a girl, this one. An adult, far more dangerous than that banshee in the dust' (Ibid., 235). In Lone's estimation, Isma is 'more dangerous' exactly because of what separates Ismene from Antigone, that she is more careful in her actions and words. Lone does not consider Isma as Luce Irigaray considered Ismene, as 'indisputably a "woman" in her weakness, her fear, her submissive obedience,' (Irigaray 1947; 1985; 2010: 102), but rather as Bonnie Honig does, as 'subtle, sub rosa, quiet, under cover of darkness' (Honig 2013: 161). In Lone's estimation, Isma is more of a political threat than her sister, as her quiet ploy to join her sister is more akin to his political manoeuvring than Aneeka's 'banshee in the dust' performance on-screen. Thus, in *Home Fire*, Antigone becomes not only the younger sister to Ismene, but a much younger sister; while Aneeka being a young woman allows her to walk the line between the typical

characterisations of Antigone as the elder or younger sister, Isma is characterised as being equally politically ‘dangerous’ due to the patience and maturity afforded to her as the significantly older, maternal sister.

Ultimately, in analysing Antigone’s age, we are able to access each adaptation’s overarching aims. Like all of Haynes’ work, *The Children of Jocasta* is grounded in Classics, which accounts for her outlier choice to maintain Antigone as the older sister. Smith wrote *The Story of Antigone* for children, so having the protagonist as the younger sister makes her more identifiable for the younger audience and augments the argument that Antigone’s myth encourages children to use their voice to advocate for justice. In *Home Fire*, having Isma as the much older sister allows for an allusion to incest, and accounts for their choices: Aneeka does what she does because she is a ‘woman-child’, and Isma is more measured in her actions due to her maternal maturity. Finally, it is noteworthy that the ages of Antigone and Ismene are not mentioned in Salley Vickers’ *Where Three Roads Meet* since the sisters are not the main focus of the novel.

This analysis of Antigone’s age points to a broader topic when researching adaptations which, though they may engage with the same source texts, do so for quite disparate purposes. As Sanders explains in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, ‘Mythic paradigms provide the reader or spectator with a series of familiar reference points and a set of expectations which the [adapter] can rely upon [...] while simultaneously exploiting, twisting and relocating them in newly creative ways and newly resonant contexts’ (2006: 81). While Antigone’s story provides the ‘familiar reference point’ of a girl standing up against injustice, the multiple approaches to adapting her myth, as demonstrated within this chapter, illustrate the many ways that the story can be retold. Moreover, ‘political commitment [frequently] informs and influences these acts of recreation’ (Ibid., 81), and this is certainly the case with Antigone’s afterlives, where her spirit of political dissension is recast to address a myriad of social injustices. Antigone is ‘*the* feminist heroine *par excellence*’ since she has become ‘[s]ynonymous with confrontation, resistance to tyranny, and defiance of patriarchy,’ (Fleming 2008: 165). To rewrite Antigone is a political act, and the most recent retellings of Antigone illustrate that primary among contemporary feminist concerns are how young people are using their voices for social justice. Shamsie’s Aneeka protesting her brother’s statelessness inexorably mirrors Iesha Evans taking a stand against racially motivated police brutality (Sidahmed 2016); Smith’s Antigone and Haynes’ Ismene

demonstrate the political power of a girl's dissenting voice, much like Greta Thunberg demanding a response to the climate crisis, asking world leaders 'How dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood' (*UNTV* 2019). While Söderbäck may anxiously ask 'is this eternal return of Antigone not a sign that we lack new imaginaries?' (2010: 4), this chapter offers some indication that, if anything, the 'eternal return' to Antigone's mythos demonstrates the infinite adaptive, imaginative, and activist potential for Greek myths.

### **Chapter 3: Mythic Masculinities**

In the same way that the first chapter of this thesis critically explored contemporary womanhood through the women of ancient epics, this chapter considers how contemporary female authors adapt the male heroes of Greek myth, with a focus on how they engage with modern theories of masculinity. In particular, this chapter asks what the specific value might be of analysing mythic men with reference to modern theories of masculinity. If the role of myth in antiquity was to narrate and etiologically explain the social and natural order, adapting myth serves the role of reappropriating these ancient myths in the service of shedding light on contemporary society. This indicates that adaptations of ancient men can shed light on contemporary masculinities. This chapter will explore instances where mythic masculinities have been rewritten in contemporary literature for feminist purposes. It will first consider Jeanette Winterson's novella for the Canongate Myth Series, *Weight*, that retells the myths of Atlas and Heracles. In Greek myth, 'Atlas, under strong constraint, holds up the broad sky with his head and tireless hands, standing at the ends of the earth, [...] for Zeus the resourceful assigned him this lot' as punishment for his leading role in the Titanomachy (Hesiod, trans. West 1988, *Theogony* l.507). Meanwhile, the hero Heracles is most famous for his Twelve Labours and subsequent immortality (see Apollodorus *Library* II.5): as mythographer Edith Hamilton explains, 'The greatest hero of Greece was Hercules. [...] Hercules was the strongest man on earth and he had the supreme self-confidence magnificent physical strength gives' (1942: 225). It is the strength of Atlas and Heracles that is emphasised in accounts of their mythos, and it is their strength as metaphors for masculinity in Winterson's retelling that will be analysed here. This analysis will particularly reference both Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's model of male homosocial desire, as well as more contemporary conceptions of toxic masculinity. Thereafter, this chapter, in direct dialogue with the first chapter that analysed adaptations of the women of the Homeric epics, will analyse how Achilles and Odysseus – the male heroes of the same epics – are adapted in the same modern texts. Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* both adapt Achilles, while Miller's *Circe* and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* present versions of Odysseus. This latter half of the chapter will focus on how these adapting authors contend with the legends of heroic men: do they uphold their

heroic status, or do they judge their actions to be irreconcilable with modern ideologies that do not valorise violence in quite the same ways? It is in staging these questions that the chapter will also consider the adaptive choices made by Jennifer Saint in her novel *Ariadne*, particularly in terms of Theseus' legendary heroism. This chapter will function as a mirror to the first chapter, in examining the (destructive and generative) potential for 'putting new wine in old bottles' (Carter 1983; 1998: 37), this time in terms of mythic masculinities.

Classical myths have always served the purpose of maintaining patriarchal rule and dissecting the human and, particularly, the male condition. By the same token, these myths need to be explored if patriarchy is to be unsettled. As classicist Bettany Hughes notes, 'the purpose of the myth-merchant, the storyteller, was to hold [their] audience rapt and to transmit social and political messages, to explore man's place in the world, to dissect the human condition' (2005: 343), and as Pomeroy interprets it, Zeus establishes 'a patriarchal government on Olympus' to 'introduce moral order and culture' (1975; 2015: 2). More recently, online, Alt-Right, white nationalist, men's rights groups (known as the Red Pill) use classical mythology, philosophy, imagery, and iconography to promote their vitriolic agendas. Donna Zuckerberg outlines her research into the weaponisation of the literature and history of ancient Greece and Rome by the men of the Red Pill, to promote white supremacist and patriarchal ideologies (Zuckerberg 2019: 5). She looks at how men on these Reddit pages use, for example, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus to reinforce rape culture, to 'lay bare the mechanics of this appropriation' (Ibid., 5). For her, this trend cannot be ignored because it has the potential to reshape how ancient Greece and Rome are perceived in the modern world, and because they lend historical weight and legitimacy to discriminatory world views. Zuckerberg also draws upon Page DuBois' work which responds to those who have appropriated material from antiquity in the service of a conservative political agenda. DuBois is a classicist who worries about 'contemporary writers [that] use the Greeks to argue for their [conservative] views. Their positions lend implicit support to politicians and religious leaders who advocate for so-called family values, restriction of women to their homes and obedience to their husbands as well as the dissolution of the separation between Christianity and the state and the promotion of homophobia, militarism, xenophobia, and the restriction of immigration' (DuBois 2001: 4). Thus, the Classics have been used in the service of conservative, patriarchal ideologies in recent

history, where the misogyny and patriarchy of Greek myth have been extrapolated and exploited for oppressive purposes.

Before considering the texts introduced above I shall outline some aspects of the dominant theories of masculinity. Studying masculinities is vital at present, because masculinity is in crisis, particularly evinced by the Male Suicide Crisis. Suicide is the biggest cause of death for men under the age of 45 in the UK, and male suicide rates are higher than female rates, one reason for which is that men are less likely to ask for help or express negative feelings (Baffour 2018: np.). Men's Studies as an academic field emerged in the mid-1980s, partly as a response to questions about men raised by feminism (Kimmel 1986: 518). A key theorist in the field of masculinities is R.W. Connell, whose theory of hegemonic masculinity critiques the assumption that 'one's behaviour results from the type of person one is' (Connell 1995; 2005: 67) as well as the distinction between behaviours that are considered either "masculine" or "unmasculine". For Connell, this conception is inherently flawed, because firstly, it considers masculinity only in terms of the personal, rather than the social, and secondly, it is 'inherently relational' because it depends on defining masculinity in contrast to femininity (that is, not masculinity), thereby relying on dated concepts of polarised gender binaries (Ibid., 68). Connell also outlines the historical approach wherein, until the eighteenth century, women were only considered different from men as 'incomplete or inferior examples of the same character'; the emergence of actual gender differences came with bourgeois ideas of separate spheres in the Victorian era (Ibid., 68). As an alternative to these models which present masculinity as an object '(a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm)', Connell argues that 'we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives' (Ibid., 71). Masculinity, and gender as a whole, is a set of practices, rather than something tangible, physical, and/or factual. Furthermore, when Connell argues that 'With growing recognition of the interplay between gender, race and class it has become common to recognize multiple masculinities' (Ibid., 76) she is clearly approaching the more contemporary concept of intersectionality. Thus, Connell warns against a subsequent oversimplification because there is not, for instance, a unified Black masculinity or working-class masculinity, in the same way that there is not a single model of 'man'.

It is from this understanding of masculinity that Connell then approaches the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Her model derives from Gramsci's sociological theory of hegemony which analyses class dynamics, and hypothesises that there are social structures which maintain class differences (Ibid., 77). Connell applies this to patriarchy because, like class, 'At any given time, [there is] one form of masculinity rather than others [that] is culturally exalted'; hegemonic masculinity thus refers to 'the configuration of gender practice' which embodies current ideals within patriarchy, and therefore guarantees 'the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Ibid., 77). Principally, while hegemony 'relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole', hegemonic masculinity refers to the 'specific gender relations of dominance and subordination' within that framework (Ibid., 77). Crucially, while hegemonic masculinity primarily oppresses women, it also creates stratification between groups of men, with men who enact corporate or military aggression presently in power, while unmasculine men are oppressed by the hegemonic structures. Connell labels this structure of oppression 'Subordination' (Ibid., 78), and explains the structure of 'Complicity':

The number of men rigorously practising the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small. Yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend (Ibid., 79).

There are few men who actively enact masculine praxis, yet most men benefit from the social gender dynamics wherein, broadly, men are dominant and women are subordinated. All men are therefore complicit in hegemonic masculinity because they profit (socially and economically) from the 'dividend'. She argues that there must be 'some correspondence between [the] cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual' (Ibid., 77); businessmen, government officials, and military leaders all enact masculinity to create and maintain a gendered hegemony.

On the other hand, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that the rigorous practice of hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity also has a number of negative implications for men. Primary among these is the fear of being accused of being homosexual, or 'homosexual panic', which follows from the dependence of patriarchy on the cultivation of close social bonds between men, a situation in which 'many twentieth-century western men experience their vulnerability to the



social pressure of homophobic blackmail’ (Sedgwick 1985: 89). As Edwards points out, such bonds ‘are not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated homosexual bonds’ and thus ‘individuals [are forced] into the frighteningly unsettled, coercively incoherent, murderously self-contradictory quicksands of homosexual panic’ (Edwards 2009: 38). While men who do not practise the hegemonic pattern still benefit from the patriarchal ‘dividend’, they are also under the continual and costly pressure to prove and/or deny their identity.

Connell also maintains that these figures who typify hegemonic masculinity may not necessarily be actual men in that they may be fictional, such as actors, or ‘even fantasy figures, such as film characters’ (Connell 1995; 2005: 77), or indeed, mythological figures. In *Weight*, Jeanette Winterson retells the classical myths of Atlas and Heracles to navigate such problems in masculinity; Atlas and Heracles’ strength, in particular, typifies hegemonic masculinity because their mythic strength makes them exemplars of the hegemonic pattern. Atlas’ strength is evident in the way that he carries the Kosmos on his shoulders at great cost to himself: ‘I could hardly breathe. I could not raise my head. I tried to shift slightly or to speak. I was dumb and still as a mountain.’ (Winterson 2005: 23) Here, the short sentences signal Atlas’ physical exertion, conveying his restricted, laboured breathing. The repeated ‘I’ at the start of each sentence reinforces the all-consuming strain as he is fully absorbed in his struggle. Yet his ability to hold up the Kosmos and, after he acclimatises to the eponymous weight, to sustain profound thoughts and relatively normal conversations, indicates his strength. Similarly, Heracles’ Labours demonstrate his stamina and strength; in *Weight*, when describing the ten Labours he has already completed, his tone is casual: ‘I have already killed the Nemean Lion, destroyed the Hydra, caught the golden hide of Artemis...’ (Ibid., 32). The list form accentuates his offhand tone which suggests that Heracles is not physically challenged by battling beasts, nor is he affected by challenging powerful goddesses. This tone is typical of adaptations of Heracles; in Ted Hughes’s play *Alcestis*, the introductory dialogue establishes his nonchalance when discussing his labours, as he mentions ‘Yet another labour. [...] Stealing horses. / The man-eating horses of Diomed. [...] death has never troubled me much.’ (Hughes 1999: 29-30). Heracles, then, has become a ubiquitous symbol of masculine strength. In *Weight*, his casual tone typifies his attitude to his own strength, as for instance when he offers Atlas the following – ‘I’ll take the world off your shoulders while you go. Now there’s a handsome offer’ (Winterson 2005: 34). Heracles does not

consider the (physical and, as we shall see, emotional) strain on himself, only the benefits for himself and for Atlas, the better to convince him. The adjective ‘handsome’ is particularly noteworthy here because it supplements the persuasive tone and connotes a specifically masculine model of beauty. Since ‘one can understand [men’s] power as brute force’ (Whitehead & Barrett 2001: 16) or, rather, that physical strength and violence is one way in which men maintain patriarchal hegemony (Connell 1995; 2005: 257), Atlas’ and Heracles’ strength establishes them both as exemplars of hegemonic masculinity. Though their powers are of mythic proportions, they act as hyperbolic figures of male strength, which is one way that patriarchy maintains hegemony. In *Weight*, Atlas and Heracles’ unrealistic strength becomes a hyperbolic reflection of physical strength as a masculine trait. Their powerful statuses as a Titan and a demigod mean that they are hierarchically above mere mortals and, in the same way that their mythic strength is magnified masculine strength, their godliness is an amplification of hegemonic masculinity. While gods rule over mortals, men, in turn, ‘claim and sustain a leading position in social life’ (Connell 1995; 2005: 77) over women. If ‘the number of men rigorously practising the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small’ (Ibid, 79), Atlas and Heracles become symbols of this elite, hegemonic class of men.

Atlas and Heracles’ relationship becomes increasingly complex when read with reference to Sedgwick’s model of homosocial masculinity. As Bird explains, ‘*Homosociality* refers specifically to the nonsexual attractions held by men (or women) for members of their own sex’ (Bird 1996: 121). Although homosocial relationships can also be sexual, and they inexorably impact other sexes, and the (social, sexual, and political) relationships between the sexes. For example, Heracles’ masturbation is a recurring motif:

“So you think you’re stronger than I am, do you Atlas? Can you balance Africa on your dick?”

[...] Heracles already had his own dick out and was working it furiously to make it stand.

“Come on, stick it on here. Let’s have the whole continent smack on my bulb.”

[...] Heracles was just about to come. “This’ll put snow on the Himalayas, eh boy?”

He lay back, scattered over the stars. “Go on Atlas, now you.”

“I don’t have a free hand.”

“I’ll do it for you if you want – mate to mate.”

“I’m too tired.”

“You sound like a girl.” (Winterson 2005: 51-2).

For Heracles, masturbation constitutes a show of masculine strength, demonstrated by the competitive nature of the exchange, particularly the challenging questions. Heracles masturbating in view of Atlas and, in turn, offering to perform a sex act for him, could arguably function as a hyperbolic manifestation of Sedgwick’s model of male homosocial desire, because there is a libidinous aspect to their interaction, but they are crucially not lovers, since the offer is specified as ‘– mate to mate’. Though, the extremity of the setting – with Heracles masturbating over mountain ranges and continents, and then leaning back amongst the stars – stretches the hyperbole to the point of parody, thus satirising male bonding. This exchange functions as a parodic rendering of contemporary “laddish” culture (see Bates 2014: 139-148; Diaz-Fernandez & Evans 2019: 237-247). This interpretation is evidenced by the juxtaposition between these giant heroes (both in terms of their legend and their physicality) and the use of anachronistic, “laddish” language, typified by ‘dick’ and ‘bulb’. In addition, Atlas’ feminine-coded rebuke ‘I’m too tired’ (a cliché based on the misunderstanding of consent that women must provide a reason not to have sex) and Heracles’ subsequent critique of his effeminacy all contribute to the satirical tone of the exchange. Heracles in *Weight* bears satirical resemblance to The Dog Woman in Winterson’s earlier novel *Sexing the Cherry* (1989): a grotesque giant woman, wrapped in a skirt big enough to be a ship’s sail; as Heracles can have the continent of Africa on his penis, The Dog Woman could throw an elephant. In *The Passion* (1987), Winterson’s parodic rendering of Napoleon is also – certainly ironically – larger than life; Sanchez categorised *The Passion* as ‘historiographic metafiction’ (1996: 95-104), a term coined by Hutcheon to refer to works that incorporate fiction, history, and theory, and that necessarily involve parodying genre and history. Hence, though the characters of Heracles and Atlas in *Weight* can be read in terms of formative theories of masculinity – most notably Connell’s model of hegemonic masculinity and Sedgwick’s homosocial male desire – they are, more immediately, satires of modern masculinity, rendered in mythic archetypes.

Another theory of masculinity that is relevant to the study of *Weight* is ‘toxic masculinity’, a term that is increasingly popular in discussions of masculinity. Though ‘toxic masculinity’ has become widely used in both academic and popular discourses, its meaning and origins are somewhat obscure (Ging 2017: 3). For Kupers, it describes ‘the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men’ (Kupers 2005: 713; in Ging 2017: 3). For Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity sometimes refers to men’s engagement with toxic practices, though such toxic practices are not always defining characteristics of hegemony. In *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo*, Sanyal draws upon Serano’s definition that men take on the role of sexual aggressors to gain attention and feel desirable and Schultz’s claim that ‘[j]ust as hetero women are often forced to choose between the images of the virgin and the whore, modern straight men are caught in a cultural tug of war between the Marlboro Man and the Wimp’ (Serano 2009; Schultz 1995: 112; in Sanyal 2019: 136) to conceptualise toxic masculinity. For Sanyal, ‘The process that teaches men from boyhood to feel and express only half of the full range of human emotions and repress and deny the other half [is] “toxic masculinity”’ (Sanyal 2019: 137). This framework of masculinity is important because understanding the effects of gender on boys and men sheds light on gendered violence, and men who are in touch with their more empathetic, ‘unmanly’ feelings (sensitivity, neediness, and fear), are more likely to recognise those feelings in others, and therefore understand consent (Ibid., 138-9). Toxic masculinity conceptualises the methods by which boys and men are conditioned to suppress ‘unmanly’ feelings, and how that has different negative effects for men, who are more likely to suffer with depression and commit suicide, and women, who are more likely to be victims of gender-based violence due, in part, to the toxic cycle of masculinity.

In ‘Boys Will Be Boys: The Making of the Male’, Marina Warner makes a distinction between masculinity as it is presented in modern media compared to how ancient audiences would have understood mythical heroes. In contemporary culture (outlets of which include television, computer games, and toy shops), male figures are mythologised as rapists and warriors, which sets up models, rather than counter-examples, of masculinity (Warner 1994: 27). This contrasts to the mythic heroes of Greek cycles, such as Oedipus, Jason, and Orestes, who served as tragic warnings (due to their crimes, including hubris, matricide, infanticide,

autoenucleation, and suicide) rather than exemplars. Their stories '[did not] make them exemplary, but cautionary: they provoked terror and pity, not emulation' (Ibid., 27). This contrasts to contemporary models of toxic masculinity, which '[do not] cry, "Beware!", but rather "Aspire!"' (Ibid., 27). Warner specifies that this analysis does not offer 'an excuse, a rationale or adequate explanation for men's capacity to rape and kill' but equally it rejects 'the universalising argument about male nature', which is a rejection of the essentialist stance that men are inherently violent (Ibid., 29). She ends the lecture with a quotation from Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel, *The Last Man* (1826): "'This, I thought, is Power! Not to be strong of limb, hard of heart, ferocious and daring; but kind, compassionate, and soft.'" (Ibid., 31). It is a measure of our present failure that these words are embarrassing – 'a foolish dream, a chimaera' – rather than utopian, but it does leave us with the connecting thread throughout Shelley's work, which is applicable here to toxic masculinity: 'if monsters are made, not given, they can be unmade, too' (Ibid., 31). Hence, though Greek myth offers a plethora of 'toxic' heroes, it is important to specify that, in earlier contexts, these were cautionary, rather than aspirational, models of masculinity.

In *Weight*, Heracles is an example of such toxic masculinity. An aspect of toxic masculinity is hypersexuality, and Heracles' hypersexuality is demonstrated by his numerous explicit sexual encounters in the novel. For example, he imagines raping his step-mother Hera, 'forc[ing] his prick in her,' (Winterson 2005: 42). The brusque colloquialism 'prick' supplements the rough abrasiveness of the fantasy. This rape fantasy is uncomfortably comedic, as Heracles' 'prick kept filling and deflating' (Ibid., 40). His oscillation between erection and flaccidity acts both comically and metaphorically, as a physical image of the complexity of their relationship: Heracles is sexually attracted to Hera, yet she is his stepmother who drove him mad. This scene ends with Heracles 'drop[ping] his hand to his prick and start[ing] to masturbate. [...] As he started to come, she kissed him once' (Ibid., 43). This has a conclusive tone, as though Heracles' masturbation overcomes his previous sexual conflict regarding his feelings for Hera, and this is supported structurally by the line-break which follows his orgasm. By concluding the scene with Heracles' orgasm, the scene takes on a sexual rhythm, starting with flirtation, such as when Heracles calls Hera 'drop dead gorgeous' (Ibid., 40); continuing on to foreplay and fantasy, and

ending with his orgasm. When Heracles kidnaps Iole by sacking a city, killing all her relatives, and seizing her mid-suicide attempt (Ibid., 113-4), the sexual imagery is similarly explicit:

Heracles caught her in his arms as she reached the earth, one hand moving straight between her legs. As he carried her over his shoulder, his prick bursting, he massaged her cunt with his dirty bloody finger, and made her wet. (Ibid., 114)

There are a number of elements here that mirror Heracles' sexual relationship with Hera. The 'wet' imagery here recalls Heracles 'wetting his fingertip' (Ibid., 42) on Hera's nipple; and the masturbatory images, previously of Heracles pleasuring himself with his hand, and here of him touching Iole 'with his [...] finger' all create a consistent narrative about Heracles' sexuality as inexorably brutal. The repeated use of 'prick' also creates consistency, as well as suggesting violence, intrusion, and destruction. The word choice 'prick' is an anachronism that undercuts the character's classicism, therefore demoting this classical hero to a common rapist. There is also an unresolved tension between the elevated reputation of the classics and the baseness (as well as complexity and absurdity) of human desire. The weight of Heracles' hyper-masculinity is therefore tied to sexual violence and his seemingly insatiable sex drive, presenting him as an exemplar of toxic masculinity, as it pertains to sexual violence.

While Heracles' hypersexuality is an example of masculinity's toxicity for women, we also can see in his characterisation the toxic effects of masculinity on men. Heracles suffers from acute anxiety: '*the thought-wasp, buzzing Why? Why? Why?*' (Ibid., 67). The '*thought-wasp*', a take on the *oistros* (demonic fly) that torments Heracles, here symbolises Heracles' anxiety – the repetition of 'Why?' and the imagery of something that buzzes ominously around one's head and stings creates a familiar representation of doubt, anxiety, and persecution. A wasp is also notably something violent and poisonous which pricks, so it plagues Heracles in a way not dissimilar to how his sexual aggression affects women. The pressures of performing the labours causes Heracles anxiety, which mirrors how the pressures of performing masculinity cause men anxiety. Stylistically, the scene of Heracles '*having a panic attack*' (Ibid., 67) is italicised, which separates it from the rest of the text to highlight the disjunction between the larger than life figure having a moment of human frailty, and the ancient mythical figure having a very contemporary

panic attack. This recalls Sedgwick's theories of the 'social pressure' that men suffer in attempting to enact hegemonic masculinity, and particularly the anxiety caused by an inability to suppress what Sanyal calls "unmanly" feelings of sensitivity and neediness and fear (Sanyal 2019: 138-9). Although, as Edith Hamilton notes, the 'greatest hero of Greece was Hercules. [...] the strongest man on earth' (1942: 225), Winterson portrays him as anxious, his '*thought-wasp*' replicating this sense of being trapped in a box of his own poisonous masculinity.

A further aspect of self-damaging toxic masculinity is the way in which men who 'challenge the status-quo, [are] *forced* back into compliance, whether through mockery and derision or through outright violence' (O'Malley 2015: np.). This '*force*' is seen in 'Zeus [who] was anxious [because] real heroes don't think.' (Winterson 2005: 57); Zeus symbolises patriarchal hegemony and he is 'anxious' when seeing Heracles diverge from the traditional heroic (masculine) path. Heracles' characterisation in *Weight* demonstrates the two sides of toxic masculinity: his conformity to hyper-masculine tropes has toxic ramifications both for women (against whom he is sexually violent) and himself as a man (indicated by his anxiety).

Conversely, Atlas rejects the model of masculinity enacted by Heracles. He is as physically strong as Heracles and, therefore, by the logic of the novella, just as masculine, but he does not exhibit any of the toxic behaviours that Heracles does. Instead, he shoulders his burden with 'such grace and ease, with such gentleness, love almost,' (Ibid., 83). The multiple sub-clauses communicate a gentle, rhythmic cadence reflecting Atlas's grace as he settles back into holding the Kosmos. The kind and caring language used to describe Atlas is not a contrast to his strength, but rather a supplement to it: Atlas can bear the weight much more easily than Heracles who, when he sees this display, feels 'ashamed' because 'He would gladly have dashed the world to pieces if that would have freed him' (Ibid., 83). Atlas' ability to bear the Kosmos with gentleness and grace, especially compared to Heracles' belaboured attempt, suggests that masculinity need not be toxic and oppressive in order to be strong. Moreover, while the narrative ends with Heracles installed on Olympus as a hero, but still battling the '*thought-wasp*', Atlas is given a far more emancipated ending. He rescues Laika, the dog that the Russians sent into space, so 'Now he was carrying something he wanted to keep,' (Ibid., 127) which leads him to have 'a strange thought.' (Ibid., 134). Atlas asks himself '*Why? / Why not put it down?*' (Ibid., 149), in which the repetition of an italicised '*Why*' echoes Heracles' thought wasp, but transforms it positively.

Ultimately, Atlas' capacity to show love, and therefore eschew toxic masculinity, frees him from his weight.

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While the first chapter focused on the women of the Greek epics (Penelope, Briseis, and Helen) with reference to feminist theories, this chapter will now examine the male protagonists of these epics (Achilles and Odysseus). Achilles is at the forefront of Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, but they contend with his legend in quite distinct ways: while Miller's novel aims to preserve Achilles' heroism, Barker's novel dethrones Achilles as the best of the Greeks at Troy, focusing instead upon his sexual and martial brutality. This move to interrogate mythic heroes and find their ethics and actions irreconcilable with modern morals – particularly regarding violence and treatment of women – is also present in Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne*, where Theseus' heroism is also scrutinised. Odysseus, like Achilles, is adapted quite differently in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Madeline Miller's *Circe* – in the former, Odysseus is the (absentee) patriarch and example of hegemonic masculinity but, in the latter, he is denied patriarchal control of the eponymous goddess' island.

In *The Song of Achilles*, Miller chooses to present an Achilles that is not defined by his rage, the rage that opens the *Iliad*: 'Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,' (Homer, trans. Fagles: 1:1). Miller's Achilles is not portrayed as stereotypically masculine, which is particularly striking when he poses as a woman in Deidameia's entourage: 'He was holding the earrings up to his ears now, turning them this way and that, pursing his lips, playing at girlishness' (Miller 2011: 152). Achilles 'playing at girlishness' is an act of gender performativity, in that he is, in Judith Butler's terms, staging femininity. For Butler there are no intrinsic traits of masculinity or femininity, but by performing the socially accepted traits of the gender binary, people reinforce 'the illusion that there is an inner gender core' (Salih & Butler 2004: 254). Achilles' feigned interest in earrings and pouting is a performance of femininity which is intended to cement his disguise as a woman, yet it also 'produces the effect of some true or abiding feminine essence or disposition' (Ibid., 254). It is particularly interesting that Achilles is a man dressed as a woman, since Butler's theories particularly focus on drag because 'In



imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself' (Butler 1990: 137). Achilles – an archetype of mythic masculinity, enduring throughout the centuries as an ideal warrior – wearing a dress and performing womanhood reveals the performativity of gender itself. Achilles' performance as Pyrrha is not emasculating to him – for him, it is 'An irritant, but not a crippling shame, as it would have been to another boy' (Miller 2011: 130). This scene was not invented by Miller; an extant fragment of the *Cypria* recounts this part of Achilles' myth, where Odysseus and Diomedes arrive on Skyros to find Achilles, whom Thetis has hidden there amongst the women (*Cypria* fr. 19, in *West Greek Epic Fragments* 97ff.; in Alexander 2009, 250 [footnote]).

As classicist Caroline Alexander writes in *The War That Killed Achilles* – a text that studies what the *Iliad* can tell us about attitudes to war throughout the centuries – 'when one of the "girls", ignoring the other finery, grasps [the armaments], they know they have found their man. The fact that Achilles was not immediately recognizable as a young man is intended to be a tribute to his striking beauty' (Alexander 2009: 94). Alexander also notes that Achilles' Olympian foil can tell us much about his character:

The traits that define Apollo - bringer and averter of destruction, healing powers, aloofness and withdrawal, youthful beauty, skill in the lyre – have a striking counterpart in the *Iliad*: these are the traits that also define Achilles, the most beautiful hero at Troy, whose wrath has wrought plaguelike destruction, who was taught healing arts by Chiron, and who is discovered by the Embassy in his tent [playing the lyre] (Ibid., 172).

To the Ancient Greeks, beauty to the point of femininity and hypermasculine wrath were not mutually exclusive, but rather qualities that combine to accentuate one another in gods and godlike heroes. In choosing to accentuate Achilles' beauty and overwrite his wrath,<sup>30</sup> Miller's text preserves his legend and suggests that contempt for apparently feminine traits in men is a relatively modern concept. Considering the title and the story being told via Patroclus' enamoured, homodiegetic narration (comparable, to a limited extent, to Nick Carraway's

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<sup>30</sup> As explored in Chapter 1: 'Women in the Texts', where Manne's theory of 'Himpathy' is used as a framework to consider how Miller exonerates Achilles specifically from the crime of rape, in the case of Briseis.

narration in *The Great Gatsby* [1925]) it is clear that the purpose of Miller's adaptation is to preserve Achilles' heroism and make it palatable to a modern audience that would not valorise rape and violence.

Rather than exemplifying oppressive masculinity, Miller's Achilles clashes with such patriarchal power, as is epitomised in Agamemnon. As indicated in the first chapter, Agamemnon is portrayed in contemporary women's adaptations of the *Iliad* as an irredeemable, sexually deviant, warmonger – the epitome of hegemonic masculinity. In *The Song of Achilles*, however, Achilles is completely opposed to Agamemnon: 'The contrast between the two had never seemed more sharp: Achilles relaxed and in control [...]; Agamemnon with his face tight as a miser's fist, louring over us all' (Miller 2011: 263). Achilles is a 'sharp' contrast to Agamemnon's 'specific gender relations of dominance and subordination' (Connell 1995; 2005: 78), as demonstrated by his 'relaxed' demeanour versus Agamemnon's tense and threatening manner. This portrayal of Agamemnon as a sullen and incompetent ruler does have its roots in the *Iliad* which, in Alexander's interpretation, presents in this character a 'pointed portrayal of a traditional king who is unworthy of command' (2009: 36). Alexander calls Agamemnon's failed test of the army (where he suggests that they should all go home, to test their loyalty) an 'astounding act of idiocy' and also suggests that 'as illogical and disastrous as the trial may be, it is entirely consistent with the *Iliad*'s carefully drawn depictions of Agamemnon in action' (Ibid., 35). Indeed, when combined with Agamemnon's mishandling of Chryses and the subsequent plague, and his taking of Briseis with the resultant withdrawal of his best warrior, the trial scene is 'simply one more example [...] of Agamemnon's unfitness to command' (Ibid., 35). Crucially, in contrast to Agamemnon, we can see a version of Achilles beyond 'a one-man genocide whose defining characteristic was his unquenchable anger' (Haynes 2011: np.). In his interactions with Agamemnon, Achilles portrays himself as 'a weary man engaged in the exhausting work of war, which he performs expertly but without much appetite' (Alexander 2009: 168); in his kind treatment of Priam and 'in his elegant forestalling of Agamemnon's possible defeat in competition at the funeral games, Achilles demonstrates profound knowledge of the disposition of men's souls,' (Ibid., 210). Though Agamemnon was chosen by Zeus to lead the Greek army, he is far from a flawless ruler, and it is through the accentuation of his unfitness to command that Miller's adaptation portrays Achilles in a more forgiving light.

Conversely, Achilles in Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* is dethroned from his heroic legend. The opening lines of the novel make it abundantly clear that this narrative is not going to preserve Achilles' song: 'Great Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles ... how the epitaphs pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called him "the Butcher"' (Barker 2018: 3). In stripping him of his epithets, and unerringly emphasising his brutality, the narrator conveys that the purpose of the novel is antithetical to any sympathetic portrayal of Achilles. Briseis, the protagonist of Barker's novel, is 'his reward for killing sixty men in one day,' (Ibid., 37), which is a very blunt way to communicate Achilles' martial brutality. Equally, the line 'He fucked as quickly as he killed' (Ibid., 28) provides an unflinching portrayal of his sexual violence – the blunt, direct, and matter of fact language delivered in short clauses serve to dethrone Achilles from his heroic status. Barker does not overwrite Achilles' Apollonian beauty in her quest to scrutinize and delegitimize Achilles' claim to heroism: her Achilles is depicted as 'probably the most beautiful man alive, as he was certainly the most violent,' (Ibid., 56). His beauty remains inextricable from his characterisation, as it was for Homer and Miller, but it does not indicate any sort of morality or godliness in his character. While he is 'probably' the most beautiful, his brutality is 'certain'.

This depiction of sexual violence is not limited to Achilles; indeed, it is portrayed as a systemic problem throughout the Greek army. After the murdering and 'the looting stopped – there was nothing left to take – and the drinking began in earnest. [...] / And then they turned their attention to us' (Ibid., 16). The list form shows the progression of the army's actions, from raiding, to murdering, to looting, to drinking, to then 'turn[ing] their attention' to the women with the intention of raping and enslaving them. The apparent naturalness of their actions speaks to endemic rape culture 'in which rape and sexual assault are common [...] a culture in which dominant social norms belittle, dismiss, joke about or even seem to condone rape and sexual assault' and in which 'victims are silenced and blamed, the crime is normalized and perpetrators are completely ignored' (Bates 2018: 56; 61). This culture is strongly echoed in Barker's novel, most notably in the way in which it works to silence victims, and the title of *The Silence of the Girls* refers specifically to this systemic silencing of female victims. In addition, sexual assault is normalised and condoned, as demonstrated both in the previous example and when Briseis reports seeing 'a woman raped repeatedly by a gang of men who were sharing a wine jug,

passing it good-naturedly from hand to hand while waiting their turn' (Barker 2018: 16). Here, gang-raping women is as normal as sharing a drink, and the soldiers' cheerful, patient demeanours clearly indicates that the behaviour is condoned. Barker's anachronistic use of rugby chants draws a direct line between the brutal, explicit rape culture in the ancient and mythical army and contemporary culture, where in the U.K., for instance, over 85,000 women are raped and 400,000 sexually assaulted every year (Bates 2018: 56). Barker's novel exemplifies one approach to dealing with mythic masculinities, which is to highlight how such age-old violence is still present in mainstream culture, perpetuated in acts as seemingly harmless as rugby chanting. As much as there is a continuum between normalised rape culture and sexual violence, so too is there a continuum between these ancient myths and enduring essentialised assumptions regarding male power and female subjugation.

It is important to note, however, that contemporary feminist authors are not the first to villainise the heroes of Greek myth. Indeed, 'the *Iliad*'s most outstanding Achaean heroes are unambiguously cast as villains in the works of later writers' (Alexander 2009: 219).

Agamemnon, Menelaos, and Odysseus, in particular, 'make multiple appearances in the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as bullying, duplicitous, cold-blooded tyrants' (Ibid., 219). This suggests that the heroism of these classical heroes has been interrogated throughout literary history, and that contemporary female authors are the latest to consider these figures in light of contemporary morality.

Dethroning heroes from classical myth is also a key preoccupation in Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne*, in which Theseus' heroic legend is interrogated. Theseus' heroic reputation is first built up under Ariadne and Phaedra's enamoured gaze, and subsequently critiqued as Theseus' actions reveal that his morals are far from heroic (in the sense of being just, though they are heroic in that they are typical of heroes). Put simply, Ariadne and Phaedra initially hero worship Theseus. When Theseus regaled them with his journey to Athens, Ariadne 'could see that Theseus would have known in an instant what to do. [...] Beside me, Phaedra was rapt, spellbound by his clean, decisive heroism' (Saint 2021: 86). The sisters' rapturous attention and confidence in Theseus' abilities shows they are enthralled by him and that, in particular, they view him unequivocally as a hero. Their initial veneration of Theseus speaks to his continued reputation as 'The great Athenian hero' that 'had so many adventures and took part in so many great enterprises that there

grew up a saying in Athens, “Nothing without Theseus.” (Hamilton 1942: 208). In Apollodorus’ *Library* alone, Theseus performed six Labours en route to Athens where he then faced Medea whose plot was to poison him. But ‘Theseus drove Medea from the land’ and then famously delivered Athens from its duty to deliver youths to Crete to feed the Minotaur. Theseus was also involved in the hunt for the Calydonian boar, the Argonauts, Heracles’ katabasis, the Theban Cycle, the mythos of Helen and, of course, the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus (Apollodorus, trans Hard 1997: III.16; Epit.1; I.8; I.9; II.5; III.6-7; III.10; Epit.5.2). “Nothing without Theseus”, indeed. Ariadne describes Theseus thus:

He did stand alone amongst men, this great Athenian hero, of whom so many legends would be woven. He was taller, broader, handsome, of course – and of the bearing not just of a prince but the poised strength of a panther waiting to strike. A man who would inspire songs and poems, whose name would be heard to the ends of the earth. (Saint 2021: 54)

His heroism, demonstrated by his beauty, status as Athenian royalty, and ferocity, is deliberately accentuated here – it is this heroic reputation that the novel later works to counter-write. The multiple clauses and elevated language speak to the elevation of his narrative. Yet, the reliability of the heroic accounts is immediately brought into question when Ariadne asks herself ‘Did I feel the cogs of destiny, the gliding of the Fates’ loom, or was it actually just the thumping of my excited heart?’ (Ibid., 55). In doing this, the autodiegetic narrator suggests that we should doubt not only her enamoured, naive perspective, but also the literary tradition of celebrating the heroes of Greek myth. This rhetorical question paired with the above reference to the many legends that will be woven point to another key concern in *Ariadne*: the question of whose story is being told and whose is not; the question of who will be remembered favourably and who will not. This motif is central not only to this text, but across the corpus of feminist adaptations of Greek myth (Ariadne, for instance, is much more excited to think ‘I would be part of his story now’ (Ibid., 93) than Barker’s Briseis is when she thinks that her experiences will be subsumed by Achilles’ legend, that she is ‘stuck inside his story’ [Barker 2018: 297]). This recurrent concern will be

further analysed in Chapter 5 'Palimpsests: Paratexts and Intertexts'; for the purposes of this chapter, the concern of whose story it is works to demonstrate the ubiquity of the male heroic narrative.

It is this male heroic narrative that *Ariadne* interrogates. Daedalus, who is famous for his intellect, demonstrates a shrewd understanding of Theseus' character:

I can give you the means to lead Theseus from the Labyrinth. [...] But, Ariadne, do you think that is what he wants? [...] **Does a Prince of Athens who strives for legend want to be rescued from a monster by a beautiful girl?** Do you think he will allow you to take him by the hand and smuggle him from Crete under a blanket, like a sack of grain? [...] Theseus wants your help, but not to spirit him away from the battle. He means to defeat the mighty Minotaur tomorrow. He will leave Crete with its greatest treasure plundered, its labyrinth left open and its myth dissolved. **It will be Theseus' courage that is sung of** (Saint 2021: 60-1 [my emphasis]).

Daedalus understands, before Ariadne does, that his own legend is Theseus' priority, not justice for Athens or romance with Ariadne. Daedalus' multiple questions speak to the masculinity at stake in hero narratives. In this case, Theseus needs Ariadne's help, but he cannot have it remembered that he relied on a woman; the lines emphasised within the above quotation point to the demand that the hero's legend alone is preserved, especially without reliance on 'a beautiful girl'. Moreover, Daedalus' questions indicate that the narrative of the masculine hero is now being interrogated in contemporary retellings.

Ariadne's anger at Theseus for abandoning her on Naxos is the most clear critique of the masculine hero figure in the novel. She explicitly shouts 'You are no hero, you faithless coward!' (Ibid., 128): in this exclamation, Ariadne literally strips Theseus of his heroic legend. Daedalus' warning questions are echoed in Ariadne's enraged narration, where she proposes that 'he would not tell of how he had crept out before dawn and left me sleeping, unsuspecting, whilst he slunk away. That shameful retreat would not feature in his boasts, would it?' and asks 'How many

women had he left in his path before me? How many had he charmed and seduced and tricked into betrayal before he went upon his way, another woman's life crumbled to dust in his fist, claiming every victory for himself alone?' (Ibid., 128). As well as her personal anger, Ariadne considers his broader pattern of behaviour; there is dramatic irony here too as the reader may know of Theseus' other wronged women, including the assaulted Amazon, Hippolyta, as well as Helen and Phaedra while they were both still children. This angry iteration of Ariadne draws upon Ovid's interpretation of her in *Heroides* X, 'Ariadne to Theseus', where she says 'All wild beasts are gentler than you and not one, / could have abused my trust more than you' (trans. Isbell 1990; 2004: 1.1-2). As Isbell notes, 'It is difficult to find in this letter anything of love. [...] She succumbed to the conniving opportunism of a man who desired her only peripherally while he acquired everything she could give' (Isbell 1990; 2004: 89). Contemporary adapting authors are once again turning to Ovid's *Heroides*, where the voices of mythical women were principally heard, in shaping their contemporary re-characterisations of these figures. Here, Ariadne's anger, originally given voice in Ovid, and once again voiced in Saint's novel, is not only indignant about her personal treatment at the hands of Theseus, or Theseus' treatment of women more generally, but the valorisation of mythical heroic men whose actions were ruinously misogynistic. 'I could not have been Ariadne', reflect Cixous and Clément in *The Newly Born Woman*, not because of the shame of sex outside of love and marriage, but because 'Theseus doesn't tremble, doesn't adore, doesn't desire; following his own destiny, he goes over bodies that are never even idealized. Every woman is a means, I see that clearly' (Cixous and Clément 1975; 1986: 76). For Cixous and Clément, it is clear that Theseus exploits women without desire for them; it is an empty consumption in which women are only valuable to him for the way they supplement his ambition for heroism.

In 'Ariadne's Mystery', Deleuze reads Theseus in terms of the overman in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For Deleuze the 'sublime or higher man conquers monsters, poses enigmas, but he ignores the enigma and the monster that he is himself' (Deleuze 1994: 8). To become an *Übermensch* he 'must discard his Heroic will' (Nietzsche 1883; 1966: 188; in Deleuze 1994: 8) because it is a product of society that Nietzsche nihilistically rejects. Hence, through a Nietzschean reading, as through an Ovidian one, Theseus' heroism is subverted into a

character flaw; he only cares about his own legend, because ‘each higher man is fixated on his own prowess that he repeats like a circus act’ (Deleuze 1994: 9). If Theseus is ‘the spirit of negation, the great fraud’ while Ariadne is ‘anima, the soul’ and the spirit of affirmation, then ‘As long as Ariadne loves Theseus, she participates in this endeavor to negate life’ (Ibid., 8). When she is with Theseus, she is passive, but ‘Under Dionysus’s caress, [her] soul becomes active’ (Ibid., 8-9). Hence, dethroning Theseus as a hero has been a repeated focus for modern philosophers: in both Cixous and Clément and Deleuze’s treatises, Theseus is characterised by self-interest, and primarily concerned with his grandiose view of his own talents. When we read Theseus’ heroism as a character flaw, we can therefore read Ariadne’s abandonment by him as an affirmation that liberates her from his sublime, higher-man control.

Ariadne’s anger towards Theseus has a narrative foil in Phaedra’s indifference. ‘Still just as handsome, I noted dispassionately.’ (Saint 2021: 158): the scales quickly fall from Phaedra’s eyes, as she transitions from a ‘spellbound’ girl in Crete to a dispassionate and distrusting resident of Athens. Ariadne ultimately forgives Theseus when they meet again, unable to find ‘any words of reproach or anger’ (Ibid., 265) because of her affirmative life with Dionysus, whereas Phaedra never forgives him: ‘I hated him for leaving my sister, for leaving me, for his lies, for all of it. [...] To think I had ever hung upon his words or gazed at his green eyes and thought him handsome or exciting or noble!’ (Ibid., 288). Phaedra is incredulous that she ever considered Theseus heroic, and she continues to loathe him throughout their marriage, perhaps because she is married to the ‘higher-man’, while her sister’s married life is comparatively idyllic. On a related note, Phaedra poses a challenge for adaptation in terms of contemporary feminist mythmaking that is comparable to Helen, in that it is remarkably difficult to consider her mythos through any feminist lens. Indeed, Edith Hall has reported an ‘intuitive loathing of Euripides’ tragedy *Hippolytus*’ due to its ‘toxic ideology in which Hippolytus’ stepmother Phaedra falsely accuses him of rape’, thus providing evidence in favour of the misconception regarding the regularity with which women frame innocent men for sex crimes (Hall 2015: np.). Natalie Haynes builds on this in *Pandora’s Jar*, where she argues that ‘Phaedra can be used to legitimise the myth that many women lie about being raped’ (Haynes 2020: 210). Moreover, Phaedra’s mythos ‘adds in no small quantity of our own prejudice: against step-mothers, against



female sexual desire and, yes, against women who accuse men of injuring them, rightly or wrongly' (Ibid., 201). Thus, her myth can be weaponised to discredit women, particularly those who are speaking up against their abusers. Phaedra in *Ariadne* is particularly interesting to consider in the context of this chapter because Saint exonerates Phaedra from this crime, and places the blame back onto the hero, Theseus. In Saint's adaptation, Phaedra had only written Hippolytus' name, and it is Theseus' hot-headedness and recollection of his own behaviours – including 'rapes, forced marriages, kidnaps and child rape,' (Ibid., 206) – that guide him to the conclusion that he 'know[s] what men do' (Saint 2021: 344). In this version, then, it is Theseus, not Phaedra, who falsely accuses Hippolytus of rape, which is in line with the dethroning of the heroic legend that is present in *Ariadne*, as well as in the treatment of heroes in contemporary feminist revisionist myth writing.

Finally, the treatment of Odysseus in contemporary retellings of Greek myth is particularly interesting in terms of hegemonic control. Hegemony 'refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life' (Connell 1995; 2005: 77). This is identifiable with *oikos* in the *Odyssey*, in that *oikos* refers to the family's home, hearth, and holdings. As I explore in Chapter 1, the *Odyssey* asks: 'Who will take charge of the *oikos* and *polis* in his absence?' (Felson & Slatkin 2004: 103). At the heart of the narrative is the question of who will maintain the class and patriarchal hegemony when Odysseus – the figurehead of both – is gone. The *oikos* and hegemony are at stake, therefore the very continuance and indeed survival of the patriarchy itself. Upon his re-entry to Ithaca, Odysseus says to Penelope, 'This is / your house', because she has maintained the domestic economy during his absence: 'the trees are full of fruit; the sheep have lambs; / the sea brings fish and people thrive.' (Homer, trans. Wilson, 2018: 19: 113-115). The 'patriarchal domestic economy' that Felson and Slatkin refer to is Ithaca as a home and hearth, or Odysseus' realm of *oikos*, but Odysseus also maintains his class and gendered hegemony through a functioning 'patriarchal domestic economy'. His hegemony is endangered during his twenty-year absence, but is maintained by Penelope for her husband. It is this patriarchal *oikos* that is portrayed in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, in which Penelope chronicles Odysseus' long absence: 'What can I tell you about the next ten years? Odysseus sailed away to Troy, I stayed in Ithaca' (Atwood

2005: 81). The sentence structure here, wherein Odysseus' movement is mirrored by Penelope's stasis, separated by a comma as they are separated by the Aegean Sea, reinforces the idea that Odysseus has 'sailed away' from the hearth (and wife) that he controls. The rhetorical question answers Felson and Slatkin's question 'What are the obligations of the wife?', because she is obligated to tell 'you', the reader, about the decade at home, where she is maintaining the *oikos* and *polis*, because 'the patriarch is gone, perhaps never to return'. In *The Penelopiad*, as in the *Odyssey*, the disruption of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal *oikos* is a source of anxiety, which is assuaged with 'the husband's successful return and successful elimination of all competitors for his wife' (Felson & Slatkin 2004: 103), hereby symbolising a reinstatement of patriarchal hegemony.

What happens when an *oikos* has a non-masculine hegemony? In the *Odyssey*, we see two such instances, as 'Both Circe and Calypso manage their lives [and lands] independently of husbands' (Felson & Slatkin 2004: 106). Both immortal women maintain their hegemony in the *Odyssey*, and Odysseus is subjected to it rather than the conqueror of it. Odysseus is the subject of a woman's *oikos*, as is clear in Madeline Miller's *Circe*, where the eponymous goddess says 'I am a host' (Miller 2018: 202), thereby asserting that it is her land and he is a guest. Though there would be a risk of a female host to a male guest falling into the familiar maid / waitress / servant roles, Circe consistently rejects this model, as demonstrated in the following scene in which Circe demonstrates her control over Odysseus' men:

The table grew stained [with wine], as if with slaughter; and they looked to my nymphs to clear it up. When I told them they would do it themselves, they eyed each other, and if I had been anyone else, they would have defied me. But they still remembered their snouts. (Ibid., 192-3)

Here, the table is a symbol of the domestic, the centre of the hearth, and the soldiers stain it in their attempt to pervert and claim Circe's home; yet still she maintains control. Odysseus' men expect Circe's nymphs to act as serving girls, waiting on them and tidying up after them, but Circe's assertive language '*told* them they *would*' and the reminder of her transfiguration of them

into pigs empowers her and reinforces her hegemony. In fact, Circe's transformations of intruding men into pigs ensures her complete control over her *oikos*. Circe reports that the men 'hated it all, their newly voluptuous flesh, their delicate split trotters, their swollen bellies dragging in the earth's muck. It was a humiliation, a debasement' (Ibid., 172). In transforming men into pigs, there is a reversal in gendered power dynamics because the men are humiliated and debased, hierarchically demoted to the 'muck', while she is the omnipotent figure that puts them there. The gendered language used to describe the pigs (their 'voluptuous' bodies; their 'delicate split[s]' invoking vaginal imagery; and their 'swollen bellies' suggestive of pregnancy) reinforces this interpretation that the men have been demoted and made effeminate, while she is the matriarch. This is demonstrated when she judges that 'men make terrible pigs' (Ibid., 172): the men are pigs in the colloquial sense that they act disrespectfully towards women, but they also fail at being pigs, because they bristle at the debasement. Circe asserts her dominance over Odysseus in a more subtle way: 'I began to ask him small favours. Would he kill a buck for dinner? Would he catch a few fish?' (Ibid., 192), wherein she assigns him tasks befitting his newly subordinate role. Odysseus readily agrees: 'I will do it before dinner tomorrow.' (Ibid., 193). While she subordinates Odysseus' men by making them perform "feminine" duties like cleaning, Odysseus is charged with "masculine" tasks such as hunting and fishing yet, crucially, he does these things in service to Circe, so Odysseus and the Ithacans are forced into the role of servers, a position they assumed Circe and her nymphs would occupy. Subordination of a different gender and the lower ranks within one's own gender is a key aspect of hegemonic control (Connell 1995; 2005: 78), and Circe demonstrates her power to subordinate Odysseus and his men, as well as the horde of nameless nymphs sent to serve her. Although Odysseus is the patriarch of Ithaca, his power is not transferable to Circe's isle, and thus he is denied his hegemony over Aiaia.

Circe does not judge Odysseus to be a toxic man, particularly in comparison to her father Helios and (ex-)lover Hermes. Helios is cast as the ultimate patriarch either on his sun-chariot, or on his throne in his obsidian castle where, Circe recalls, 'At my father's feet, the whole world was made of gold' (Miller 2018: 5). The 'gold' is a reference to the sunlight – hence, godly power – that exudes from him, but also the way that he is highly valued as the Titan of the sun. By placing herself and the world at her father's feet, Circe is presenting a (meta)physical

hierarchy with her father above everything else, therefore casting him as the epitome of patriarchal power. With such power comes many instances of toxic masculinity, such as his ego – ‘My father has never been able to imagine the world without himself in it.’ (Ibid., 4) – and, more disturbingly, when he burns Circe with the entire heat of the sun for daring to tell him he was wrong for dismissing *Pharmaka*, the herbs from which she derives her witchcraft (Ibid., 54-5). Hermes is portrayed as similarly egotistical, his estimation of his own intelligence making him belittle others: ‘See how quickly he made one a fool? That’s what he desired most of all: to drive others into doubt, keep them wondering and fretting, stumbling behind his dancing feet’ (Ibid., 96-7). Hermes’ conceit regarding his own godly intelligence is toxic because he emotionally and psychologically abuses people for his own entertainment. His toxicity is exemplified when he says ‘Nymphs always do [run screaming], [...] But I’ll tell you a secret: they are terrible at getting away’ (Ibid., 158). Hermes is not only enforcing rape culture here – and trying to introduce it to Circe’s island – but actively encouraging it with a grin and a wink. Circe thinks that this joke is typical among the Titans and Olympians, shining a light on the systemic problem of rape culture in patriarchal structures. The endemic rape culture among gods is analogous to, even symbolic of, contemporary culture, where rape jokes proliferate to normalise sexual violence. Circe challenges both of these figures of toxic masculinity, summoning her father and threatening him to negotiate her freedom from Aiaia and denying Hermes entrance to Aiaia. Like her continued control of Aiaia’s *oikos*, Circe’s journey of empowerment culminates in her ability to challenge the toxic masculinity as it manifests in her world, which also functions as a critique of contemporary misogyny in Western society.

While Circe considers Odysseus to be a victim of war, the gods’ machinations, and time itself, rather than an exemplar of toxic masculinity, Penelope and Telemachus report otherwise. They claim that Odysseus ‘made life for others a misery’ (Ibid., 279), citing his braggadocio over blinding Polyphemus as the cause for his lengthy delay in getting home and, ultimately, the cause of death for his fellow Ithacans. They also report that he was emotionally and psychologically abusive to them upon his return, due to his boredom with ‘A greying wife who was no goddess and a son he could not understand’ (Ibid., 284) compared to his two decades of adventure. This iteration of the returned hero owes a literary debt to Tennyson’s interpretation in ‘Ulysses’, in which the eponymous hero finds himself an ‘idle king’, ‘Match’d with an aged wife’ and with a

son who is 'by slow prudence to make mild / A rugged people' – that is, much unlike himself (Tennyson 1833; 1842). Tennyson imagines a bitter and restless Ulysses, 'made weak by time and fate, but strong in will' (Ibid.), often leaving Ithaca in search of further legend. Tennyson's Ulysses is intent on reliving the greatest moments of his odyssey, such as travelling to the Underworld: 'It may be we should touch the Happy Isles, / And see the great Achilles, whom we knew', as well as having fresh adventures to increase his reputation: 'Some work of noble note may yet be done' (Ibid.). In Sanyal's (2019) model of toxic masculinity, men are disenfranchised by their enforced isolation from their emotions and, for Odysseus, this is epitomised in the circumstances of his death. He is suspicious and unwilling to extend *xenia*, causing him to be killed by Telegonus' spear imbued with Trygon's venom. Odysseus' toxicity in this scene is exemplified by him shouting 'I am the ruler here' (Ibid., 252) wherein he jealously guards his rulership, to his ultimate detriment. As with Achilles, different adaptations of Odysseus portray him in divergent manners, underlining the sense that he is a mythical figure with a strong ability to reflect and inflect changing contemporary discourses about masculinity – its power, weaknesses and limitations.

Zuckerberg writes that 'for many the study of Classics is the study of one elite white man after another', but that, crucially, 'No matter how white and male Classics once was, we are not that anymore. In spite of the numerous obstacles that remain, [Classics] is now more diverse than ever,' (Zuckerberg 2016: np.). This movement to diversify Classics, to de-centre the upper-class white man as the subject of classical studies, means that the current moment is particularly exciting when considering the reception and reinterpretation of male mythical figures. If this is a time when the male domination of Classics as a discipline is being challenged, it also follows that the men within myth can be challenged in new ways. As we have seen in this chapter, mythical heroes such as Achilles, Theseus, and Odysseus have been scrutinised, as well as transformed, satirised, humiliated, and exposed, generating narratives that, while set in the ancient world, stage and interrogate many feminist concerns with modern masculinity. These concerns include the emotional toll that patriarchy takes on men, the gender-based violence that women suffer at the hands of men, and the inexorable connection between normalised rape culture and misogynistic violence. When adapting mythic men for modern audiences, the authors must ask, can the actions of these heroes be reconciled with modern morals? Moreover, what are

our morals, and what does it take to be considered heroic to modern audiences? In the case of Theseus, Jennifer Saint unequivocally rejects him as an adaptable hero: he is held accountable for his crimes and the crimes of others, most notably Phaedra's. However, in the cases of Achilles and Odysseus, there is more flexibility in the judgement of their actions. In the cases of Saint's *Ariadne*, Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, and Miller's *Circe*, in particular, these male characters are crucially no longer in the foreground, to give voices to the previously overlooked and silenced women of myth. In Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, of course the eponymous hero is the focus, but his story is (as we shall see in the following chapter) more focused on his capacity as a queer romantic lead rather than as a warrior or aggressor. Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, on the other hand, utilises parody as a method to focus on mythical men and their contentious relationships with their masculinity. Carter's contention that 'intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts' (Carter 1983; 1998: 37) can also be applied to the men of myth as they are adapted in contemporary feminist literature.

## **Chapter 4: Queering Myth**

This chapter briefly outlines queerness in Ancient Greek culture and myth, before moving onto queer classical reception and the enduring importance of Classics for queer youths. After this, the chapter will turn to Sappho, from whom the terms *Sapphic* and *lesbian* are derived, particularly *if not, winter*, the Sapphic fragments translated by Anne Carson. This examination of Sappho's poetry and dominant critical approaches to her biography and works will evidence the interrelations between queerness and Classics, more specifically how Sappho has been used to narrate female same-sex desire and how the fragmentary nature of the remaining Sapphic poetry is inextricably linked to this. The chapter moves on to examine two examples of LGBTQ+ representation in contemporary mythic novels. Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is an immensely popular mythic adaptation, wherein the Trojan War is a gruesome backdrop against which the love story of Achilles and Patroclus is staged. My analysis will consider how ancient and modern understandings of homoeroticism are portrayed in the novel. Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* is an adaptation of Iphis and Ianthe, whose myth has fallen into obscurity since the medieval and early modern eras, but which Smith has reinvigorated into a lesbian and genderqueer narrative. Ultimately, this chapter will conclude by considering what makes these contemporary adaptations distinctive from their predecessors – namely, how attitudes to LGBTQ+ identities and rights make the early twenty-first century particularly generative for queering myths.

It is well known that same-sex relationships among men were a significant part of Ancient Greek culture. Pederasty was common in Ancient Greek society, in which an older male citizen of the *polis* (the *erastes*, lover) would form a relationship with a younger man (the *eromenos*, loved) of the same class; this relationship was overtly sexual, but was broadly considered to be educational too (see Rice 2005; 2015: 1-7; Kampen 2002; 2015: 1-4). There are many accounts of men's bodies inciting lust in classical mythic literature. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Myrmidons*, Achilles says of Patroclus 'I did respect the intimacy of your thighs / by lamenting you' (fr. 136). Gods, as well as heroes, had same-sex relationships. Zeus, in the form of an eagle, carried Ganymede to Olympus to be his immortal cupbearer; Poseidon stole Pelops in a chariot; and Apollo tragically killed his lover Hyacinth in a game of discus (Theognis fr. 1.1345; Pindar *Olympian Ode* 1.40 ff; Apollodorus 1.3).

The presence of queerness<sup>31</sup> in Ancient Greek culture and myth has had subsequent ramifications in classical reception, both historically and in more contemporary scholarship. Foundational work in queer classical scholarship includes Kenneth Dover's *Greek Homosexuality* (1978). Dover's monograph was the first to describe homosexuality in Ancient Greek art and literature, thus providing a basis for further research into sexuality in Ancient Greek culture and morality. His work laid much of the groundwork for more recent scholarship into sexualities in antiquity, such as Davidson's *The Greeks and Greek Love* (2007) and Lear and Cantarella's *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty* (2008). Jennifer Ingleheart's *Masculine Plural* (2018) is also a key source when considering queer classical scholarship, as it studies the interconnected histories of sexuality and classical reception within Victorian and Edwardian public education, with particular reference to Philip Gillespie Bainbrigge, a poet, classicist, and soldier in the First World War. Ingleheart concludes that Queer Classics can be mobilised to 'counter the harmful public image of Classics as inherently stuffy and conservative' (Ingleheart 2018: 298), and that it calls for a more embodied analysis of ancient source material, in direct challenge to Classics as a purely cerebral, exclusionary discipline.

Emerging research in Queer Classics can also provide a form of community for queer researchers. As Hannah Clarke's survey and wider research has demonstrated, the 'largest reason that research participants seem to be interested in the Classics as young queer people is that Classics remedies, to a certain extent, anxieties of feeling culturally temporary' (Clarke 2019: np.). This anxiety for LGBTQ+ people can be assuaged by the visibility of queer figures in ancient myths, such as Heracles and Hylas, Achilles and Patroclus, Sappho, and Bilitis, which provide a sense of queer history, as well as a sense of community for 'contemporary

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<sup>31</sup> For the purposes of this study, 'queerness' is used as an umbrella term to denote non-heterosexual sexual identities, including lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities; queerness is also used in a gendered context, referring to non-cisgendered people, including transgender, nonbinary, agender, or gender nonconforming people. More broadly, queer theory calls for a challenging of the heterosexual/homosexual division, to open space for multiple identities and cultures that do not fit into these labels. Critical work useful to the context of this definition include Berlant and Warner's 'Sex in Public' (1998) which provides a critical analysis of heteronormativity and provides an argument for queer world-making and counterpublics. Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980) prompts readers to consider the paucity of lesbian visibility, structures of lesbian sexualities, and the potential for lesbian literary criticism. Rich provides numerous examples of how male power has suppressed female sexuality — including denying female sexuality, sexual violence, and social, familial, and economic control — and she proposes that lesbian sexuality should be defined, not by sexual preference, but rather by resistance to compulsory heterosexuality. Further to this, she proposes that we redefine women-centred experiences as part of a lesbian continuum to counter the restricted and clinical terms used to define female sexuality.



Classics-loving queer youth' (Ibid., np.). Clarke created a survey of LGBTQ+ people studying Classics, with particular questions pertaining to whether there were figures from myth or antiquity that particularly resonated with them as LGBTQ people, and their estimation of the importance of queer representation in both the classroom and popular media (Ibid., np.). Clarke's research found that LGBTQ+ youths turn to the Classics to legitimise their queer identity and desire for a queer cultural inheritance. Clarke acknowledges that 'Twenty-first century identities don't map easily onto ancient figures, [labelling] Greeks and Romans as "gay" is not useful, and it is likewise useless to depict them as "straight"' (Ibid., np.). Nevertheless, her research indicates that Queer Classics has generative potential for both research and researchers alike.

Sappho is the earliest surviving woman writer of the west (Greene 1996: 1); she was considered to be the female counterpart to Homer. She was 'The Poetess' to his 'Poet' and Aristotle reported that 'although she was a woman' she was highly honoured (*Rhetoric*, 1389b12 in Greene 1996: 1). Moreover, Sappho is a central figure in Queer Classics, as she is the ancient lyricist from Lesbos from whom the identifiers *sapphic* and *lesbian* are derived. Though the term *lesbian* was prescribed by doctors seeking to pathologise female same-sex desire, it became the chosen identity marker of women-loving women. As sapphist classicist Ella Haselswerdt writes in 'Re-Queering Sappho', a self-reflexive piece considering the importance of the queer potential of the fragmentary Sapphic corpus:

women found in the imposed name of their supposed sexual disease a tradition worth embracing — a set of beautiful fragmented poems about the love of one woman for another, full of detailed imagery of flowers, women, and fruit, with an attention to private, embodied experiences of lust, loss, and longing. (Haselswerdt 2016: np.)

In Sappho's poetry, as in her name, women found a historical record of their desire and, through this, legitimisation. Haselswerdt notes, 'I can't deny my personal investment in the lone voice of the woman who loves and longs for other women' (Ibid., np.); evidently, in queer classical reception, as in the history of lesbianism, Sappho's voice resonates as one that narrates queer women's desires.

Yet, not all classicists agree with the classification of Sappho as a queer lyricist. Glenn W. Most claims that Sappho's reputation as the founding mother of lesbianism is 'a onesided [sic] distortion' (Most 1996: 35), an act of creative reception rather than one of historical accuracy. Most cites the origins of the terms *sapphic* and *lesbian* as labels of sexual dysfunction and the Attic comedies that portrayed Sappho as the polar opposite of a woman-loving woman (Ibid., 27, 35). The comedies referred to by Most are those which portrayed Sappho 'primarily as an oversexed predator — of men'; though *lesbian* now means female same-sex desire, in 'classical Greek, the verb *lesbiazein*—"to act like someone from Lesbos"—meant performing fellatio, an activity for which inhabitants of the island were thought to have a particular penchant' (Mendelsohn 2015: np.). While Sappho is, at present, celebrated as a queer figure, 'Victorian scholars [did] their best to explain away her erotic predilections' by arguing that her relationships with young girls was that of a schoolteacher and her students (Ibid., np.). In *Sappho is Burning*, Page DuBois maintains that any study into the history of sexuality must include Sappho, due to her work centring female narrators that desire other women (she criticises Foucault in particular for understating Sappho's relevance in the history of sexuality [DuBois 1997: 146–157]). Mendelsohn wryly labels these debates 'the Sappho wars', though the issue of Sappho's sexuality transcends spirited academic debates and satirical commentary. Haselswerdt recalls a conversation in which a colleague proposed that Sappho was a man, and it upset her greatly, leading her to question 'But why did I care so deeply? Why do I so badly want a female Sappho? And why do I so badly want a queer Sappho?' (2016: np.). Haselswerdt argues that her eponymous call to re-queer Sappho is a part of the 'fight for the legitimacy of lesbianism' and that 'in re-queering Sappho, we might simultaneously make some headway into rehabilitating lesbianism as a radical and queer contemporary identity' (Ibid., np.). The contentious queer legacy of Sappho remains, in academic circles, important: is labelling Sappho a lower-case lesbian a wilful distortion of fact or an important part of history for women-loving women?

Anne Carson's translation of Sappho's fragments, *if not, winter*, is particularly vital to this chapter because her formal and linguistic choices contribute to the debate surrounding Sappho's queer legacy. Carson's technical deployment of square brackets to denote papyrological enigmas, such as where the papyri are damaged or destroyed, or the writing rendered illegible over time, attempt to create a more direct link between the experience of reading Sappho's poetry

in its surviving form and the translated work. There are some drawbacks to this approach: as Carson writes in her introduction, the brackets are ‘an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it’ and that ‘it will affect your reading experience, if you allow it’ (Carson 2003: xi). However, she asserts that ‘Brackets are exciting’ because they recreate ‘the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp’ (Ibid., xi). Carson outlines how she has attempted to minimise the evidence of her voice in the translation to allow Sappho’s voice to preside, though she admits that ‘[t]his is an amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labor’ (Ibid., x). In translating Sappho, Carson uses the same technique as Emily Wilson in her Homeric translation — using plainer language to make the work more accessible.

This hypothesis of the transparent translator resonates with Wilson’s introduction to the *Odyssey*, in which she states that ‘there is no such thing as a translation that provides anything like a transparent window through which the reader can see the original’, but she hopes that her rejection of ‘bombastic or grandiloquent’ language will make the epic more accessible, and more akin to Homer’s tone (Wilson 2018: 86; 83). Wilson commends Carson on her introduction, that ‘enable[s] even the Greekless reader to understand some of the most important textual problems in Sappho’ (2004: np.), thus demonstrating the translators’ aligned goals. Referring to Carson’s choice of parentheses and minimalist publication style, Wilson points out that Carson’s translation ‘make[s] effective use of blank space’ (2004: np.). Carson’s blank spaces are effective as an artistic allusion towards the fragmentary nature of Sappho’s extant poetry, as well as an engagement with more recent female short-form poetic traditions, popularised by poets such as H.D., Dorothy Parker, Emily Dickinson, and Sylvia Plath. Thus, in the choices that Carson makes as a translator, she tries to provide the reader of the translated Sapphic fragments with as close an experience as possible to reading them in their original state by effectively utilising form and simple language.

What, then, is the queer significance of this plainer, more accessible style? Carson alludes to the lesbian significance of Sappho’s legacy in the following quotation:

Controversies about her personal ethics and way of life have taken up a lot of people's time throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship. It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there? (Ibid., x)

Moreover, she then quotes Gertrude Stein's writing on Sappho, particularly the assertion that 'She ought to be a very happy woman' (Stein 1903-1932; 1999: 461, in Carson 2003: x): in quoting Stein's overt reference to lesbian pleasure, Carson alludes to the queer significance of Sappho. As Wilson writes in her review of *if not, winter*, 'For Carson, what matters is Sappho's poetry, not her gender or her sexual orientation. But Sappho's words themselves are not gender-neutral' (2004: np.). Though Carson's aim is not to highlight Sappho's queer significance, her desire to simply 'undo a bit of the cloth' (Carson 2003: x) and allow Sappho's words to shine through completes this task for her. This expressed desire to 'leave the matter' of her sexuality, the inherent implication that all that can be said has been said, and thus it is up to the individual reader to decide how they read Sappho, functions in the same way as the aforementioned parentheses. Carson writes that 'brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure' (2003: xi), and I would argue that her rhetorical question 'Can we leave the matter there?' offers the same 'free space of imaginal adventure' for reading.

Though Carson herself wishes to ‘leave the matter’ of Sappho’s sexuality, the fact remains that much of Sappho’s surviving poetry fragments are centred around the themes of female desire and yearning. Fragment 38 is a good example of desire in Sappho’s poetry, which is translated as either ‘you burn me’ (trans. Carson 2002) or ‘you scorch me’ (trans. Raynor 2014). Mendelsohn calls this ‘the sexy little Fragment’ (2015, np.) and, indeed, though only this line of the poem is preserved, the sense of lust the words contain remains potent. In the longer Fragment 96, Sappho writes that a woman ‘Surpasses all the stars. And her light / stretches over salt sea / equally and flowerdeep fields’; she writes that women ‘equal goddesses in lovely form’ and invokes Aphrodite to elucidate her feelings: ‘]desire / and[ ]Aphrodite’ (trans. Carson 2002). Fragment 96 also refers to ‘remembering / gentle Atthis’. Atthis was one of Sappho’s most significant lovers and, according to the *Suda* (the Tenth Century Byzantine encyclopaedia), it was ‘Through her relations with them [Atthis, Telesippa, Megara] she got a

reputation for shameful love' (*Suda* s.v. Sappho, in Carson 2002: 361). Sappho dedicated a number of her poems to Atthis, such as the following:

]
]
] Atthis for you
]
]
(fr. 8)

I loved you Atthis, once long ago
a little child you seemed to me and graceless
(fr. 49)

For centuries, Sappho's relationship with Atthis, preserved in the fragments of her poetry, has been a point of interest for lesbians, classicists, and even composers. Georg Friedrich Haas' 2009 opera *Atthis* 'sews Sapphic fragments together in an account of a relationship between the poet and the younger woman' (Hall 2015: np.). Sappho compares Atthis to a child: this is what Mendelsohn calls 'her susceptibility to the graces of younger women' (2015, np.). Sappho's relationships with younger women can be understood as a feminised version of the pederastic tradition.

Yearning for lost love is also a key theme in Sappho's surviving poetry: 'but a kind of yearning has hold of me—to die / and to look upon the dewy lotus banks / of Acheron' (fr. 95). Sappho yearns for Acheron, the river of woe in Hades, due to losing her *eromenos*, Gongyla. Sappho's most famous poem is perhaps Fragment 107: 'do I still yearn for my virginity?'. The meaning of Fragment 107 is veiled by time, as there is no consensus on the meaning of virginity to the Ancient Greeks (Rangos 1995: 1-2). It is most likely that Ancient Greek virginity did not refer to abstinence from any sex with any gender, though it could refer to penetrative heterosexual intercourse — if this is the case, then Sappho could be yearning to return to a time before she had heterosexual sex. Yet, others argue that Grecian virginity was more aligned with

notions of marriageability and fertility, as evidenced by the word for a maiden's state, *parthenia*, and the disparity in virgin Olympians, such as Artemis and Hestia (see Rangos 1995; Ciocani 2013: 23). Hence, Sappho could be yearning for her youth, which is further evidenced by the fact that she was 'likely past middle age when she died, since [...] she complains about her graying hair and cranky knees' (Mendelsohn 2015: np.). Whatever Sappho meant by 'virginity', the recurrent theme of yearning in her poetry has led to a tradition of female same-sex desire being closely entwined with yearning. More recently, queer yearning has been harnessed for its activist potential by bell hooks who, in *yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, uses it to refer to 'common passions, sentiments shared by folks across race, class, gender, and sexual practice' that can '[open] up the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage with one another' (hooks 1999: 12; 13). As Wilson noted, Sappho's words are not gender-neutral: the Sapphic fragments are concerned with female same-sex desire and yearning, and this accounts for the calls to re-queer Sappho by queer classicists such as Haselswerdt.

The papyrological event of Sappho's surviving poetry can hold as much significance to contemporary readers as her much-contested sexuality. For DuBois, the power of Sappho's poetry lies not only in the representation 'of the place of the individual and her desire, not only of the evocation of pleasure, luxury, and the meditation on loss;' it is also an example of 'turning preexisting poetic materials to new use, to a poetic project different from that for which they were first composed' (DuBois 1997: 7). In other words, the enduring appeal of Sappho's work lies not only in her communication of female-centric desire, but also in the differences between the poetry of Sappho in her own time and the poetry of Sappho as we have it today. Habinek notes that the recurrent theme of yearning and the incomplete preservation of Sappho's poetry appeals to the postmodern embracing of incompleteness (1996: xiii), yet this is not a separate entity to Sappho's queer appeal. The fragmentary remains of her work and the continued debates surrounding her sexuality come together to form the 'undeniable source of the interest she continually attracts from disparate readers' (Ibid., xiii). For subsequent readers, then, the existing form and meaning of Sappho's poetry are inextricably linked. Although, of course, this could not have been Sappho's intention: she could not have anticipated that papyrological disintegration would lead to her poetry's fragmentary reception. Habinek asserts that 'the fragmentary nature of the surviving texts has only increased their value for succeeding generations' (Ibid., xiii), and

cites Sylvia Plath's poem 'Lesbos' from her posthumous collection *Ariel* as evidence for this. Habinek points to Plath's mimesis of Sappho's dialogic and pastoral style – for instance in the lines 'And I, love, am a pathological liar,' and 'I should sit on a rock off Cornwall' (Plath 1965: ll. 7, 29) – as a point of comparison. Yet, Plath presents the narrating persona as the departing lover, rather than the departed, and Habinek argues that this is a rejection of Sappho:

[T]he testimony of Plath's poetry suggests that she belongs instead to a long line of female writers who have found it necessary to reject the authoritative example of Sappho in order to get on with their creative lives (Habinek 1996: xiii).

In rejecting Sappho in this manner, Plath resists 'the hegemony of the elite classical tradition' (Ibid., xiii) by denying the authority of this tradition, and forging her own literary path. This demonstrates how female writers can move beyond the intimidating shadow that Sappho's poetry and its reception have cast in order to pursue their own creative lives.

Carson presents a prosaic fictionalisation of Sappho in 'Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve (2nd Draft)' in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000). The short story reimagines Catherine Deneuve as a university teacher and philologist, with a specialism in Sappho. The story opens with a clear conflation between Sappho and the fictitious Deneuve's sapphism: 'Sappho put it simply. Speaking of a young girl Sappho said, *You burn me*. Deneuve usually begins with herself and a girl together in a hotel room.' (Carson 2000: 128). From the beginning, the actress-turned-academic's sexuality is presented as a modernisation of Sappho's own, as indicated by the 'hotel room' and its implication of casual sex. As an educator, Deneuve also continues the feminised pederasty, although it is noteworthy that the setting in a university rescues the modernised Sappho from accusations of paedophilia, while maintaining the power imbalance. The unnamed girl that is the object of Deneuve's desire recalls Atthis, particularly her 'graceless[ness]' (fr. 49): her voice is described as 'animal', she 'stumbles in' and 'thrusts some pages' at her teacher for an assignment, and she translates Greek with 'extreme vulgarity' (Carson 2000: 129; 131; 133). Deneuve yearns for the young girl, who is often physically or emotionally absent, which captures the tone of Sappho's fragments. Stylistically, the short sentences replicate the fragments, and the invocation of natural imagery is also characteristic of

Sappho's work: 'Imagine a springtime garden of watered boughs and uncut girls.' (Ibid., 133). Catherine Deneuve became a cult icon for women-loving women in the 1980s after playing a queer vampire in *The Hunger* (dir. Tony Scott, 1983). In conflating Deneuve and Sappho, the short story invites us to consider whether the queer relevance of certain cultural figures lies not in their actual sexualities, but in the queer reception their art.

Before considering the most contemporary examples of authors utilising mythic source materials to narrate same-sex desire, it is important to note that these twenty-first century examples are part of a long tradition since Ancient Greece of queering myth. Three such examples, which I propose are important in proving the hypothesis of this chapter, but which lie outside the scope of this thesis, are Jeanette Winterson's *Art & Lies*, Mary Renault's *Fire From Heaven*, and the work of Oscar Wilde. Winterson's *Art & Lies* is a speculative fictitious autobiography of Handel, Picasso, and Sappho. Winterson's Sappho addresses the same concern as Anne Carson's introduction to *if not, winter* — namely, that Sappho's sexuality is more famous than her surviving work. Winterson's Sappho laments:

So little of her remains. Her remains are scandalous. The teasing bones that shock and delight. Yet, it is certain, that were every line of hers still extant, biographers would not be concerned with her metre or her rhyme. There would be one burning question [...] What do Lesbians do in bed? (Winterson 1994: 289)

This quotation echoes Carson's desire to 'leave the matter there' (2002: x), indicating and indicting the persistent prurience with regard to 'scandalous' lesbian sexuality. Mary Renault's *Fire From Heaven* is a fictionalised account of Alexander the Great's life, with particular focus on his relationship with Hephaestion: 'Hephaestion had known for many ages that if a god should offer him one gift in all his lifetime, he would choose [Alexander]. Joy hit him like a lightning-bolt' (Renault 1969: np). Madeline Miller's more contemporary novel, *The Song of Achilles*, has been compared to Renault's novel (for example, Williams 2011) in much the same way that Alexander the Great and Hephaestion's relationship was compared to Achilles and Patroclus'. Furthermore, Oscar Wilde is one of the most famous examples of an erudite figure looking to Greek Antiquity and myth for academic, creative, and personal inspiration. As



Evangelista argues, Greece provided a discourse for Wilde to communicate his sexual desire for other men, because Greek myth enabled lovers to articulate emotions that were publicly declared to be perverted and criminal (Evangelista 2009: 126). Wilde famously rewrote his lover Douglas as Hyacinthus, which Evangelista points to as an aesthetic justification of his own homosexuality (Ibid., 126). Wilde, then, is a key example of Ingleheart's contention that Classics has played a formative role in English upper-class homosocial institutions and homosexual practices (Ingleheart 2018). Thus, there has been a long and complex relationship between ancient Greek myth and culture and what is now the LGBTQ+ community, and Greek myths are frequently queered, in-line with changes in individual and societal attitudes to same-sex desire.

Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* and Miller's *The Song of Achilles* are two texts in which female writers utilise mythic source material to narrate more current queer experiences. Smith's novella is an optimistic anti-capitalist and eco-activist retelling of Iphis' gender change in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Miller's novel is a retelling of Homer's *Iliad*, told primarily as a love story between Achilles and Patroclus. Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is perhaps the most popular contemporary adaptation that queers myth, and it is my contention that while interpreting Achilles and Patroclus as lovers is not Miller's invention, Miller's novel effectively brings their relationship into the twenty-first century by foregrounding consent and tenderness. In so doing, the ancient mythical characters can thus become icons of contemporary LGBTQ+ literature.

According to the *Iliad*, Achilles and Patroclus are close childhood friends who lead the Myrmidons to war in Troy; they hold each other in very high esteem, as demonstrated when Achilles calls him 'my prince, Patroclus' (Homer, trans. Fagles: b.16, l.57) and 'Son of Menoetius, soldier after my own heart,' (11:718) while Patroclus thinks of Achilles as 'his great friend' (11:272). Their closeness is central to the plot of the *Iliad* because it is Patroclus' death that incites Achilles to return to fighting, thus ensuring that Hector will die by Achilles' hand, that Achilles will die soon after, and that Troy will then fall. As Edith Hamilton relays, Achilles declared that 'I will kill the destroyer of him I loved; then I will accept death when it comes' (Hamilton 1942: 271). Hamilton's word choice is effective in communicating the epic scale of Achilles' feelings, and the tragic ramifications of his actions. It is when Achilles learns of Patroclus' death that we truly see their closeness, as he acts like a woman mourning the death of a loved one:

A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles.  
Both hands clawing the ground for soot and filth,  
he poured it over his head, fouled his handsome face  
and black ashes settled onto his fresh clean war-shirt.  
Overpowered in all his power, sprawled in the dust,  
Achilles lay there, fallen ...  
tearing his hair, defiling it with his own hands. (18:24-30)

Tearing one's garments and hair was a part of ancient mourning processes, present in Greek and Ancient Hebrew traditions, and it was a practice particularly reserved for women to perform (Jastrow 1900: 38). Here, then, where Achilles' grief manifests, there is also a declaration of love between the two Myrmidons. Moreover, when the shade of Patroclus visits the grief-stricken Achilles, he entreats the prince to 'Never bury my bones apart from yours, Achilles, / let them lie together' (23:100-1), which has long since been considered a declaration of their intimacy. Evidently, mythic source texts already presented Achilles and Patroclus as lovers.

Furthermore, representing Achilles and Patroclus in a romantic relationship has a considerable history between Ancient Greece and Madeline Miller. In Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, Ulysses criticises Achilles for not fighting, and 'With him Patroclus, / Upon a lazy bed'; Thersites says to Patroclus 'Prithee be silent, boy. I profit not by thy talk. Thou art said to be Achilles' male varlet. [...] Why, his masculine whore.' (Shakespeare 1609: act 1, scene 3, l.150-1; act 5, scene 1, l.15-18). Shakespeare's contemporary Marlowe, in *Edward II* used Achilles and Patroclus' relationship as an example of a same sex relationship between a nobleman and a 'minion', as an indication of the nature of the homosexual relationship between Edward II and Gaveston: 'And for *Patroclus*, stern *Achilles* drooped' (Marlowe 1594: l.728). These early modern iterations of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship evince that Miller's text is a more recent iteration of the long-standing literary tradition of writing Achilles and Patroclus' relationship in romantic terms, rather than a modern fabrication. For early modern playwrights, 'Achilles' closeness to his companion has been a source of anxiety for other male characters, because [...] it keeps him from battle and thus prevents him from expressing his manliness in

appropriately militaristic ways.’ (Heavey 2015: 16). Achilles’ desire ‘become[s] a caution to early modern men about the weakening (and feminising) effect of excessive desire, whether heterosexual or homosexual’ (Ibid., 16). Heavey draws upon Bruce R. Smith’s *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*, in which he argues that early modern masculinity was ‘an inherently unstable business’ due to masculine identity being defined by men’s relationships to other men (Smith 2000: 128; in Heavey 2015: 3). Thus, in early modern drama, Achilles and Patroclus were portrayed as lovers, yet the love was a source of anxiety.

Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* is a contemporary portrayal of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers, following the tradition of Aeschylus and Shakespeare. Miller’s adaptation differs from Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s in that the relationship is the central romance, rather than a concern related to a broader issue about power. As Miller herself has said ‘I think that now we are at a place in our culture where we can re-accept that interpretation of the story,’ (Day 2012: np.) indicating that this contemporary moment – where LGBTQ+ voices are being increasingly heard – is able to reimagine Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship as a romance and to think about the wider implications of this. Moreover, Miller opines that it ‘felt like it was a love story already, but I sometimes think the idea of them as lovers has been a little bit whitewashed from the record’ (Ibid., np.). As we have seen, Miller is not the first person to write Achilles and Patroclus as lovers; in *Myrmidons*, Aeschylus presented their relationship as romantic, particularly when Achilles refers to ‘the intimacy of [Patroclus]’ thighs’ (fr. 136). For McKenna, *The Song of Achilles* ‘provides a welcome tonic’ to ‘de-gayifying’ adaptations of the *Iliad*, such as the 2004 film *Troy*, that he accuses of ‘eviscerating the original storyline’ in which Achilles kills Hector and dooms Troy due to his grief of losing his lover (McKenna 2015: 91-2). McKenna asserts that the romance between Achilles and Patroclus is immanent in the Homeric original, therefore ‘Miller’s work should be understood in the most radical way possible’ because it ‘is not simply that she interprets the best aspects of *The Iliad* through her novel; rather, she allows the Greek epic to fully become itself’ (Ibid., 95). Although Miller’s novel is not original in its conception of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers, it is radical in its gesture towards reclaiming queer Achilles and Patroclus from interpretations such as Hollywood’s *Troy*, which seek to ‘whitewash’ the myth.

This is not to say that it is a straightforward task to reinterpret Achilles as a romantic lead. He is described by Haynes as ‘a one-man genocide whose defining characteristic was his unquenchable anger’ (2011, np.). The *Iliad* opens with the invocation of the Muses to ‘Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles,’ (1:1.1) — Achilles’ rage, though, can be a source of nuanced reinterpretation. As Maia Lee-Chin writes in ‘Achilles’ Rage and #MineToo’, her experiences as a rape survivor and her resultant indescribable anger led her to identify with Achilles, despite the irony that she was ‘find[ing] comfort in the rage of a rapist [...] He, a rapist, and I, a victim’ (2020: np.). Lee-Chin recognises the role that Patroclus plays in tempering Achilles’ temperament, as ‘Patroclus reminded him of his commitment — no, his duty to humanity, his own or otherwise’ (Ibid., np.). The author also undertook this journey of forgiveness and remembered humanity, saying ‘I found a Patroclus of my own’ (Ibid., np.). Miller’s adaptive choice to make Patroclus the homodiegetic narrator, the one singing the eponymous song of Achilles, confirms him as the only figure whose death affects Achilles — it is through Patroclus that Achilles is humanised, which speaks to the broader genre of the novel. Achilles must be at least partly humane to be considered as a romantic lead, and it is only through Patroclus’ enamoured perspective that the reader can view a sympathetic Achilles. Evidently, Achilles remains a figure of interest and, potentially, identification, and this has been compounded by Miller’s influential debut novel which moves away from Achilles’ enraged legend to rewrite him as a romantic protagonist.

*The Song of Achilles* is an incredibly popular novel, evidenced by its awards and reviews. It won the Women’s Prize for Fiction in 2012, which comes with accolades, £30,000 prize money, and ‘a significant spike in sales as a result of the win’ (Brown 2012: np.). Joanna Trollope, chair of the 2012 judging panel, described the love story as ‘in a curious way, uplifting’ despite the inevitable tragedy (Ibid., np.). Haynes was also on the judging panel and, in her review of the novel, wrote that ‘Miller’s prose is more poetic than almost any translation of Homer’ (Haynes 2011: np.). For Haynes, Miller makes their doomed romance more appealing with the in-depth characterisation of Patroclus as the self-deprecating, besotted lover, and Achilles as ‘the lover beneath the bloodshed and fury’ (Ibid., np.). Haynes recognises the allure of knowing the tragic ending – ‘But we know Achilles will never return from Troy [...] We know that Patroclus must die before Achilles’ (Ibid., np.) – and how that contributes to the enjoyment

of reading ‘deeply affective version[s]’ of familiar stories. *The Song of Achilles* also has a large fan-following, as demonstrated by its significant tags on the fanfiction website ‘Archive of Our Own’, on which the tag “Fandom: The Song of Achilles” has 960 works, and the tag “Relationship: Achilles/Patroclus” has 2,246 works;<sup>32</sup> on ‘Tumblr’, the most popular posts tagged “The Song of Achilles” and “TSOA” amass 10,000–37,000 notes.<sup>33</sup> The popularity of – and fandom surrounding – Miller’s novel speaks to the desire to tell LGBTQ+ stories in mythic contexts in present-day literary culture. This desire relates to what Clarke recalls as looking for herself in the stacks: a desire to feel represented in literature, history, and popular culture, and turning to Classics for evidence of queer history (Clarke 2019: np.). Miller’s novel provides both a queer history that goes back centuries and representation in modern day literature.

The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus as depicted in *The Song of Achilles* can be read through dual lenses, as both ancient and modern notions of same-sex relationships are blended in the novel. In terms of ancient modes of homosexuality, the narrator Patroclus alludes to institutionalised pederasty, but goes on to define his relationship with Achilles in opposition to this. His relationship with Achilles is unusual in the ancient context, as ‘many boys took each other for lovers. But such things were given up as they grew older, unless it was slaves or hired boys’ (Miller 2011: 166). Patroclus and Achilles’ relationship is not pederastic or childish indiscretion, neither of them is the Marlovian ‘minion’ (of a lower social class, elevated by their relationship with the king); they are the same age, born into the same social class, and they both consent. The equality and non-coercive consent that is central to Patroclus and Achilles’ relationship in Miller’s novel is indicative of the contemporary demand for explicit consent in romance literature, in contravention to ‘the [lingering perception] that romance novels are full of romanticized sexual violence’ (Faircloth 2018: np). Thus, the relationship between these heroes is re-framed to appeal to a modern audience, which demonstrates how these ancient stories can be reworked with contemporary conceptions of queerness and consent at the forefront.

Moreover, Patroclus’ narration provides instances in which the gap between the ancient setting and modern readership is bridged, such as in the protagonists’ experiences of homophobia. Although homophobia is a relatively recent term, coined by psychologist George

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<sup>32</sup> source: *Archive of Our Own*, last accessed: 30th March 2022

<sup>33</sup> source: *Tumblr*, last accessed: 30th March 2022

Weinberg in the early 1960s, Miller's inclusion of homophobic incidents in *The Song of Achilles* is another example of how ancient mythical figures can negotiate modern experience and sensibilities. Patroclus notes that 'Our men liked conquest; they did not trust a man who was conquered himself' (Miller 2011: 166) which is a reference to the Hesiodic Heroic Age, in which war and conquest were central social tenets. The prejudice of being sexually 'conquered' by another man was because men were shamed for taking on a submissive sexual role and called *malakos* (soft, effeminate) in mockery (Rice 2005; 2015: 4). This conquering phobia is also reflected in literature in the intervening period, for example in Thersites' insults to Patroclus in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. In *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior*, Tim Bergling coins the neologism 'Sissyphobia' to refer specifically to the homophobia faced by effeminate men in recent history (Bergling 2001). Thus, Patroclus' reflection on 'conquered' men being mistrusted reveals both ancient and more modern prejudices against gay men. Similarly, Odysseus' comment to Achilles and Patroclus that "'I've heard that you prefer to share. Rooms and bedrolls both, they say'" (Miller 2011: 165) serves this same purpose, where 'I've heard' and 'they say' imply that there is something salacious or shameful in their 'preferences' and echoes Ulysses' gossiping in *Troilus and Cressida*. It is also noteworthy that Miller has Odysseus share this gossip, as he is also defined in his epic and subsequent reception by his sexuality, in his case his many extramarital (heterosexual) affairs. Achilles and Odysseus, both *Aristos Achaion*, Best of the Greeks, have their legends bound up in their sexuality.

Similarly, Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* do not map easily onto the Ancient Greek notions of *erastes/eromenos*. This is mostly due to the fact that their relationship is not pederastic. In classical discourse, Achilles and Patroclus are listed as an example of 'a pederastic couple that was not ideal' as they 'were similar in age, and there is much dissension as to which of them was the erastes and which was the eromenos' (Holmen 2010: np.). There is debate about who would be the *erastes* and who the *eromenos* from ancient source texts, as Aeschylus' tragedy *Myrmidons* has Achilles as the lover, and Patroclus as the loved, while in Plato's *Symposium*, Phaedrus calls Aeschylus' interpretation 'nonsense' (Plato, 178A-185C: 183 in Holmen 2010: np.). Instead Plato opines that 'Quite apart from the fact that he was more beautiful than Patroclus...and had not yet grown a beard, he was also, according to Homer, much younger' (Ibid., np.). Miller, however, does not choose between Aeschylus' interpretation or

Plato's — she does not apply the *erestes* and *eromenos* roles to the couple. The Ancient Greek terms that the two characters do use for each other, however, are significant. During their early friendship in Phthia, Achilles explains to his father that “I wished him for a companion.” *Therapon*, was the word he used. A brother-in-arms sworn to a prince by blood oaths and love’ (Miller 2011: 35). In the *Iliad*, Patroclus is Achilles’ most trusted advisor and most loyal general in Troy, and this is the connotation of the word choice *Therapon* in *The Song of Achilles*. Yet, as the plot progresses and their relationship transitions into a romantic one, the Ancient Greek moniker that Achilles affords to Patroclus also changes: “*Philtatos*,” Achilles says, sharply. Most beloved.’ (Ibid., 333). The sharpness of Achilles’ tone and the bluntness of the short sentences reflect this bittersweet moment, as Patroclus hears this as a dead shade, and the grief-stricken Achilles is saying this to King Priam, who has come to plead for his son’s body to be returned. Although Achilles and Patroclus do not conform to the *erestes/eromenos* structure, their relationship is still defined within the scope of Ancient Greek concepts of intimacy.

Miller reserves the use of Ancient Greek monikers for the most poignant narrative moments: the establishment of Achilles and Patroclus’ friendship and the moment when Achilles is forced to remember his humanity after the death of Patroclus, taking ‘the step of forgiveness, one towards tenderness and love’ (Lee-Chin 2020: np.). The other instance in the text when Ancient Greek is deployed is when Achilles’ father gives Patroclus a nickname: ‘*Skops*, Peleus took to calling me. Owl, for my big eyes. He was good at this sort of affection, general and unbinding.’ (Miller 2011: 48). Though this may seem inconsequential, this is a scene of significant foreshadowing. Peleus’ affection and humanity sharply contrast to Thetis’ cold persona, which is a constant point of tension in the novel. This juxtaposition is embodied in their child, particularly when Achilles struggles to find his humanity after the death of his ‘*Philtatos*’. In addition, Peleus calls Patroclus *Skops* when he tells the story of Meleager and his wife, a myth that foreshadows their tragic fates. In the myth, Meleager refuses to fight despite the pleas of his advisors and people, until his wife Cleopatra entreats him to, but it was unfortunately too late to receive the gifts he was promised (March 1998; 2001: 250). This foreshadows how Patroclus would entreat Achilles to fight, but he would not relent until it was too late — until after Patroclus dies. Patroclus’ name is an inversion of Cleopatra’s, in the same way that his story is a mirror of hers. This foreshadowing is significant because it speaks to the thread of tragedy that is

woven throughout the love story. Achilles and Patroclus' relationship in *The Song of Achilles* is defined using Ancient Greek terminology at the most significant narrative events, despite their non-conformity to the pederastic model.

In the same way that Achilles and Patroclus do not conform to the pederastic social structure in *The Song of Achilles*, their sexual relationship is also not obviously pederastic. The explicit sexual intercourse between Achilles and Patroclus in the novel is manual: 'He stroked me gently [...] My hand reached, found the place of his pleasure [...] My fingers were ceaseless [...] His hand was ceaseless now' (Miller 2011: 94, 95, 172). There are less explicit allusions to sexual activity between Achilles and Patroclus, such as when they 'lay on the river-bank, learning the lines of each other's bodies anew' (Ibid., 96), that leave the specifics of their intercourse unsaid. It is noteworthy that there is no evidence in the novel of intercrural intercourse, though this is widely accepted to be the most common method of pederastic sex (Rice 2005; 2015: 1-4). Therefore, though Aeschylus and Plato discussed Achilles and Patroclus' relationship in terms of pederasty, and classicists such as Holmen consider them a pederastic couple (though an imperfect one), Miller's interpretation of the two Myrmidons differs significantly. Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* do have a queer romance, and although it does not fit into the Ancient Greek model of pederasty, it is still defined using Ancient Greek parameters of intimacy.

Since the central romance of *The Song of Achilles* is based on ancient, mythical characters and their relationship is modelled on ancient notions of intimacy, the question therefore arises of how the author has so successfully captivated a modern audience. Miller's use of juxtaposing imagery and prepossessing language forms a large part of the novel's contemporary impact. She juxtaposes images of music and war as a microcosm of the interlocking themes of love and death in the novel. Achilles' skill with the lyre, from Patroclus' enamoured perspective, adds depth to a figure previously characterised by his speed and rage on the battlefield. When Miller's Achilles plays the lyre, Patroclus reports that 'His head fell back a little, exposing his throat' (Miller 2011: 33), which is a very open, vulnerable position, particularly when compared to his fighting style: 'Achilles' limbs blurred and struck' (Ibid., 84). Achilles' lyrical skill is also present in the *Iliad*, particularly in the Embassy to Achilles, where Achilles plays peacefully: 'delighting his heart now, / plucking strong and clear on the fine lyre'



(9:224-5). Achilles' god-given and war-honed speed and rage are still present, as demonstrated when Odysseus and Ajax arrive and 'Achilles, startled, / sprang to his feet, the lyre still in his hands' (9:232-3). These two seemingly disparate aspects of Achilles' persona are also married in *The Song of Achilles*, in Patroclus' comparison of his fighting-style to dancing: 'His feet beat the floor like a dancer, never still' (Miller 2011: 42). The marriage of Achilles as a musician and Achilles as a fighter is a microcosm of the novel itself because it is a love story, but also a war story. In Thomas Heywood's early modern drama *The Iron Age I*, Achilles plays his 'effeminate flute', epitomising his self-indulgent refusal to fight (Heywood 1632: G3r-G3v; in Heavey 2015: 16). This speaks to the change in attitudes towards masculinity, as a refusal to fight is perhaps not as condemnable in the present day. As explored in the previous chapter, men's heroic narratives – and thus masculinity itself – is being interrogated in contemporary feminist myth writing; male heroism is being increasingly redefined by women, and while Winterson parodied hypermasculinity and heterosexual machismo, Miller provides a valuation of aestheticism, sensitivity, and emotional intelligence. Music thus becomes a method of bringing forth discussions of what makes a heroic man into the twenty-first century, as well as speaking to the different intentions behind the adaptations of Achilles' homoerotic desire: for Heywood, this is a source of masculine anxiety, for Miller, it is the central romance of her novel.

As Patroclus undertakes the task of portraying an Achilles who is both a lover and a fighter, telling a story that is both a romance and a tragedy, there are poignant moments that relay these seemingly juxtaposed ideals. For instance, Patroclus reflects that when Achilles starts leading raids, 'He seemed so much the hero, I could barely remember that only the night before we had spat olive pits at each other,' (Miller 2011: 209-10) wherein the hyper aggressive image of Achilles leading raids feels incongruous with the boyish charm of Patroclus' love interest. This is even more apparent when Patroclus helps Achilles to dress in armour for battle, and they share a tender moment before the bloodshed, and Patroclus 'saw the stiff leather dig into his soft flesh, skin that only last night I had traced with my finger [and] felt his lips on mine, the only part of him still soft' (Ibid., 210). The repetition of 'soft' in relation to the armoured man who earns the title "'*Aristos Achaion.*" *Best of the Greeks.*' (Ibid., 166) for his skill in war epitomises the way in which Miller uses juxtaposing symbolism to marry music and war, love and death, in *The Song of Achilles*.

In addition, Miller has received much praise for the aesthetics of her language in the novel. In her review of *The Song of Achilles*, Natalie Haynes commends Miller's prose as more poetic than any rendering of Homer (2011: np.), and it is this rhapsodic language that persuades the reader to consider Achilles as a romantic figure, rather than an enraged rapist. Consider, for instance, the sentences 'We were like gods, at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but the other' and 'When he died, all things swift and beautiful and bright would be buried with him' (Miller 2011: 96; 158). Rather than rage and revenge, Achilles becomes characterised by his love and joy. Both of these sentences use multiple clauses to create a tripping sensation, as though there are too many emotive epithets to express. The lines communicate an excess of love pouring out between Achilles and Patroclus, which is experienced as an illuminating 'bright' pleasure rather than a weight, and which lights up Patroclus' prose itself. This overflowing sensation is further demonstrated by the repeated mantra 'This, and this and this' (Ibid., 47; 96; 350). Miller's use of romantic language, therefore, is the most persuasive aspect of the novel that allows contemporary readers to accept Achilles as a romantic lead. In reviews of *The Song of Achilles*, the reviewers tend to make specific reference to Miller's prose, for example: 'In prose as clean and spare as the driving poetry of Homer, Miller captures the intensity and devotion of adolescent friendship' (Russell 2012: np.). Therefore, Miller's deployment of lines such as 'He is half of my soul, as the poets say' (Miller 2011: 284) significantly contribute to the popularity of her novel, and the popularity of *The Song of Achilles* demonstrates the desire for undefensive queer myths in the contemporary moment.

Although less well known, Smith's 2007 novel for the Canongate Myth Series, *Girl Meets Boy* also actively queers myth. Smith adapts the myth of Iphis and Ianthe as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but with a focus on queer identities in contemporary society. *Metamorphoses* is particularly important to this thesis because Ovid does what the authors within the scope of this thesis do, only two thousand years earlier: he adapts and alters myths. As Feeney writes in his introduction to the *Metamorphoses*, 'Ovid knows and loves the traditions of his literary past, but refuses to be intimidated or enslaved by them. Everything is to be invigorated by unexpected perspectives, everything is to be made new' (2004: xxviii-xxix). Moreover, 'Transformation is the title of the poem and the single linking thread that unites the hugely various stories', and while transformation is a broad theme, the 'main connecting thread is an interest in identity'

(Ibid., xxii; xxix). Ovid adapts myths under the umbrella theme of transformations to explore a multitude of identities, a tradition that continues to the 21st century with the texts covered in, and beyond the scope of, this thesis. More relevant to this chapter, Ovid surveys the imaginative and moral possibilities of hybridity: metamorphosis can be oppressive to the point of imprisonment or death, or it can be a positive force, liberating the metamorphosed or otherwise allowing them to realise their possibilities (Ibid., xxiv; xxix). Through metamorphoses, a person can realise their identity and find liberation; this identity can – and often does in Ovid – refer to sexuality. Indeed, Feeny goes as far as to say that all of the most memorable stories are in the realm of love and sexuality (Ibid., xxx), for example Echo and Narcissus, Deucalion and Pyrrha, and Cephalus and Procris. Hence, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* offer opportunities to break away from sexual and gender norms because of his focus on transformation and hybridity.

The sexual and gendered 'possibilities of hybridism' in the *Metamorphoses* are epitomised in Ovid's telling of the myth of Iphis, at the close of Book IX. In this myth, Iphis was born as a girl but raised as a boy, since her father had demanded of her mother 'if by chance / [...] your child is a girl [...] / you must kill her' (Ovid, 9:677-679). On the advice of the Egyptian goddess Isis, Telethúsa gives her child the gender-neutral name Iphis, and raises her as a boy. In time, Iphis and 'a fair-haired girl called Ianthe [...] famed for her beautiful looks' (Ibid., l.715-7) had their marriage arranged and fell in love. Iphis and her mother fear that their secret will be revealed at the 'wedding between two brides, where the groom has failed to appear' (Ibid., l.763), so they both pray to the goddess Hera: 'O Juno, goddess of marriage, O Hymen!' (Ibid., l.762). Hymen was a minor god of marriage ceremonies in Hellenistic religion, but who was merged with Hera/Juno in later Greek and Roman mythos, as she symbolised the ideal wife and the patron of marriage and the family (Bardis 1988: 94). On the morning of the wedding, Hera transforms Iphis into a boy: 'her limbs grew stronger, and even her features / sharpened' (Ovid, 9:788-9), allowing Iphis and Ianthe to marry successfully. Here we can see how the eponymous theme of metamorphosis in the Ovidian epic allows for the exploration of identity, particularly in terms of sexuality (Iphis experiences same-sex desire for Ianthe) and gender (Iphis undergoes a gender transformation).

Despite Ovid's Iphis and Ianthe capturing the current zeitgeist of queer gender and sexual identities, it has not persevered as one of the most popular stories from *Metamorphoses* unlike,

for instance, his rendering of Apollo and Daphne. Instead, the myth of Iphis and Ianthe has fallen into relative obscurity in the modern era, which is confirmed by Valerie Traub (2019: 1). Iphis has not captured the attention of many artists and authors and has therefore remained somewhat unknown outside classical studies and even within it, as Traub notes, ‘the plight of Iphis and Ianthe has not attracted the broad critical interest of scholars seeking to understand Ovid’s influence on literary history’ (Ibid., 1). Much like the interest shown in Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship in the Early Modern period, Mediaeval translators, mythographers, and adapters *did* consider Ovid’s Iphis a source of fruitful inquiry. Though ‘Ovid’s impact on the literary production [...] across the genres of epic verse, lyric, erotic epyllia and drama – has been comprehensively surveyed’ (Ibid., 7), very little critical attention has been paid to the popularity of this particular metamorphosis in the Medieval and Early Modern period. *Ovidian Transversions* aims to redress this critical neglect by exploring the wide-ranging issues to which this myth was made to speak in early modern France and England (Ibid., 2). While the myth was applied to Christian purposes in this historic period before it fell into obscurity, more recent literary critics ‘offer lesbian and queer interpretations of “Iphis and Ianthe”’, and it is with these interpretations that the myth is beginning to re-enter ‘wider scholarly conversation [...] as a story of cross-dressing and lesbianism’ (Ibid., 9). The scholarship within *Ovidian Transversions*, such as McCracken’s ‘Metamorphosis as Supplement: Sexuality and History in the *Ovide moralisé*’ (2019: 43-59) and Lanser’s ‘Changing the Ways of the World: Sex, Youth and Modernity in Benserade’s *Iphis et Iante*’ (2019: 261-278) redress the academic oversight of the significance of Ovid’s Iphis and Ianthe in the early modern period, and the myth is re-entering cultural conversations as a queer myth.

I have argued elsewhere (Judge 2019) that the Ovidian myth can be read through a contemporary queer theory lens. Drawing on medical definitions of gender dysphoria, particularly the transgender requirement to ‘live and be accepted as a member of [a different] sex, usually accompanied by the wish to have [gender affirmation] treatment’ (NHS Online “Gender Dysphoria” 2016, in Judge 2019: 80), I argue that Iphis’ myth can be read as a transgender gender-affirmation narrative. Gender affirmation is the – typically hormonal and surgical – process which changes a trans person’s body to match their gender identity. After her metamorphosis, Iphis ‘felt a new vigour she’d never enjoyed as the female she’d been’ (Ovid,

9:790), in which the use of ‘vigour’, from the Latin *virgoris*, could be the male author and translator assuming that masculinity feels stronger and more vigorous in their comparison of the male and female experience, or it could be interpreted in terms of gender affirmation (Judge 2019: 80). Within the latter interpretation, ‘Iphis feels a “new vigour” as her body’s biological sex now accurately reflects her gender identity’ (Ibid., 80), which has significant implications for queer myths because this interpretation suggests that Ovid’s myth could be an important tool for genderqueer cultural representation. Moreover, I argue for an understanding of Iphis as a genderqueer figure, rather than a specifically transgender one, as the term genderqueer is ‘an umbrella term used to describe gender identities other than man and woman – for example, those who are both man and woman, or neither man nor woman, or moving between genders’ (NHS Online “Gender Dysphoria” 2016). This will be particularly useful in the following analysis of Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy* as a genderqueer narrative. Ultimately, I assert that ‘the mythological Iphis has cultural relevance in contemporary society, as her myth can be utilised for genderqueer representation’ (Judge 2019: 80). This article evidences Traub’s assertion that Ovid’s Iphis and Ianthe has entered a wider scholarly conversation ‘as a story of cross-dressing and lesbianism’ (Traub 2019: 9) — as a lesbian and genderqueer myth.

For Feeney, ‘The staggering extent of [Ovid’s] success is most evident in the impact that the *Metamorphoses* has had on other creative artists [...] an impact that shows no sign of abating even in the contemporary world,’ (2004: xxxii). Ali Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy* is evidence of Ovid’s creative impact on artists in the contemporary world and, along with Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*, it is also evidence of the most recent iterations of creators actively queering myth in-line with contemporary society’s attitudes to LGBTQ+ identities. Before expanding on this, I would draw attention to Smith’s adaptive choices in the novel: like Isma/Ismene and Aneeka/Antigone in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, Smith creates new characters that mirror their mythic counterparts — Iphis becomes Robin and Ianthe becomes Anthea. Anthea is phonically similar to Ianthe, the name Anthea ‘means flowers, or a coming-up of flowers, a blooming of flowers,’ (Smith 2007: 82) mirroring the name Ianthe, which means ‘bloom of a violet’ and encapsulates femininity, beauty, and maidenhood (Wheeler 1997: 194). While Robin is in a constant state of becoming her gender in the novel, Anthea’s understanding of gender and sexuality grows and blooms throughout. Robin is Smith’s reimagined Iphis, and while her name

does not have the same phonic relationship to her mythic counterpart, it is still significant. For one, Robin is a gender-neutral name, but spelled in the stereotypically “masculine” way, which relates to Robin’s fluid gender. Robin’s surname is Goodman, which can be taken as humorous gender-play – she is a good man – but it is also reminiscent of the domestic demon Puck, from English folklore, who was referred to as hob-goblin, or Robin Goodfellow (*EB*, ‘Puck’ 2016, np.). Robin Goodfellow would sometimes perform small household tasks for humans, yet they often tended towards knavery and trickery. Though Robin Goodman does not demonstrate any of her namesake’s homemaking skills, the following activist tendencies of Goodman indicate a Puck-like mischief. Just as in Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, Smith’s characters’ names gesture towards their mythic counterpart, while also indicating that this is a modernised version of the story.

Unlike Shamsie’s novel, where the myths of Oedipus and Antigone are never mentioned but the themes of the Theban Cycle are replicated, *Girl Meets Boy* demonstrates a metatextual awareness of the myth that is being adapted. For Genette, metatextuality ‘unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it’ (Genette 1997: 4). Metatextuality occurs in revised myths, as outlined by Tekin in her analysis of Cherrie Moranga’s and Liz Lochhead’s drama. Tekin expounds that ‘the postmodern understanding of the text [as intertextual and poststructuralist] introduces an inevitable collaboration of intertextuality and self-referentiality, both of which are embodied in [...] metatext’ (Tekin 2012: 42). When rewriting is considered, and mythic rewriting in particular, the text is necessarily in dialogue with its earlier source and ‘[t]hus, any rewriting of any text may be viewed as a metatext’ (Ibid., 42). ‘[S]he told me the story of Iphis’ (Smith 2007: 86): in *Girl Meets Boy*, Robin tells Anthea the myth, thus creating a metanarrative in which the characters within the retelling are aware of the myth that they are mirroring. Moreover, they utilise their metanarrative for activist purposes, as the characters become eco-activists who graffiti Inverness with messages such as ‘IN NO COUNTRY IN THE WORLD RIGHT NOW ARE WOMEN’S WAGES EQUAL TO MEN’S WAGES’ (Ibid., 134), and sign them off with the mantra ‘THIS MUST CHANGE. Iphis and Ianthe the message girls 2007’ or ‘the message boys’ (Ibid., 133-4). While *The Song of Achilles* can be considered a more straightforward adaptation, because the novel draws upon a history of male same-sex desire, Smith’s adaptive choices speak to the fluidity that is central to *Girl Meets Boy* (as it was central to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* before

it) — sexuality, gender, and the borders between narratives all blur to present a celebration of gender fluidity and to highlight the activist potential of queering myths.

By rewriting the Ovidian myth as a lesbian and genderqueer narrative, *Girl Meets Boy* queers myth and, as well as being a celebration of queerness, it also highlights the paucity of lesbian myths. In the *Metamorphoses*, Iphis worries that ‘Cows never burn with desire for cows, nor mares for mares;’ and ‘The female is never smitten with passionate love for a female.’ (Ovid, 9:731; 734) Evidently, Iphis here identifies as a female and feels same-sex desire for Ianthe, establishing the Ovidian original as a lesbian myth. This interpretation has significance because, while we established above that male same-sex desire is prevalent in ancient sources, ‘Homoerotic female desire is comparatively rarely represented in ancient literature, despite the iconic status of the poet Sappho’ (Morales 2008: 49). While male homoerotic desire is present both explicitly and through the subtext of closeness in ancient literature, the ‘ancient novels, which promote female rivalry over female friendship, provide few representations that could be judged part of a “lesbian continuum” (Ibid., 50). Morales refers to Adrienne Rich’s ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian existence’, in which she employs the term ‘lesbian continuum’ to include a range of woman-identified intimacies that are not limited to sexual experiences, including the intimacy of ‘bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support;’ and wilful marriage resistance (Rich 1980: 648-9). Rich theorises that this broadened scope of lesbianism allows us to ‘grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of “lesbianism.”’ (Ibid., 649). Since ancient sources focus more on female rivalry over intimacy (with Sappho as the notable exception), it is difficult to locate the ‘lesbian continuum’ in ancient literature. This is confirmed by Pomeroy, who expounds that ‘Other than the stories about the Amazons, there are no [Greek] myths alluding to female homoerotic associations’ (Pomeroy 1977; 2015: 12). Ovid’s Iphis, then, who ‘burn[s] with desire’ for another woman, is particularly noteworthy. Ovid portrays a same-sex marriage between women as impossible, because it is outside of the bonds of societal demands, where laws enforced marriage, rewarded childbearing, and promoted heterosexual family (Morford et al. 2011: 22). Lindheim also recognises this, pointing to the social constructs of antiquity, in which the ‘*res* (“the social circumstances,”) demand that marriage be heterosexual’ (2010: 186). Smith’s adaptation, on the other hand,

reflects modern attitudes to lesbianism and therefore does not portray lesbianism as impossible. In 2013, Kaye Mitchell read Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* in terms of queer fiction. In this analysis, Mitchell focuses on the lesbian interpretation of Ovid's Iphis and Ianthe, which is also reflected in Smith's novel. For Mitchell, Smith's adaptation portrays 'lesbian sex [as] "impossible" only in the view of the obviously sexist and ignorant friends of Anthea's sister' (Mitchell 2013: 65). Mitchell focuses on Smith's lesbian narrative, in which she 'seek[s] both to re-naturalise nature' by reclaiming water from a massive corporation, 'and to emphasise the naturalness of female same-sex desire' (Ibid., 65). The 'lesbian continuum' present in Ovid's myth and Smith's reinterpretation (where lesbianism becomes a possible conclusion to the story of Iphis and Ianthe, or Robin and Anthea) is a radical excavation of a myth that had fallen into obscurity and that is rare in its portrayal of female same-sex desire.

In 'Contemporary Meets Ancient, Queer Meets Myth, *Girl Meets Boy*' (2019), I focused on the genderqueer element of Iphis' myth and its reinterpretation in the character Robin in *Girl Meets Boy*. Robin is presented as gender nonconforming in the novel:

She had a girl's toughness. She had a boy's gentleness. She was as meaty as a girl. She was as graceful as a boy. She was as brave and handsome and rough as a girl. She was as pretty and delicate and dainty as a boy. (Smith 2007: 83-4)

Comparing Robin's gender to a girl, then a boy, and back again, 'creates almost a pendulum of gender, where her identity swings back and forth steadily and fluidly'; additionally, 'the gendered attributes that she is given are opposite of the stereotypical attributes ascribed to the specific genders' (Judge 2019: 82). This subversion of stereotypes unsettles the entire concept of gender-based assumptions and biological gender, by showing that gentleness, toughness, handsomeness, and prettiness are not gender specific. The novel suggests that such temperaments should be attributed to one's personality, rather than assumed due to biological sex or gender. This works to both demonstrate the fluidity of Robin's gender and, more broadly, complicate the concept of gender itself, as 'girl' and 'boy' are problematised. In addition, the choice to use 'boy' and 'girl' rather than 'man' and 'woman', 'male' and 'female', or 'masculine' and 'feminine', adds a further nuance of growth, suggesting that Robin is in a constant state of



*becoming* her gender, and that gender identity is always changing, something that we are always growing into (Ibid., 83).

In this article, I draw upon the work of Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, particularly their theory of gender performativity, where they claim that ‘a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that “being” a sex or gender is fundamentally impossible’ (Butler 1990: 19). For Butler, the patriarchal constriction of language and discourse work to “prove” there are indisputable markers of biology that cannot be altered — the ‘linguistic terms that facilitate and articulate a set of fantasies’ (Ibid., 134), ‘fantasies’ here referring to the idea that gender is something biological and binary. ‘Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity’ (Ibid., 191), which is definitely the case with Robin. She refuses the labels of man or woman, girl or boy, or even transgender, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming, saying simply ‘The proper word for me, [...] is me’ (Smith 2007: 77). Thus, Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy* presents a genderqueer Robin as a reimagined Iphis, and her genderqueerness problematises binary understandings of gender and reductive gender-based assumptions regarding personality.

Ranger (2019) expands on this genderqueer interpretation to argue for reading Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy* as a queer translation of Ovid. Citing the radical translation praxes of Emily Wilson, Josephine Balmer, Anne Carson, and others, Ranger makes the case for understanding the last thirty years of classical translations as feminist/queer translations. A key feature of feminist translation is the visibility of the translator/rewriter who self-reflexively situates herself within the work, and these strategies have been repurposed for queer translation practices, ‘which draws attention to the treatment of queer characters in a source text, or “hijacks” a text to foreground issues of gender and sexuality’ (Ranger 2019: 234-5). Hence, ‘the cultural and feminist turns of Translation Studies have reconceptualized the possibilities of translation, expanding its generic and strategic boundaries, and redefining its processes, artefacts, and gendered metaphors’ (Ranger 2019: 233). Within this broader, queerer definition of translation, Smith’s text can be understood as a translation of Ovid. Unlike classicists such as Miller and Haynes, Smith works with translated editions of the classical texts, in this case Mary Innes’ and Ted Hughes’ translations of the *Metamorphoses* (Ranger 2019: 232). Ranger proposes that ‘critical queer theory suggests itself as a methodology for the translation of “troublesome” subjects in ancient texts — that is, subjects who resist binary categories of gender or sexuality’

(Ibid., 232) and ultimately suggests that Smith's queer text becomes a queer translation. Reading Smith's text as a translation rather than, or as well as, a retelling, however, has important implications because, as Ranger argues, 'a queer translation practice is an activist project' which combats homophobic discourse in Classics, Translation Studies, and contemporary culture simultaneously, and 'enables ancient queer bodies and identities to retain their multiplicities in translation' (Ranger 2019: 232; 251-3; 232). Smith's text, then, does not only (re)queer Ovid's myth, but it also engages in the broader phenomenon of queering ancient texts in translation, thus participating in the radical feminist/queer methodologies emerging in contemporary Classics. This conceptualisation of *Girl Meets Boy* within the context of revolutionary translation methodology recalls my 'Literature Review', where women's translations were cited as indicators of the debates in feminist Classics as a whole. In terms of this project, this argument proves that feminist rewritings of myth are as much a part of the classical tradition as translations, and such works indicate the increasing demand to not only hear women's voices in Classics, but reflect on how they can radically alter the legacy of conservatism in the discipline. Moreover, a traditionally conservative discipline can be developed to speak to contemporary activist goals.

Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* are two literary exercises in queering myth and, in doing so, they reveal not only a method of reinstituting queer history, but also how queering myth can be radically politicised. These are two instances of authors actively queering myth, yet this is not to say that Greek myths, and Ancient Greeks themselves, were not also queer, as extant Sapphic Fragments, vases, and mythic literature all demonstrate. If the Ancient Greek source texts were already queer, and there has been a long intervening history between antiquity and these most recent queer retellings, what makes these most recent examples distinctive from their forerunners? B.J. Epstein proposes that 'acqueering' a text can include: adding in queer sexualities, sexual practises, or gender identities; changing cis/het identities to queer ones; removing extant homophobia or transphobia in language or stories, or, alternatively highlighting it to force the reader to confront it; or including editorial or authorial paratexts, such as prefaces or footnotes, to discuss queerness and/or translatorial choices (Epstein 2017: 121 in Ranger 2019: 235). This contemporary methodological

understanding of ‘acqueering’, or actively queering, ancient source texts is central to what makes these contemporary queer myths distinctive from their predecessors. This active practise of excavating queer figures, removing longstanding homophobia, and intentionally choosing language to highlight the queer in the myth is at the core of queer translation studies and, as we have seen, central to contemporary queer mythmaking. Miller’s choice to retell the story of the *Iliad* with a focus on Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship in *The Song of Achilles* and Smith’s choice, from all of the *Metamorphoses* and beyond, to adapt one of the rare myths that portray female homoerotic desire are examples of this deliberate effort to ‘acqueer’ the Classics.

## **Chapter 5: ‘I want to tell the story again’**

### **Palimpsests: Paratexts and Intertexts**

Mythic adaptations can be understood as palimpsests: a manuscript on which later writing has been layered upon earlier writing. As Linda Hutcheon points out, ‘[to] deal with adaptations as adaptations is to think of them as [...] inherently “palimpsestuous” works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts’ (2006: 6). In terms of mythic adaptations, the newer meanings inscribed by contemporary authors are layered on top of the meanings ascribed to myth throughout history. Sometimes these hauntings to which Hutcheon refers are literal (which is the case, as elucidated below, in Margaret Atwood’s *Penelope* and Ursula Le Guin’s eponymous *Lavinia*), but more often it refers to the fact that ‘When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works’ (Ibid., 6). When working with adaptations one must of course be aware of the earlier works being adapted, yet adaptation is also ‘a process of creation’ because it is not simply repeating the earlier work, it ‘involves both (re)interpretation and then (re-)creation’ (Ibid., 8). Hence, ‘an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing’ (Ibid., 9). With contemporary women’s adaptations of Greek myths, one can identify the layers of meaning throughout the history of classical reception: from the original oral myths, to their first instances of being written and preserved, to their replication via empire (such as in the case of Roman mythology), to their long histories of loss, retrieval, translation, and adaptation for various purposes. This chapter seeks to add a further layer of meaning to the palimpsest of mythic adaptation: the layer of para- and intertextual awareness demonstrated by contemporary mythic adapters and its subsequent presence in the texts themselves. The first task is to demonstrate that the authors within the scope of this thesis have an active understanding of each other’s work, which will be demonstrated by drawing upon paratextual sources – namely interviews, reviews, and theses – which confirm that the authors have an awareness of the current literary momentum of the genre of feminist myth writing. Thereafter, the chapter highlights in-text instances where this paratextual awareness becomes intertextual — references within the novels to the work of the authors’ contemporaries, to the novels that are also contributing to the present popularity of female authors adapting Greek

myth. This has led to a phenomenon within this literature of women writing about their current literary circumstance within the novel itself or, more specifically, women writing about women writing about myths. I argue that feminist adaptations of myth must be understood as palimpsestuous, and will consider the potential implications of this understanding.

The term “paratext” was coined by Gérard Genette in his text *Palimpsestes*, and further theorised in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. For Genette, ‘text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions’ (1991: 261). Genette refers to the paratext as ‘a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [...] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it’ (Genette 1997: 5; in Ratner 2018: 734). Genette’s peritexts (paratexts that are embedded in the same volume as the text body; as opposed to epitexts, that occur firstly outside the volume) occupy two categories: those controlled by the publisher and those controlled by the author. The former typically includes a spine title, title page, copyright notice, advertisements for other titles from the publisher; the latter, ‘authorially driven peritexts’, include epigraphs, dedications, and footnotes (Ratner 2018: 734). These two categories, however, are indistinct: some of this extra-textual content – such as copyright notices, advertisements, and reviews from “relevant” authors – can be influenced by the author, despite traditionally being controlled by the publishers; similarly, publishers can guide authorial peritexts.

An example relevant to this thesis of peritextual content that could equally be influenced by the publishers and/or by the authors themselves is the use of quotations on the covers of the novels, which combine to create the illusion of an immediate ‘literary ecosystem’ (Ibid., 733). On the cover of Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*, for example, there is a quotation from Bettany Hughes, classicist and author of the polemical *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (2005), describing Miller’s novel as ‘Sexy, dangerous, mystical’ (Hughes in Miller 2011: np). Similarly, Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* has on its back cover a quotation from the prominent classicist Mary Beard:<sup>34</sup> ‘Atwood takes Penelope’s part with tremendous verve... she explores the very nature of mythic story-telling’ (Beard in Atwood 2005: np.). By including reviews from popular classicists

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<sup>34</sup> Beard has amassed a large, if controversial, social media presence which has increased her platform, despite significant instances of racism, rape apologism, classism, and transphobia (see Ramaswamy 2018; Bisset 2021).

with high media profiles on the covers of these novels, the publishers – Bloomsbury and Canongate, respectively – are implicitly making the case for the esteemed value of these novels in the field of Classics. The connection between Atwood’s novel and Miller’s is further accentuated by a quotation on the inside cover of *The Song of Achilles*, where a reviewer ‘hope[s] *The Song of Achilles* becomes part of the high school summer reading list alongside *Penelopiad*’ (Simonson in Miller 2011: np). Similarly, Emily Wilson reviewed Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, a quotation from which is included inside the cover of the novel: ‘In fictional responses to the Classics, I very much enjoyed and admired *Home Fire* [...] a politically and psychologically acute novel modelled on Sophocles’s *Antigone*’ (Wilson in Shamsie 2017: np.). Wilson’s work translating Sophoclean drama, particularly *Antigone*, makes this review singularly relevant, because it proves the connection between these literary adaptations and Classics as a discipline. In turn, quotations from Mary Beard and classicist, radio presenter, and novelist Natalie Haynes are included on the ‘Praise’ page in Emily Wilson’s translation of the *Odyssey* (Wilson 2017: np.). Quotations from Ali Smith are included on the cover and inside pages of Shamsie’s *Home Fire*; on the cover of Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy*, there is a quotation from Jeanette Winterson. Salley Vickers’ *Where Three Roads Meet* and A.S. Byatt’s *Ragnarok* – both within the Canongate Myth Series – sport cover quotations from Ursula Le Guin. Le Guin’s novel *Lavinia* was not published within the Canongate series but it was released soon after the books of her contemporaries Atwood, Winterson, and Byatt, to whose works Le Guin’s is often compared.<sup>35</sup> Quotations from Miller – an adapter of Greek myth whose prominence has increased since she won the Women’s Prize for Fiction – are featured on the covers of Natalie Haynes’ *The Children of Jocasta* (‘Passionate and gripping’ [Miller in Haynes 2017: np.]) and *A Thousand Ships* (‘Haynes gives much-needed voice to the silenced women of the Trojan War’ [Miller in Haynes 2019: np]). Miller is cited on the latter as ‘Madeline Miller, author of *Circe*’ (Ibid., np.), thus making this connection between the novels within the same field even more explicit. The authors’ praise is used by the publishers to endorse the work and lend authority to each new adaptation, by placing it within the same context as other more established mythic adapters and classicists. These

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<sup>35</sup> See Atwood 2011: np; Atwood 2018: np.; Atwood & Le Guin 2010: np; Winterson 2004: np; Le Guin 2007: np; Haven 2017: np; &c.

quotations, then, demonstrate a concerted effort by the publishers to create connections between these authors' works.

These constructed connections indicate a paratextual network, where quotations from authors of related literature are used to create 'A system much larger than a single book [...] that attempt to guide reader response' (Ratner 2018: 736). The inclusion of such quotations on the covers of these texts, then, 'play simultaneously a role integral to the book and one that connects them to the larger marketplace in which that book circulates' (Ibid., 736). Ratner argues that such a paratextual network should be understood within 'the broader ecological term *symbiosis* [which] offers a more useful frame because it acknowledges that texts and their paratexts interact in sometimes parasitic and sometimes mutualistic ways' (Ibid., 735). For Ratner, paratexts can be 'parasitic' because they can affect the readers' experiences of the text in a way that is completely separate to the main body of the text itself. The network creates a cultural and economic pressure on the reader to consume all within this 'larger marketplace'; a reader cannot read the works of Natalie Haynes, for example, without also purchasing the works of Madeline Miller; or, that one cannot appreciate Shamsie's adaptation of *Antigone* without having read Sophocles' drama and, particularly, Emily Wilson's translation of it. These paratexts can symbiotically be 'mutualistic' too, which is also the case with this constructed peritextual network: such quotations by overlapping authors create the illusion of an active authorial network within the genre of contemporary feminist adaptations of Greek myth.

When dealing with paratextual content, Genette makes it clear that both the 'author and the publisher [...] are responsible for the text and for the paratext' (1991: 266). A key example of the editorial paratexts within this thesis is Canongate's editorial contributions for the publication of *The Myths* series. The idea to commission the series was Jamie Byng's, Canongate's Managing Director, following the success of The Pocket Canons series in which popular contemporary thinkers and celebrities introduce sections of the Bible (MacMillan 2019: 64). The Pocket Canons series was spearheaded by a design agency, Pentagram, which as MacMillan argues in her thesis on feminist rewriting in the Canongate Myth Series 'points to the continuing aesthetic value of ancient stories. Indeed, what the mission statement further stressed was the "contemporary" nature of the intended audience' (Ibid., 64). This lay the groundwork for Byng's subsequent project, by again using 'recognised authors as both a marketing technique and a

channel through which to make ancient narratives that might be perceived as outdated seem current and important' (Ibid., 65). In an interview, Byng opined that 'writers have been doing this [rewriting myths] for centuries but as a publishing idea I felt it had real potential' (Byatt 2006: np); for MacMillan, Byng's comments point to 'the inextricable connection between the project as an artistic undertaking and a marketing campaign' (MacMillan 2019: 65). With regard to the editorial paratextual network, each of the novels are prefaced with the same note from the publishers,<sup>36</sup> which works both to unify the works under the umbrella of the series and market the other novels within the peritext of the individual book itself. Moreover, many of the books include endmatter advertisements for other stories within the series, and general praise for the series itself (Atwood 2005: np.; Winterson 2005: np; &c.). Byng's interview acts as an editorial epitext – paratextual content from the publishers that occurs outside of the text – and the endmatter advertisements for other books within the same publishing event are editorial peritexts — paratextual content from the publishers within the physical confines of the text itself (Genette 1991: 262-4). Genette provides the formula '*paratext = peritext + epitext*' to illustrate that the peritext and the epitext together create the paratextual field (Ibid., 264). Editorially, the paratexts of the Canongate Myth Series includes peritextual and epitextual elements that operate for primarily promotional purposes.

As mentioned above, the authorial paratext plays a collaborative role with the editorial paratext, and these paratexts are often epitextual. If authorial peritexts include footnotes and epigraphs, and publishing epitexts can include anything from advertisement to prospectuses (Ratner 2018: 734), the examples given by Genette of 'the authorial epitext [include] interviews, conversations and confidences' (1991: 267). In an interview with Boyd Tonkin, Margaret Atwood recalled that 'Byng, like a sprite out of some Border ballad, "leapt out from behind a gorse bush and talked me into it"' (Tonkin 2012: np.). Atwood's interview does much the same thing authorially as Byng's did editorially, which is to advertise the series as a publishing event led by Canongate, that boasts the work of 'the world's greatest contemporary writers' (Canongate Online 2020: np). Atwood shared that she had 'two false starts on other legendary

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<sup>36</sup> 'Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives – they explore our desires, our fears, our longings and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human. The Myths series brings together some of the world's finest writers, each of whom has retold a myth in a contemporary and memorable way. Authors in the series include: [...]' (Vickers 2007: np; &c.)



yarns [... then] out of my unconscious [...] there appeared in particular the hanged maids, who have always bothered me about the *Odyssey*' (Tonkin 2005: np.). This comment speaks intriguingly to *The Penelopiad*, where Penelope describes her narrative as 'spin[ning] a thread of my own' (Atwood 2005: 4) and, in the preface, Atwood relates that she has 'always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself' (Ibid., xxi). In the interview, then, Atwood echoes the opening to her novel, which shows that this paratext is in direct conversation with the text itself; this connection is a palimpsestic one, as Atwood's paratexts contextualise the text, adding a layer of meaning to her words. Similarly, on her website, Winterson highlights the publishing event of the Canongate Myth Series – 'Publishers sometimes have great ideas. Jamie Byng, the passionate impresario behind Canongate, called me to tell me about his Myth series. [...] Pick a myth. Any myth.' (Winterson 2006: np) – and echoes the text itself in her paratextual content: 'mine would be the story of Atlas and Hercules because I have an Atlas Complex' (Ibid., np.). Again, in an interview with Suzi Feay, Salley Vickers is described as 'the latest author to take up the invitation from Canongate publishers' and Vickers opines that 'Oedipus is a central myth for psychoanalysts [...] Freud's not read it correctly!' (Feay 2007: np.), which is the central thesis of *Where Three Roads Meet*. These are three instances wherein the authorial epitexts – in the form of interviews – frame the texts themselves, as well as demonstrate the same goal as the editorial epitextual interview above, which is to market the Canongate Myth Series as an innovative publishing event. Further to this, these authorial epitexts demonstrate the palimpsestuous nature of contemporary mythic adaptation, because the author is able to add layers of commentary to their texts, enabled by online content.

Authorial interviews that speak tellingly to the texts also occur outside of the Canongate Myth series. For instance, in an interview with Kira Cochrane, Miller shares her motivation behind the narrator of *The Song of Achilles*: 'Patroclus doesn't appear very much in *The Iliad*. He's elusive. A mystery, really. And so I wanted to explore the question: who is this man who means so much to Achilles?' (Cochrane 2012: np.). Miller's decision to retell Achilles' story particularly from Patroclus' perspective is a source of interest to scholars (see McKenna 2015: 92) predominantly because, as Miller notes, he is a far more elusive figure in the *Iliad* than his lover. In this interview, then, Miller addresses a question of significant interest to the readership

of the novel, demonstrating how authorial epitext can contribute meaningfully to the ‘literary ecosystem’ surrounding a text. Moreover, Miller’s epitextual interviews provide a useful insight for this thesis more broadly, such as in her interview with Krishnan Guru-Murthy for Channel 4’s ‘Ways to Change the World’ series. In this interview, Miller answers ‘Yes! [...] Absolutely!’ when asked if she intended *Circe* to be considered feminist literature, and that ‘partially I wrote *The Song of Achilles* because I was incredibly frustrated that the interpretation of them as lovers had been closeted in recent years’ (Guru-Murthy 2019: 8:17; 33:40). Miller summarises the classical debates surrounding Achilles and Patroclus — that we will never know what Homer intended, or even if Homer was a person (though she declines to further weigh in on the Homeric Debate), but that we do know that ‘some ancient authors absolutely read the *Iliad* [...] as a love story [...] with Achilles and Patroclus at the centre. Plato takes them as ideal lovers’ (Ibid., 33:15).<sup>37</sup> She also opines that retellings are ‘exactly in-line with Homer’ and the classical tradition, since ‘these stories belong to everybody and everyone was tinkering with them and retelling them’, and that she is grateful to Rick Riordan (the author of the *Percy Jackson* series) for making mythology accessible to YA readers (Ibid., 34:05). Miller also cites Emily Wilson as a scholar whose work operates in ‘really interesting and exciting ways’, and highlights Wilson’s choice to translate what was previously the twelve hanged maids as ‘slaves’ instead, to signal their absolute lack of agency, making it all the more unjust when ‘Odysseus – theoretically the hero – kills them anyway’ (Ibid., 36:00). Evidently, authorial epitexts – in this case, specifically interviews – add an extra layer to the palimpsestuous network of contemporary women writers’ adaptations of Greek myths. Moreover, epitexts illuminate how the authors consciously engage with the same central questions as those throughout this thesis, specifically regarding adaptation, reception, and feminism.

If interviews are an accepted mode of authorial epitexts, thus contributing to the paratextual literary network that is being established within this chapter, then reviews and theses must – by the same logic, and where relevant – also count as authorial paratext. Throughout this thesis, I have drawn upon Natalie Haynes’ reviews for the *Guardian* newspaper, such as her review of Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* (2017)<sup>38</sup> and Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* (2011).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 4: ‘Queering Myth’ for further detail on this debate.

<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 2: ‘Antigone’s Afterlives’

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 4: ‘Queering Myth’

Haynes also uses this paratextual platform to review some of the most significant, emergent, popular non-fiction from the field of Classics, such as Mary Beard's *SPQR* and Edith Hall's *Introducing the Ancient Greeks*. For the latter, Haynes writes that 'She is especially good on the nuance that thrives in every corner of the Greek world. [...] Hall's passion for the Greeks is never uncritical' (Haynes 2015: np.). She also draws a parallel between Hall's text and contemporary politics, particularly the Trojan Horse affair where there was an alleged conspiracy to introduce 'Islamist' ethos into several schools in Birmingham, but the conspiracy was a hoax spread by the media (see O'Toole 2017). During this scandal, senior Conservative politician Michael Gove announced that schools should teach 'British values' such as democracy, which she describes as 'a gratifying moment for those of us who spend much of our time pointing out that we would be nothing without the ancient Greeks' (Haynes 2015: np.). Haynes then uses this as a springboard to justify the continued need for classical education. She also reviews dramatic productions, such as Simon Stone's production of *Medea* and Juliette Binoche's production of *Antigone* (Haynes 2019: np.; Haynes 2015c: np.), as well as reviews of new translations, such as Clare Pollard's translation of Ovid's *Heroides* and AM Juster's accessible – 'terrifically easy to read' – translation of Tibullus' *Elegies* (Haynes 2013: np.; Haynes 2012: np.).

Moreover, Haynes uses her platform as a *Guardian* contributor to engage in key debates occurring in Classics scholarship. For instance, in her piece 'Helen of Troy: the Greek epics are not just about war, they're about women', she opines that 'women are part of every aspect of the Trojan war, from its causes to its terrible consequences' (Haynes 2019b: np.). Although the famed opening line of the *Iliad* suggests that it is about one man, the epic poem actually provides 'countless examples of what it means to be a man: absolutist like Achilles, cunning like Odysseus, weak like Agamemnon, protective like Hector, wise like Nestor, bereaved like Priam' (Ibid., np.). Yet, 'Rage – Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles' (Homer, trans. Fagles 1.1) also alludes to a woman, to the goddess that tells the story via Homer: 'He doesn't name her, but she is presumably Calliope, the muse of epic poetry' (Haynes 2019b: np.). Haynes' presumption exposes one of the sidelined women of the *Iliad* – the muse that creates it – and alludes to her heteroglossic novelisation of the Trojan War, *A Thousand Ships*. Haynes describes Calliope as 'hiding in plain sight' (Ibid., np.), which is akin to the muse's portrayal in Haynes' novel. Calliope's narrative is interspersed throughout the novel, as she provides the poet with the

stories of the women of the Trojan War — the stories that we are reading in the novel. The novel opens with her perspective:

Sing, Muse, he says, and the edge in his voice makes it clear that this is not a request. If I were minded to accede to his wish, I might say that he sharpens his tone on my name, like a warrior drawing his dagger across a whetstone, preparing for the morning's battle. But I am not in the mood to be a muse today. Perhaps he hasn't thought of what it is like to be me. (Haynes 2019: 1)

Calliope is 'hiding in plain sight' behind the poet who is the implied author of the text. Haynes' novel begins in the same way as Homer's epic poem, with the poet demanding the Muse's labour. Haynes' Calliope, however, differs from Homer's: for one, she is named; additionally, she is a far less obliging Muse than she is in the *Iliad*. Homer's epic poem is a testament to her accommodating his demand to sing of the wrath of Achilles, whereas the Calliope of *A Thousand Ships* is glib and unaccommodating. Moreover, she narrates that 'It's all I can do not to laugh' (Ibid., 40), mocking the poet for his frustrated disappointment as he impotently fails to compose literature without her.

For Haynes – in her novel, as in her review – the muse that is credited with the singing of the Trojan War is truly integral because without her the stories cannot be told. Even when Haynes' Muse concedes to sing for the poet, she continues to be disobliging, since she chooses to share the women's accounts instead of the male heroes' stories that the poet was seeking. While the poet wonders 'How does his poem keep going wrong?', Calliope tells us that 'he hasn't understood at all. I'm not offering him the story of one woman during the Trojan War, I'm offering him the story of all the women in the war' (Ibid., 40). Calliope's characterisation in *A Thousand Ships* forms a critique of the longstanding literary tradition of the muse as a loved object, silent and passive, to amplify the male artist's activity and genius, which reinforces gender based stereotypes: man creates, woman inspires; man is the maker, woman is the vehicle of male fantasy (see Murray 2008: 328-9). In Haynes' article, the *Iliad* provides 'countless examples of what it means to be a man' courtesy of Calliope, where now she is providing countless examples of what it means to be a woman within the same mythical context. Evidently,

authorial paratextual platforms – in this case, Natalie Haynes’ online news column<sup>40</sup> – is in direct dialogue with her creative prose.

Research theses can also be considered authorial epitexts. Emily Hauser’s doctoral thesis ‘Since Sappho: Women in Classical Literature and Contemporary Women's Writing in English’ (New Haven: Yale 2017) is of particular importance to this research. Hauser pursues many of the same directions of inquiry raised within this thesis, particularly concerning women writers who are creating space for themselves in the western canon by ‘reworking “old tales” — and in particular, tales of the women of the ancient world [...] to give them more agency — to give “silenced women” a “voice”’ (Hauser 2017: 3-4). In analysing the women of classical literature in their twenty-first century receptions, Hauser draws upon the scholarship of Carolyn Heilbrun who asserts that ‘We cannot yet make wholly new fictions; we can only transform old tales’ (Heilbrun 1990: 104; in Hauser 2017: 3). Though identifiable with the aims of this thesis, Hauser’s research differs from mine. There are notable differences in methodology (she approaches this research as a trained classicist, while I come from an academic background in literature and Women’s Studies), as well as scope. In her 2017 thesis, she works with texts that predate the scope of this research, such as Elizabeth Cook’s *Achilles* (2001) and Erica Jong’s *Sappho’s Leap* (2003), while this thesis includes novels that have been published as recently as 2021.

Most pertinent to this research is Hauser’s comparison between the Penelope of Homer’s *Odyssey* and her reimagining in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* as well as the Lavinia of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and her subsequent interpretation in Ursula Le Guin’s novel *Lavinia*. Hauser argues that Lavinia is a personification of literature itself, which is a symptom of women being appropriated into the abstract throughout literary history, and she makes an interesting case for Aeneas’ three wives – Creusa, Dido, and Lavinia – each resonating with a particular literary tradition: Homeric epic, tragedy/elegy, and Virgilian epic, respectively (Ibid., 211-214). With Penelope, Hauser analyses the manipulation of narrative structure in the Homeric epic, with particular reference to Book 19, arguing that she ‘can be seen as enshrining the process of the transformation of oral narrative to written plot’ (Ibid., 105) which, in turn, motivates her analysis of Penelope’s

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<sup>40</sup> Natalie Haynes also has a BBC Radio 4 series called *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics*. This speaks to Haynes’ paratextual presence as an expert in Classics and a vocal advocate for bringing antiquity to a modern audience, which is then reflected in her literature, as is demonstrated throughout this chapter.

narrative in *The Penelopiad*. Hauser contends that Atwood's Penelope is, of course, 'written in the knowledge of the textual ending of the *Odyssey*' and, further to this, she asks 'How does Atwood's Penelope differ when she knows the ending of her story, and when *she* is the creator and narrator of her tale?' (Ibid., 105). In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope narrates beyond her ending in the *Odyssey*: to expand on this point, in more recent feminist reconfigurations of her – Madeline Miller's *Circe* and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* – she is also written in the knowledge of her textual afterlife in Atwood's text. Overall, as well as working in conversation with the questions of this thesis, Emily Hauser submitting a doctoral thesis that focuses in large part on Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia* substantiates the concept of the 'literary ecosystem' that this chapter seeks to demonstrate.

Evidently, there is a network of paratextual content in the genre of contemporary feminist adaptations of myth, that is comprised of both peritextual (within the same physical volume as the text itself) and epitextual (external to the volume) paratexts. This chapter has thus far worked to prove that the authors and publishers of contemporary feminist revisionist mythology have an awareness of the genre beyond their own contribution. Further to this I want to ask what the textual implications of this extra-textual content are. How, in each case, is the author's cognisance of the broader context of their work – their awareness of this current literary moment, of the vogue of women rewriting myths – present in their writing? This chapter will now examine instances in which the studied texts make intertextual references to other works within this corpus. Firstly, however, I will briefly outline how I shall be using the term intertextuality for the purposes of this chapter.

French poststructuralist feminist Julia Kristeva argued that a text is 'a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text' wherein 'several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another' (Kristeva 1980: 36; in Allen 2000: 35). Moreover, texts are made from 'the cultural (or social) text' — all of the different discourses, language constructions, and social and institutional structures that make up culture, meaning that texts are not isolated objects, but 'a compilation of cultural textuality' (Allen 2000: 35). Intertextuality is based on the understanding that a text is not a fixed, stable, and singular object, but a manifestation of the social and relational basis of all language and signification. More pertinent to the aims of this thesis are the gynocritical theories built upon Kristeva's model of intertextuality. Gynocriticism is

a formative part of feminist literary theory and criticism, and it is a term first used by Elaine Showalter in the 1970s to describe a new literary project that sought to construct a female framework for analysing women's literature. Showalter defines gynocriticism as 'the feminist study of women's writing, including readings of women's texts and analyses of the intertextual relations both between women writers (a female literary tradition) and between women and men' (Showalter 1990: 189; in Allen 2000: 141). Showalter creates an image of a network that connects women's writing across time periods and national divisions; hence, gynocriticism depends, at least in part, on the intertextual relations between women writers. Therefore, the paratextual network sketched out above is not only a 'literary ecosystem', but a gynocentric literary network. This network works to establish – before even entering the content of the novels – a 'female literary tradition'; more specifically, the most contemporary contributions to the literary tradition of feminist myth-making. Thus, when analysing intertextuality in contemporary feminist adaptations of Greek myth, I will be operating within the theoretical framework of gynocritical intertextuality.

This 'literary ecosystem' or 'female literary tradition' that exists in the paratexts also presents itself within the texts, as intertextual references or allusions to other works within the genre. The exploration of intertextual references within the literature works to demonstrate how the extra-textual awareness by authors and publishers of the current vogue for feminist myth-making are also present within the texts themselves. The authorial and editorial palimpsestuous network is contributed to in the consideration of intertextuality. In Hutcheon's model, adaptations are 'haunted at all times by their adapted texts' (2006: 6), and a further haunting is present in the intertextualities exhibited in the texts. These intertexts are present both within a single author's body of work and without, that is to say that the authors make reference both to their own works and to the works of other authors within the genre.

The former is most prevalent in the work of Madeline Miller who, in her 2018 novel *Circe* makes reference to her 2011 novel *The Song of Achilles*. Odysseus tells Circe about the Trojan War and its most famous figures, including Achilles and Patroclus: 'The best part of him died, [...] His lover Patroclus. He didn't like me much, but then the good ones never do' (Miller 2018: 185). This quotation demonstrates that Miller maintains her interpretation in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers; moreover, it demonstrates that the Odysseus

portrayed in *Circe* is the same Odysseus portrayed in *The Song of Achilles*. *Circe*'s Odysseus who states that Patroclus did not like him is in-line with Patroclus' narration in *The Song of Achilles*, where he tells Achilles 'I do not trust them' and notes that 'The stories named [Odysseus] *polutropos*,<sup>41</sup> the man of many turnings.' (Miller 2011: 171; 155) – the Odysseus of *Circe* comments on the mistrust Patroclus showed in *The Song of Achilles*. Why would Miller make this intertextual reference to her earlier novel? The reference confirms *The Song of Achilles* as a retelling of the *Iliad* and *Circe* as a retelling of the *Odyssey*: in the same way that Odysseus features in the *Iliad* and takes centre stage in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus features in *The Song of Achilles* and has a more central role in *Circe*. Odysseus is not, however, the central figure of *Circe* – that role is of course *Circe*'s. In the same way that *Circe* only features in Odysseus' narrative in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus only features in *Circe*'s narrative: *Circe* traces 'Circe's journey, as she labours to learn witchcraft, turning lions into pets and men into pigs, and weaves a rich tapestry of life — of which, Odysseus is only one part.' (Judge 2020: np.). Hence, one way that intertextuality can be used is within a single author's body of work, to create sequential epics in the same manner as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Intertextuality also occurs externally, which is to say when one author refers to the works of other authors within the corpus of contemporary women's adaptations of Greek myth. Analysing the connections between the novels in terms of intertextuality is essential for establishing the phenomenon of contemporary feminist myth writing as a female literary tradition. A key example of this occurs within Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*, where the epistolary interludes from Penelope to Odysseus echo the voice of Atwood's Penelope in *The Penelopiad*.<sup>42</sup> Haynes' Penelope loses patience for Odysseus' return: her first letter begins 'My dearest husband,' and ends 'Your loving wife,' and she assures him that 'I don't blame you,' (Haynes 2019: 57; 57; 60); by contrast, her final letter is addressed curtly to 'Odysseus,', it is signed 'Your wife/widow,' and opens with the terse statement 'It seems almost superfluous to mention that my patience is stretched like the thinnest thread' (Ibid., 253; 261; 253). This impatient Penelope owes a debt to the Ovidian model, who epistles 'Penelope to the tardy Ulysses: / do not answer these lines, but come,' and she describes him as 'loiter[ing] in some foreign place' – a far less heroic, and more

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<sup>41</sup> Emily Wilson chooses to translate *Polutropos* as 'complicated' in her translation of the *Odyssey*.

<sup>42</sup> For more detailed analysis, see chapter 'Women in the Texts'



impatient, portrayal of his odyssey (Ovid, trans. Isbel, 1.1-2;1.71). Penelope's most famous act in the *Odyssey*, 'By day I wove the web, / and in the night by torchlight, I unwove it' (Homer, trans. Wilson 19.148-9) becomes a recurrent motif of weaving in *The Penelopiad*, and Haynes' Penelope also uses weaving imagery – 'thread' – to illustrate her emotions and thoughts. Atwood's Penelope declares 'Finally, a scheme occurred to me' (Atwood, 2005: 112) in reference to her un-weaving plot and she recognises Odysseus through his disguise immediately, demonstrating that she is at least equal to Odysseus in scheming. Similarly, Haynes' Penelope recounts conversations with Telemachus: 'Cleverer than you, Mama? he says. No, precious, I tell him. Not quite as clever as me' (Haynes 2019: 59). Haynes' Penelope, like Atwood's, critiques Odysseus' proudest schemes, proving that her intellect is at least equal to her famously tricky husband. Penelope's final letter in *A Thousand Ships* (which is addressed to Athene) laments that 'My name is a byword for patience and loyalty,' (Ibid., 314), which echoes Penelope's regret in Atwood's text that her myth has become 'A stick used to beat other women with' (Atwood 2005: 2). Equally, in Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Penelope is called 'the spider in her web' (Miller 2018: 281), which both utilises the weaving imagery and presents her as an equal schemer to Odysseus. Circe narrates that 'Loyal, songs called her later. Faithful and true and prudent. Such passive, pale words for what she was' (Ibid., 292), which also elucidates the argument that Penelope's myth has become a reductive story of obedient wifehood rather than one of domestic scheming. Haynes' adaptation of Penelope, then, contributes to the emerging tropes in adaptations of Penelope, as revealed in the similarities between Haynes' Penelope and earlier adaptations; these similarities are intertextual references to earlier adaptations of the same mythical figure, demonstrating how paratextual awareness becomes intertextual allusion.

Another example of external intertextuality within the corpus of contemporary feminist myth writing is Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne*, which can be read as a paraquel to Madeline Miller's *Circe*. Drawing on Margaret Atwood's definition in 'Dire Cartographies' (2011: 66-96), paraquels are stories that cover the same period of time (unlike prequels, that precede a story's events, or sequels that follow on), which typically depict the same events from a different perspective. Before considering the content, there is evidence to support this paraquelic interpretation in the titles and front covers of the novels. The title *Ariadne* mirrors *Circe*, because both novels are named after the protagonist, a previously sidelined woman of a heroic epic. Though Circe is the

sole autodiegetic narrator of her novel (while Miller's other novel, *The Song of Achilles*, features Patroclus as a homodiegetic narrator), Ariadne shares the narrative with her sister Phaedra. Notably, the novel is not called *Ariadne and Phaedra*, because this would not create the same link within the literary ecosystem to *Circe*. Equally, the hardback cover of *Ariadne* is dark blue, with gold decals, recalling the iconic black and gold aesthetic of *Circe*'s cover. Hence, the title and editorial paratext of *Ariadne* gestures towards *Circe*, instantly implying a connection between the novels.

In terms of mythic lineage, Circe is Ariadne's aunt, and they share a relation to Helios, who is Circe's father and Ariadne's grandfather. Hence, the novels are paraquels in that they follow members of the same family, and they both cover some of the same myths. In Miller's novel, their myths intersect when Circe assists in the birth of the Minotaur: during her trip to Knossos, she meets a young Ariadne and an enslaved Daedalus. The motif of Ariadne dancing and being cautioned against happiness lest she invite a god's wrath are central to *Ariadne*, but they are foreshadowed in Miller's novel, where 'Ariadne's light feet crossed and recrossed the circle. [...] I wanted to say, do not be too happy. It will bring down fire on your head. / I said nothing, and let her dance.' (Miller 2018: 118). In making the adaptive choice to include the same traits in her characterisation of Ariadne, Saint's novel inextricably recalls its award-winning predecessor. This paraquelic recollection has the dual effects of reminding the reader that mythic adaptations are drawing upon the same extended universe of gods, mortals, and monsters, as well as aiding in the construction of this literary ecosystem of women's revisionist myth writing.

On the other hand, *Circe* and *Ariadne* interpret Pasiphaë differently, in much the same way that Helen, Ismene, Achilles, and other mythical figures are characterised differently in each retelling. In *Circe*, Pasiphaë is a cruel sister, and unrepentant for her sacrilegious bestiality 'Bitch, [...] I fucked the sacred bull, all right?' (Ibid., 109), which contrasts to her more sympathetic portrayal in *Ariadne*, where she is described as 'a fragile sunbeam. The furnace of pain' (Saint 2021: 18). Though the characterisation of Pasiphaë is different, this quotation from *Ariadne* illustrates another way in which the novel is a paraquel to *Circe*, because the poetic language and deliberate word choice that invokes the sun (therefore providing a reminder of the characters' Titanic heritage) is a replication of the same linguistic methods deployed in Miller's novel. This speaks to the generative potential of mythic adaptations, as the same figure is adapted

in completely opposite ways, yet the novels deal with the same myths, and can therefore be considered paraquelic. In the context of palimpsests, the intertextuality – both within an author’s body of work and without – contributes additional layers of meaning to the female literary tradition of adapting myth. The intertextuality that is prevalent across contemporary feminist myth writing serves as evidence of the autographic and allographic awareness of the current momentum for the genre.

When considering the authors’ extra- and intertextual awareness of this literary phenomenon, it is important to note that women’s writing has always been concerned with reflexivity, as well as writing about the process, phenomenon, and politics of women writing. This can be traced back to the foremother of feminist writing, Mary Wollstonecraft, who called to ‘Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience’ (1792; 2014: 50) in her famous treatise for women’s education, *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Later, in *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf famously claimed that ‘a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’ (1929: 3). In reference to female literary tradition, Woolf pointed out that ‘a woman writing thinks back through her mothers’ (Ibid., 70), which feminist literary critic Mary Jacobus analyses as a matter of rewriting. The (re)discovery of female literary tradition, she claims, is not confined to strictly writing about “female domains”, but involves ‘a recognition that all attempts to inscribe female difference within writing are a matter of inscribing women within fiction’ (Jacobus 1979; 2012: 21). It is this, concludes Jacobus, that is ‘at stake for both women writing and writing about women’ (Ibid., 21). Women writers are inheriting and revising the language of their mothers, and therefore are – at least in part – writing about women’s writing. Feminist revisionist myth writing, then, is a specific instance where women are inscribing themselves within literature, thinking back through mythic mothers in their writing. This chapter will hereafter focus on the authors within this study and the instances where they have written about women’s writing and, more specifically, written about women adapting myth in their writing. One concept that recurs is that of female mythical figures “writing back” against their limited portrayal in classical literature, in their newfound voices in these contemporary novels. There are many instances of mythical women interrogating and escaping their ancient, oppressive, limited portrayals in their own voices, in contemporary novels, which shall be outlined and analysed below.

Alluding to Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, Elaine Showalter argues that the 'anxieties of female authorship' stem from the female author's belief that the male dominance of the textual field suggests that she should not be writing at all (Showalter 1977; in Richards 2019: 126). The anxiety of female authorship is further analysed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, where they ask 'What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are [...] both overtly and covertly patriarchal?' (Gilbert & Gubar 2000: 45-6). Gilbert and Gubar's theory of the anxieties of female authorship exposes the androcentric bias of the western canon (Ibid., 48). Though 'the female poet does not experience the "anxiety of influence" in the same way that her male counterpart would,' the female author's anxiety lies instead in the confrontation of male persecutors in the literary field (Ibid., 48). For Gilbert and Gubar, women's writing is palimpsestic because it contains decodable subtexts that explore the difficulties of writing in an androcentric field (Ibid., xxiii) and their authorship is a 'revisionary struggle' (Ibid., 49) because women have to revise the limited portrayal of their gender in male-written literature throughout history. Thus, in feminist revisionist myth writing, as the female mythical figure anxiously tries out her voice for the first time, she echoes the anxiety of the female author, writing in fields (Literature and Classics) that are traditionally dominated by privileged white men. The texts studied here, therefore, constitute literary afterlives for mythical female figures afforded by modern women writers. Tellingly, in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia*, the literal afterlife is used, portraying their female protagonists as ghosts that tell their side of their myths after they have died.

Penelope's aforementioned weaving of the shroud is particularly pertinent to the topic of women's writing. As Jasmine Richards opines in 'Rereading Penelope's Shroud', Penelope's weaving of the textile is Atwood 'stag[ing] and interrogat[ing] many of the theoretical problems associated with feminist theories of influence and anxiety. [...] Penelope's material circumstances force her into creating a textile (text) that can never be complete' (Richards 2019: 127). Connected to this is Nancy K. Miller's goal in her gynocritical essay 'Arachnologies', where she had 'taken as possible tropes of feminist literary agency examples from antiquity of women's weaving' (Miller 1988: 77) – the weaving of textiles in literature is thus emblematic of women's writing. For Miller, 'When we tear the web of women's texts we discover [...] the

representations of writing itself' (Ibid., 83-4), so rewriting and analysing Penelope's weaving becomes an exploration of women's writing practises. Indeed, Penelope refers to her project of telling her side of the events as 'I'll spin a thread of my own' (Atwood 2005: 4); thus, Penelope's weaving of the textile becomes a metaphor for her weaving the text, which is to say her finally telling her own story.

One might go as far as to say that the entirety of Greek myth can be retold through the metaphor of women weaving textiles. This is the case in Charlotte Higgins' *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* (2021), where Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are retold through some of the most famous weavers in Greek myth: Athena, Alcithoë, Philomela, Arachne, Andromache, Helen, Circe and, as a matter of course, Penelope. This is an ekphrastic storytelling technique, as these female mythical figures have 'woven their tales on to elaborate textiles' (Higgins 2021: 9), and the text is largely comprised of descriptions of these imagined artworks. In the introduction, Higgins points out that text and textile are derived from the same Latin root, *texere*, and the women in her retelling are weaving their stories back into the mythic tradition. Helen, for instance, is 'obsessively' weaving the Trojan War, over and over again, 'as if it might give up its brutal mysteries' (Ibid., 183) – she retells the story in textile time and again in the hope of processing her trauma. Similarly, in Philomela's myth, her brother-in-law rapes her and cuts out her tongue – an act that Helen Morales calls 'the original nondisclosure agreement' (2020: 72) – but she 'weaves her story, and thus bears witness to the crime,' (Higgins 2021: 10). In Higgins' Ovidian retelling, Philomela weaves love stories, before using her loom to testify against her abuser. Thus, not only can the whole corpus of Greek myth be told from the women's perspectives, but they can be told in ekphrastic representations of weaving, that is, women's storytelling techniques.

Penelope opens her story by contemplating her literary afterlife, lamenting that her myth has become 'A stick used to beat other women with' (Atwood 2005: 2), and she also introduces us to her literal afterlife. Her narrative opens with the line 'Now that I'm dead, I know everything.' (Ibid., 1) – she is not omniscient, but death has afforded her hindsight and the gleaning of significant knowledge. Emancipatory death has given her the freedom to 'spin [her] thread', despite 'the difficulty [...] that I have no mouth through which I can speak' (Ibid., 4). What Penelope loses in death, her corporeality, her 'bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness' (Ibid., 1),

she gains in her ability to interrogate the people who populated her mythos, in much the same way that she holds the classical tradition to account for its reductive version of her. For instance, she asks Antinous why the suitors pursued her when she was getting old and not especially beautiful. She says:

come now Antinous, [...] we're dead now, you don't have to blather on in this fatuous manner down here — you have nothing to gain by it. There's no need for your trademark hypocrisy. So be a good fellow for once (Ibid., 100).

He calls her 'merciless in life, merciless in death' (Ibid., 100) but goes on to explain their plot to marry and impregnate her, and thus claim the kingdom of Ithaca. In death, she is able to get the answers she was denied in life, by interrogating those who had wronged her. The novel gives Penelope the opportunity to 'spin a thread of [her] own', and the maids' songs and anecdotes are interwoven into her narrative. In the Underworld, as in the narrative, the maids constantly remind Penelope of her failed duty of care, by staying together in a group of twelve and miming their hanging whenever Penelope sees them. As Atwood says in the introduction: 'I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself' (Ibid., xxi). Haunting is a useful metaphor to access the key concerns of this chapter, since the female mythical figures can contend with their literary afterlives (that is, how their story has endured), while the text itself is palimpsestuously haunted by that which it is adapting.

Haunting is also central to Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia*. In the *Aeneid*, Lavinia is afforded no speech, and only one memorable thing happens to her, that her 'flowing hair caught fire, / her lovely regalia crackled in the flames, [...] for Lavinia, prophets sang of a brilliant fame to come, / for the people they foretold a long, gruelling war.' (Virgil, trans. Fagles: 6.81-9). As Le Guin's Lavinia narrates:

Like Spartan Helen, I caused a war. She caused hers by letting men who wanted her take her. I caused mine because I wouldn't be given, wouldn't be taken, but chose my man and my fate. The man was famous, the fate obscure; not a bad balance. (Le Guin 2008: 4)

By ‘the fate obscure’, Lavinia means that, unlike Helen and, to a slightly lesser extent, Penelope, she is not well remembered for the fighting “caused by her” or, rather, caused by the men fighting for gains and using her as an excuse. Lavinia is haunted by a future ghost, whom she comes to call ‘my poet’ (Ibid., 3). Virgil, on a ship, dying, hundreds of years in the future visits her in her temple. They have a relationship of reciprocity, in which she tells him about her life, allowing him to live in his unfinished poem and hear first-hand about the events that led to the founding of Rome, and she gets to hear about her future with Aeneas, who is on his way, and the things he has done on his way to Latinum; that is, the events of the *Aeneid* itself.

Like Penelope interrogating Antinous and the twelve maids holding Penelope to account in their (literary) afterlives, Le Guin’s Lavinia makes Virgil accountable for his work. Lavinia makes Virgil regret overlooking her in his poem, her rich characterisation by Le Guin making the fictionalised Virgil come to view her as ‘my unfinished, my incomplete, my unfulfilled’ (Ibid., 71). He knows that he is dying, and his biggest regret becomes his unfinished poem because he could not revise Lavinia’s characterisation, or lack thereof. He comes to realise, as he says, ‘O Lavinia, [...] you are worth ten Camillas. And I never saw it.’ (Ibid., 46). Virgil’s regret makes him realise what the forerunners of feminist classical scholarship asserted:

mythology is based primarily on [work] by male scribes, scholars, artists, and “informants” and thus concerns men’s myths and rituals. Far more is known about women in mythology, about the female figures who people male narratives, enactments, philosophies, theologies, and analyses, than about women and mythology or women’s mythologies (Weigle 1999: 969).

In Virgil’s words, ‘And I knew nothing of all that! I never looked at her. I had to tell what the men were doing’ (Le Guin 2008: 43). Virgil wonders why he visited Lavinia, rather than his hero Aeneas, or even one of the women he focussed on more primarily, such as Dido. He postulates that it is ‘Because I did see him. And not you. You’re almost nothing in my poem’ (Ibid., 68). He comes to realise that his focus on what Weigle terms ‘men’s myths’ has led to centuries of women in myth being overlooked and he is held to account for his oversights. Another instance

in which Lavinia interrogates Virgil is when she tells him that he ‘can’t be thinking straight about the babies’, calling it ‘*nefas*, against the order of things, unspeakable, unsacred.’ (Ibid., 64-5). At the same time he reveals to her that, in his conception of the Underworld, the spirits of babies who never got to live are piled up on the ground, crying. He says he knows what it’s like because he’s been there. But with whom? Not Aeneas, since the Sybil guided him; Virgil asks ‘What man did I guide? I met him in a wood’ (Ibid., 64) — a reference to the future again, to the 14th Century, when Virgil acts as Dante’s guide to the Underworld in Dante’s *Inferno*. Dante’s inclusion in Le Guin’s portrayal of Virgil is indicative of the palimpsestuous nature of mythic adaptation, as Virgil’s reception is necessarily informed by Dante’s rendering of him in his *Inferno*, as much as it is by his own, unfinished epic. As we see the ailing Virgil get confused between his literary self as an author, his literary self as a character, Aeneas (the figure whom he wrote about), and Dante (the figure who wrote about him), the male domination of the classical tradition is highlighted, which is to say the primacy of ‘male scribes, scholars, artists, and “informants” and [...] men’s myths and rituals’ in the study of Classics.

Emily Hauser interprets Lavinia as a personification of literature itself. Hauser draws a line between female personified abstractions in the form of goddesses (such as Night, Memory, and Strife) and the female personifications of genres (such as Comedy, Poetry, and Music) to the manner in which ‘women are easily appropriated into the sphere of the abstract’ (Hauser 2017: 211). Hauser pays particular attention to Lavinia’s silence in Virgil’s epic, relating it to ‘the theme of the silencing of women’s voices and its relationship to personification, and passivity, in literature’ (Ibid., 214). This is a silence which, centuries later, Le Guin engages with ‘to open up to its generative qualities in order to allow Lavinia to embrace the narrative of the *Aeneid* as a whole’ (Ibid., 214). Weaving – Penelope’s most famous act – becomes, in feminist rewritings, a metaphor for women’s writing; relatedly, Lavinia’s silence and inaction symbolise the treatment of women in male-written literature, as decorative, passive personifications of abstract concepts.

To summarise, Penelope has ‘no mouth through which [to] speak’, but finds herself with plenty of time in the afterlife to ‘spin a thread of [her] own’ (Atwood 2005: 4), and Lavinia also opens her narrative with a cogitation about her literary afterlife. When she says ‘I am not sure of the nature of my existence,’ (Le Guin 2008: 3) she alludes to an uncertainty about whether she was ever real or could ever have an afterlife. Instead she exists ‘only in this line of words I write’



(Ibid., 3) and considers that whatever life she had was not a real one, but a literary one, surviving only in Virgil's words. Yet since 'he did not write them [...] he scanted me' (Ibid., 3) she has to exist instead in the words she writes for herself. Though Atwood and Le Guin's mythological protagonists operate within a literal afterlife in their literary afterlives, there are other instances within contemporary feminist adaptations of Greek myth in which the protagonists write back against their limited portrayal that do not occur in the afterlife.

In her 2005 novel *Weight*, Jeanette Winterson repeats the mantra 'I want to tell the story again' (Winterson 2005: xvi; 100; 137), a sentiment that summarises the phenomenon of authors writing about writing and the protagonists writing back against their limited portrayals in myth. There are cases both within the Canongate Myth Series and without, of the authors writing about writing. In *Girl Meets Boy*, Ali Smith wrote 'I mean, do myths spring fully formed from the imagination and the needs of a society [...] as if they emerged from society's subconscious?' (2007: 89). In doing so she echoes the Jungian theory of mythic archetypes in which myths, like dreams, are understood as expressions of the collective unconscious because they express core ideas of the human species (Jung 1936; 1959: 96-7; 46-7). On a similar note, in *Where Three Roads Meet*, Tiresias claims that 'the interpretation is everything' (2007: 83) — a dual reference to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Vickers' reinterpretation of Freud's interpretation of Oedipus. Psychoanalysis is a key field when considering the reception of classical myth (see Zajko & O'Gorman 2013): Oedipus has become inextricable from the Complex named for him, and Jungian theory has myth built into its foundations. Although it is at the core of Vickers' text and only a small allusion in Smith's novella, both authors are gesturing towards a layer of the mythic palimpsest: its reception in psychoanalysis.

There are further significant instances of the protagonists writing back against their limited portrayals in myths, which reveal how these contemporary novels can engage meaningfully and variously with the classical tradition. Miller's *Circe*, for example, holds ancient poets to account with the admonishing observation that 'Humbling women seems to be a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep' (Miller 2018: 181). In *Circe*, the process of mythic retelling is referred to when Circe tells the mythos of Odysseus to Telegonus: 'Those stories were still in me, [...] I found myself hesitating, omitting, altering' (Ibid., 229). Circe recreates the myths in the same way that these adapting authors are engaging in acts of

(re-)creation. Miller teaches Classics; here she has Circe teaching the *Odyssey* to Telegonus and facing the same problems as many Classics teachers: ‘They’re wildly inappropriate [...] it’s kind of shocking that we actually teach them to children because they’re filled with so much violence’ (Guru-Murthy & Miller 2012: 31:50). In *The Silence of the Girls*, Briseis ends her narrative by thinking that the Trojan women are ‘going to survive - our songs, our stories’ (Barker 2018: 296) as they are passed down via oral tradition, yet she wonders ‘What will they make of us, the people of those unimaginably distant times? One thing I do know: they won’t want the brutal reality of conquest and slavery’ (Ibid., 324), thus criticising the classical tradition for romanticising rape and slavery throughout history: ‘No, they’ll go for something altogether softer. A love story, perhaps?’ (Ibid., 324). In both texts, the patriarchal traditions of myth are at once exposed and responded to, therefore reappropriating myth into a gynocentric model that reinterprets the same stories from women’s perspectives. Moreover, these perspectives reveal that, by informally passing on stories to their children, women have long since been the progenitors of cultural history.

Writing back against – and reclaiming the narrative from – the androcentric mythic tradition is also present in Saint’s *Ariadne*. Phaedra’s disenchanted narration of Theseus’ version of his feats symbolises women’s disenfranchisement within an androcentric literary tradition. Theseus tells ‘rollicking yarns crammed full of adventure and excitement, but I grew so weary of hearing how faultless he was’ and Phaedra portrays him as ‘so absorbed in his own legend that he could not see another person as anything more than a minor part of his mighty story’ (Saint 2021: 192; 217). In Phaedra’s at once exhausted and incensed narration, we are presented with a critique of Theseus’ posturing and, more broadly, the masculine legend that forces others into supporting roles. Conversely, Ariadne tells not only her own story, but weaves into her narrative the story of so many mythic women that have been treated injuriously and unjustly. This interweaving of stories becomes literal when Ariadne weaves a tapestry that features Leto, Io, and Semele, and she reflects that ‘With no one peering over my shoulder, I was free to tell the stories I wanted [...] It was not full of dutiful scenes [...] It was something else entirely.’ (Ibid., 208). As in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and Nancy K. Miller’s ‘Arachnologies’, weaving becomes a symbol of women writing women’s stories, as a reflexive departure from the male domination of the literary field.

In 'Arachnologies', Nancy K. Miller offers a gynocritical interpretation of Ariadne's myth, as well as Arachne's. Miller uses their myths as they are told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as examples that speak to the importance of foregrounding gendered experiences of authorship and the female subject over the poststructuralist destabilising of authorship and texts. In her rendering, Arachne's story is a parable of women's writing, as the myth portrays a female desire to produce art and, more specifically, women's narratives (Miller 1988: 94). In her contest with Athena, Arachne embeds narratives and, crucially, she 'constructs a feminocentric protest: Europa, Leda, Antiope, are the more familiar names of women carried off against their will by the "heavenly crimes" of divine desire,' (Ibid., 81). Gynocriticism is the feminist study of women's writing, and we see here how a gynocritical lens can be applied to a mythic source text to represent the female literary tradition. If Arachne is the parable for women's writing, Ariadne provides a metaphor for its analysis. In providing the thread for the labyrinth, 'She is that which allows the male [critic] to penetrate the space of the great artist' – Daedalus or Ovid in this case but, more broadly, the author – and to return victorious: 'Ariadne is thus the "woman in the text" the critic takes into the abyss of discourse' (Ibid., 94). For Miller, Ariadne is a figure for interpretation because the reader can enter and exit again the labyrinthine text, yet Ariadne also symbolises a female principle of interpretation and intertextual reading, that renders the male as heroic critic and the female as merely a symbol (Allen 2000: 153-4). In reading Ariadne as the method of literary criticism, one recalls Showalter's model of gynocriticism as also relating to the intertextual relations between women and men, because Ariadne's clue enables, but can also be exploited by, the male (critic or hero). When Miller asks 'whose powers do we admire?' (the critic that follows the thread, or Ariadne who provides the thread) and, more directly, 'whose story is it?' (Miller 1988: 93) we are seeing the same concerns staged in a theoretical setting that attempts to place the subjects of feminist criticism in the centre, as we see in Saint's creative prose.

In *A Thousand Ships*, Haynes' Calliope encapsulates this gynocentric concept of women, making space for their perspectives in the literary field:

But this is the women's war, just as much as it is the men's, and the poet will look upon their pain – the pain of the women who have always been relegated to the edges

of the story, victims of men, survivors of men, slaves of men – and he will tell it, or he will tell nothing at all. They have waited long enough for their turn. And for what reason? Too many men telling the stories of men to each other. [...] there must be some reason why they tell and retell tales of men. (Haynes 2019: 176).

The multiple clauses that place women as opposed to men refocuses the emphasis on the women's war, pain, and stories. There is a shift in language from this specific instance, as demonstrated by 'the poet', to a more general philosophising on women's writing and the shifting of focus away from men telling men's stories. What we are seeing here is a dual phenomenon of the female authors writing about the process of rewriting myth, and the female protagonists writing back against their limited portrayal in Greek myth and subsequent reception until recent adaptations. This adds an extra layer of meaning to this network of texts, wherein the texts themselves and the characters within them become self-reflexive, reflecting upon not only the composition of their one text itself, but also demonstrating an awareness of the history of reductive portrayals of women in myth and the current literary moment for mythic adaptation by women authors.

As Hutcheon writes, 'the appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty' (2006: 114). As I have argued above, the concept of the palimpsest explains a great deal about the para- and intertextual relationships within the literary corpus of contemporary women's adaptations of Greek myth. As Genette proposes, hypertextuality refers to 'any relationship uniting text B [hypertext] to an earlier text A [hypotext], upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary' (Genette 1997: 5) and he utilises James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a text B/hypertext to Homer's *Odyssey* as a text A/hypotext. Hence, mythic adaptations have an inextricable relationship to the myths they are adapting. The contemporary era allows for even more complex relationships in the field of mythic adaptations because, as this chapter argues, these authors more overtly stage their awareness of the other authors working within the same field, and therefore their understanding of the prevalence of the contemporary moment for feminist myth-making. This paratextual awareness has translated into intertextual references to other works within the same genre as well

as to the dual phenomenon within the literature of female authors writing about mythic adaptation and having their female protagonists “write back” against their previously limited portrayals. What are the feminist implications of this? As I argued previously, although ‘this generation of women writers is not the first to look to myth for a source text’ (Judge 2020: np.), they should be thought of as the latest generation of mythic adapters, the most recent layer to the palimpsest. Mythic adaptation is akin to a wall, with feminist authors using Greek myth as the connective cement, upon which they can lay their contribution (Ibid., np). Conceptualising contemporary feminist adaptations of Greek myth as the latest in a history of ascribed meanings to mythic adaptations generates, in gynocritical terms, a ‘female literary tradition’ of myth-making.

## Conclusion

[Is] Oenone less of a hero than Menelaus? He loses his wife so he stirs up an army to bring her back to him, costing him countless lives and creating countless widows, orphans and slaves. Oenone loses her husband and she raises their son.

Which of those is the more heroic act?

- Natalie Haynes, *A Thousand Ships*

In 2020, Harriet McMillan completed her doctoral thesis on feminist rewriting in the Canongate Myth Series (University of Edinburgh) and concluded that broader work on feminist rewriting of mythology beyond the Canongate project would be a worthwhile area of study (McMillan 2020: 287). This thesis takes the Canongate Myth Series as its starting point, though I have aimed to take a more comprehensive approach, looking at the contemporary phenomenon of women rewriting Greek myth as a whole. This approach has allowed me to draw broader conclusions about recent women's myth writing, and it has afforded me the ability to create a more contemporary project taking in texts that have been published as recently as 2021. The immediacy of this project is best evidenced by the inclusion of novels such as Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021) and Charlotte Higgins' *The Greek Myths: A New Retelling* (2021). In this thesis, I have asked why there has been a huge expansion of interest among women writers adapting and retelling classical myths, and what their work reveals about current issues and priorities within feminism.

Before considering the feminist motivations, it is worth noting the more general reasons for the current vogue of women rewriting myths. For one, it is demonstrably true that myths have enduring cultural capital and appeal. As Barthes notes in *Mythologies*, myth is a semiological system that is 'extremely difficult to vanquish'; semiological myth can be used to enforce a bourgeois and colonialist worldview, or it can 'signify the resistance', taking the form of a 'left-wing myth [...] a reconstituted myth' (Barthes 1957; trans. Cape 1972; 1982: 123, 136-8).

Hence, myths have the capacity to enforce bourgeois or colonialist status quos, or – as is the case with the liberal feminist literature within this research – they can signify the resistance by reconstituting the myths. Moreover, Greek myths offer an interconnected network of characters and stories, which Westenfeld recently compared to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2021: np.). Indeed, as my final chapter contends, not only is contemporary women’s mythic literature an ever-expanding network, but when texts such as Saint’s *Ariadne* and Miller’s *Circe* include many of the same characters, plot points, and stylistic choices, the novels can be considered paraquels. Just as Spiderman’s origin can be told and retold in different superhero movies, the mythic narratives of Penelope, Clytemnestra, or Antigone are revisited by different authors. There is a consumerist hope — held by publishers, producers, and fans alike — for ‘a Marvel-style Mythology Cinematic Universe’, that will begin with HBOMax’s forthcoming eight-part *Circe* miniseries (Ibid., np.). In publishing, therefore, the recent proliferation of women’s myth writing and the huge popularity of novels such as *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* has not only inspired other authors, but has also signalled to publishers an extremely profitable niche in the market.

The thesis has identified a number of key reasons why Greek myths are popular in the field of feminist adaptation. For one, the myths themselves offer great diversity within their female mythic archetypes which allows for a wide range of narrative possibilities, and with these possibilities arise an equally wide range of social and political applications. Blundell notes goddesses, royals, and monsters as the key categories of women in myth, while for Pomeroy the categories are goddesses, whores, wives, and slaves (Blundell 1995: 17; Pomeroy 1975). For Smith, the categories are much simpler, as she notes that “‘Bad’ women always seem to me to be far more interesting than the “goody two shoes” type, and ancient Greek myths offer a veritable cornucopia of examples,’ (Smith 1992: 75). Analysing adaptations of mythical women in terms of how they conform to, and break out of, this moralistic binary has been a recurrent focus throughout this thesis. Examples of this include adaptations of Penelope that challenge her reputation as a good wife and adaptations of Clytemnestra that are more sympathetic to her than to Agamemnon. Moreover, I have analysed how adapting authors choose between providing a fresh perspective on a well-known story (for example, when adapting Helen or Antigone) or to fill in the blanks with more shadowy and obscure mythical women (key examples within this thesis have been Briseis and Ismene). As Sian Lewis asks, ‘Is it possible to exploit myth to

explore areas about which we know little?’ (2011: 452): while we can identify oppressive social norms in myth, can we also use to feminist advantage the more enigmatic elements of myth? The texts within this thesis that have excavated Briseis, Ismene, and Iphis certainly suggest so. On the topic of Iphis, Lewis notes that ‘stories which treat changes of gender depict it as surprisingly undistruptive’ (Ibid., 455), as is also the case with Tiresias, Kaenis, and the Amazons, the latter of which can be understood as masculinised or androgynous women. If the changing of gender is not a cause for alarm or a herald of disaster, then ‘myth loses its familiar role of exemplifying [conservative] ideas and norms’ (Ibid., 455), instead offering fertile avenues for further exploration. Hence, Greek myths are popular for feminist writers because they offer a diverse range of feminine archetypes and gender subversions to be reinterpreted with an emphasis on contemporary concerns.

Ultimately, these mythic archetypes have proven themselves to be immensely malleable, particularly in the context of contemporary feminism. These classical re-imaginings tell us much about the development of feminist discourse, transcending a traditionally conservative genre where women are reduced to essentialised roles to engage with contemporary feminist discourse through a mythic framework. Rather than capitulating to the inherently conservative traditions of myth, this thesis argues that myths can and have been repurposed to speak to contemporary feminist concerns. The first chapter demonstrated that Penelope can be reimagined to challenge the patriarchal demand for wifely obedience, unacknowledged domestic labour, and the intersection of class in gender-based oppression; the gaps in Briseis’ myth leave ample room to adapt her in divergent manners, to stage the question of whether violent myths can be adapted into consensual romances or whether it is more fruitful to use Briseis to narrate rape as it is used as an instrument of war; and while Helen has been a source of inspiration for centuries, she poses a number of issues for contemporary feminist adapting authors, namely around whether she consents to going to Troy (therefore implicitly blaming her for the war), or whether, if she is stolen (thereby removing her agency). Nevertheless, she is a useful figure to navigate feminist concerns with the dangers faced by women deemed beautiful in misogynist societies, women’s portrayal in the media, sexual violence, and sex work. ‘Women in the Texts’ found that, within the scope of contemporary feminist adaptations of Greek myth, the women of the Trojan Saga are of particular interest to women writers seeking to simultaneously pose a challenge to



outdated, oppressive traditions that have their roots in antiquity, and offer infinite regenerative potential for new stories, new perspectives, in familiar frameworks. This is because this single saga offers diverse female characters – princesses and slaves, loyal and adulterous, loved and hated – in interconnected stories, with a dramatic war for a setting. While the first chapter critically examined the phenomenon of various women from the Trojan Saga being adapted in feminist literature, the second chapter functions as a case study, in order to demonstrate how one female mythical figure can be adapted in quite divergent ways by contemporary women writers. In ‘Antigone’s Afterlives’, I focused on the significant differences in adaptations of Antigone, in order to demonstrate the malleability of Antigone’s myth for a variety of political purposes, ultimately concluding that to adapt Antigone’s mythos is in itself an act of feminist revisionist writing because her enduring symbolism is as a figure of resistance against patriarchal control. The third chapter demonstrates that revisiting the heroic men of Greek myth is a fertile avenue for staging concerns regarding modern masculinity. It is proven within ‘Mythic Masculinities’ that the crisis of masculinity is a key concern for feminists, and that the heroes of Greek myth embody a number of masculine stereotypes which can be used to narrate feminist concerns about hegemonic masculinity and the impact of toxic masculinity on people of all genders. The chapter also raises questions about whether the actions of these heroes can be reconciled with contemporary values relating to gender equality, ultimately concluding that the heroic men are critiqued and often ridiculed for their inconsistency with modern values around gender equality. As the fourth chapter of this thesis contends, there has been a long and complex relationship between queer sexualities and Classics, though it proves that contemporary queer mythmaking is distinct from its forerunners due to the active practice of excavating queer figures, removing existing homophobia, and intentionally choosing language to highlight the queer in the myth. Finally, ‘Palimpsests: Paratexts and Intertexts’ is a crucial contribution to this project, because it not only proves the burgeoning literary ecosystem of contemporary feminist myth writing, it also demonstrates how women writers use the mythic framework to reflect on women’s writing itself. When the texts present the female mythical figure making space for her myth to be told, this symbolises women making space in the literary field for women’s narratives to be told by women writers. The recurring motif of women weaving textiles becomes emblematic of women weaving their own stories, their own texts, in critical dialogue with the male domination of the textual

field. Hence, Greek myths are popular for feminist adaptation because they are uniquely preserved in western cultural consciousness, and therefore provide familiar frameworks from which to explore contemporary feminist concerns.

My original contribution to the study of literature lies in the analysis of a body of work that is still emerging and setting it in the context of a more longstanding tradition of adaptation in order to determine where it takes the genre of classical adaptation. My scope, however, is limited by the still ongoing nature of this literary phenomenon. If a PhD thesis were a never-ending endeavour, this project could continue to grow alongside the corpus of literature. Take, for example, Pat Barker's recent sequel to *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), *The Women of Troy* (2021) — a text that could have radically altered some chapters of this thesis, had I not been constrained by time and word-count. The novel spans the intermittent, impatient period between the fall of Troy and the Greeks departing on their ships. Of course, the continuation of Briseis' story in *The Women of Troy*, writing further beyond her ending in the *Iliad*, would have been examined in the Briseis section of 'Women in the Texts', and Neoptolemus could be interpreted in 'Mythic Masculinities' as the figure who most has to contend with Achilles' heroic legend. The interpretations of Penelope and, in particular, Helen in the novel would no doubt yield further fascinating questions. Of Penelope, Hecuba – as a prisoner of war, after the fall of her city and the loss of most of her family – bitterly reflects '*Faithful Penelope, loyal Penelope, wise Penelope ... I was all those things – fat lot of good it did me*' (Barker 2021: 103). Here, Hecuba's irreverent dialogue puts its finger on the key problem of Penelope: that her faithfulness has been used as a measure against which all other women fall short. Barker also presents Helen as a victim of domestic violence, with bruises visible on her neck, due to Menelaus punishing her for what he perceives to be her role in instigating the war. In so doing, Helen becomes as much a victim of the war as Briseis or Hecuba, and she is given a platform to transcend her tradition of reductive portrayals. Interestingly, *The Women of Troy* would also contribute meaningfully to the chapter 'Antigone's Afterlives'. This is because of the invented subplot of Barker's character Amina, who buries Priam in defiance of Neoptolemus' ruling that he shall remain unburied. This, of course, imports the plot of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Like Antigone's call to honour the laws of the gods over those of Creon, Amina challenges Neoptolemus' ruling with the words 'you can't just overrule the laws of god. Nobody can – I don't care how powerful you are' (Ibid., 159). In

deploying Antigone in this uncanny context (familiar in its Greek mythological setting; unfamiliar in the Trojan, rather than Theban, Cycle), Barker is borrowing and redeploying the instantly recognisable symbol of a powerless young girl standing up to a corrupt, patriarchal power. I have very deliberately chosen to include this consideration of where Barker's sequel would fit into my project in the conclusion, rather than revisiting my chapters to include the novel, or omitting it altogether, to illustrate the fact that this corpus of literature is proliferating, and any current research in this field is necessarily unfinished.

Research must continue into this expanding literary phenomenon. For one, more books are being published in this vein, each with the potential to fundamentally alter our understanding of the genre. Susan Stokes-Chapman's recently published novel *Pandora* (2022), retells the Greek myth of Pandora in the form of a crime novel, with elements of romance literature, set in Georgian London. This hybridity of genres and historical fictions suggests that the tropes and traditions of 21<sup>st</sup> century women's revisionist myth writing are already being stretched, modified, or perhaps even rejected. Further inquiry into this subject might include in-depth studies into the recently-published and as-yet-unpublished works within this genre, with particular attention paid to their place within the context of the literary phenomenon of contemporary women's myth writing. In addition, more critical attention must be paid to the publishing aspect of literary production: what are publishers' thoughts, motivations, and incentives regarding women's myth writing? In keeping with my academic background in English and American Literature and Women's Studies, I am particularly interested in the social and activist potential for women reclaiming myth – what is generated, for example, when women in collectives or activist groups turn to myths for figureheads and analogues? – and the genre's place in the context of recent women's writing and current literary trends. Hypothetically, should this trend abate, the field of inquiry would gain more hindsight with which to consider the corpus of literature as a whole, beginning, I would propose, with Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and concluding at some as yet unrealised juncture.

Of course, this raises the question of why continue this research? Why is it important in the contemporary climate? Revisiting, adapting, disrupting, challenging, and (re-)claiming culturally significant stories from the cultural authorities, the oppressive reign of caucasian

heteropatriarchy, is revolutionary. Greco-Roman myth is only one example of what I am considering here as culturally significant stories — such a broad umbrella can include, but is in no way limited to: other myth systems, fairy and folktales, “classic” books, and historical eras. Angela Carter’s works are arguably the cornerstone of revolutionary adaptations of fairytales; novels that adapt exalted works include Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* (2020) and Jeanette Winterson’s *Frankissstein* (2019); fictionalised works that adapt historical figures and events notably count Hillary Mantel’s Booker Prize winning *Wolf Hall* (2009); critical attention is being paid to the renaissance of historical fiction, such as in Ina Bergmann’s monograph *The Nineteenth Century Revis(it)ed* (Routledge, 2020); adaptations of Norse myth, for instance in A.S. Byatt’s *Ragnarok* (2011), and Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (2001) and *Norse Mythology* (2017); adaptations of British and Celtic myths and legends, such as Maria Dahvana Headley’s *The Mere Wife* (2018) and, indeed, her recent feminist *Beowulf* translation (2021), and Amy Jeffs’ *Storyland: A New Mythology of Britain* (2021) – all of these are examples of culturally significant stories being revisited and disrupted. Moreover, to have women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and working class people rewrite these narratives is an act of cultural reclamation, to stake their claims in these stories inasmuch as – and to challenge how – they have been claimed by privileged, white, heterosexual, cisgendered men. In its most positive light, such adaptations, and studies of them, are a celebration of how these preserved stories can metamorphose and grow in their treatment by more diverse minds.

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