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gender construction and female agency in rewritings of classical mythology”

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Abstract

This master's thesis investigates the construction of gender, agency, voice, and power in two contemporary rewritings of Homer's *Odyssey*, namely Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018). Adopting a feminist lens, the close readings in the present paper contextualise and probe the ways in which these two women authors reimagine the stories of Penelope and Circe. Comparing parts of these revisionist retellings with earlier, more traditional renditions, this thesis analyses and discusses the similarities and differences between the versions. In addition, it postulates hypotheses on possible reasons for the increasing popularity of 21st century feminist rewritings as well as the implications thereof. The primary argument of this paper is that *The Penelopiad* and *Circe* subvert and question the classical myths, and particularly the patriarchal values they perpetuate, through effective alterations on the level of form and content, such as a gendered shift in narrative perspective. Atwood's and Miller's works should not be seen as inferior fictionalisations of the Homeric text, but rather as reimaginings of cultural heritage in their own right that allow for critical contemporary readings of Greco-Roman mythology.

183 words.

Abstract [Deutsch]

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Konstruktion von Gender, Handlungsfähigkeit, Voice (= narrative Stimme) und Macht in zwei zeitgenössischen Neufassungen von Homers *Odyssee*, nämlich Margaret Atwoods *The Penelopiad* (2005) und Madeline Millers *Circe* (2018). Mithilfe eines feministischen theoretischen Frameworks wird in der vorliegenden Arbeit die Art und Weise, in der diese beiden Autorinnen die Erzählungen von Penelope und Circe neu denken, kontextualisiert und ergründet. Durch den Vergleich dieser revisionistischen Nacherzählungen mit früheren klassischen Darstellungen werden die Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede zwischen den Versionen analysiert und diskutiert. Darüber hinaus werden Hypothesen über mögliche Gründe und Auswirkungen der zunehmenden Popularität feministischer Neufassungen des 21. Jahrhunderts aufgestellt. Das Hauptargument dieser Arbeit ist, dass *The Penelopiad* und *Circe* die klassischen Mythen und insbesondere die patriarchalen Werte, die diese aufrechterhalten, durch wirksame Veränderungen auf der Ebene der Form und des Inhalts, wie etwa eine Verschiebung der Erzählperspektive, in Frage stellen. Atwoods und Millers Werke sollten nicht als bloße Fiktionalisierungen des homerischen Textes betrachtet werden, sondern vielmehr als eigenständige Neuinterpretationen dieses kulturellen Erbes, die eine kritische zeitgenössische Lektüre der griechisch-römischen Mythologie ermöglichen.

173 Wörter.

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Introduction

Traduttore, traditore: all translators are invariably also traitors. According to the Italian idiom, any act of translation is a betrayal¹ of the source material – it can never convey the exact same meaning, given that it is always ‘tarnished’ by the translator’s influence. Although inevitable, any changes, adaptations, elisions to the original are viewed as undesired, a mark of the apparent ineptitude of the translator – or are they? The beginning of the 21st century is seeing a rapidly growing interest in new translations and rewritings of one of the key texts of Western culture: Greco-Roman mythology. One of the key indicators of this trend is the sheer amount of retellings published in the last two decades: Think, for instance, of Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005), Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Lavinia* (2008), Madeline Miller’s *Galatea* (2013), Hannah M. Lynn’s *Athena’s Child* (2020), Jennifer Saint’s *Ariadne* (2021) and *Elektra* (2022), Claire Heywood’s *Daughters of Sparta* (2021), Claire North’s *Ithaca* (2022), Charlotte Higgin’s *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* (2022), and Natalie Haynes’s *The Children of Jocasta* (2017), *A Thousand Ships* (2019), *Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (2020), and *Stone Blind: Medusa’s Story* (2022), to name but a few. In addition, in 2017, Emily Wilson became the first woman to translate *The Odyssey* into English. This fascination with creative reworkings of the ancient opus is undoubtedly (but not solely) based on the fact that these are novels written by women, about women, for women. And highly educated ones at that.

Similar trends have been observed in the past. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Canadian feminists proposed a theory of translation called ‘réécriture au féminin’, “a form [of] **rewriting in and of the feminine**, which included translation, but expanded its limitations to enable the translator/auther² [sic] to go further, to **expand the boundaries of the linguistic activity of translation, deemed patriarchal, and to allow for creative expansion of the text**” (Gentzler 2019: 279; emphasis added). However, the difference lies in the details: while the Québécoise feminists translated and retold works that were already authored by women, this novel generation of writers uses ancient texts written by men (and for men) as a basis. Their perspective is thus often a male one that legitimises patriarchal power structures. To take but one

¹ For a (fictional) treatise on the idiom and its meaning, see Rebecca F. Kuang’s *Babel* (2022).

² See Lotbinière-Harwood (1991:154–5).

example, Homer and Ovid hailed the ‘great’ Odysseus, famous for his acumen and wit. However, adopting a critical 21st century lens, the picture does not look so great: Odysseus was not only notoriously unfaithful, reckless, and (unnecessarily) brutal, but also made some highly questionable choices, putting both his crewmembers and his family in peril. Yet his reputation remains miraculously untarnished. By contrast, (almost) any female agency that could particularly threaten the superior position of the male hero is punished. American poet and scholar Alicia Ostriker has succinctly summarised the underlying problem:

At first thought, mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer. There we find the conquering gods and heroes, [...] the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the virtuously passive Iphigenia, Alcestis [, and Penelope] [...]. **It is thanks to myth we believe that women must be either ‘angel’ or ‘monster.’** (Ostriker 1986: 316; emphasis added)

The rewritings mentioned above challenge this black-and-white portrayal of women and consequently, depictions of gendered power relations in a more general sense. It is also no coincidence that this new wave of “feminist revisionist mythology” (Tuttle 1986: 184) happens now: In the words of Moira Donegan, “We’re in a moment of antifeminist backlash [...] that [...] seems aimed at silencing women, or punishing the women who won’t shut up. It’s a perilous time for women’s speech – or at least, it’s a perilous time for women who speak out against sexism” (2022: 1). On balance, the last few years have not been great for women’s rights³. In 2022 alone, Roe v. Wade was overturned, numerous Iranians died in the Mahsa Amini protests, the Taliban banned women and girls from education, China’s government views women as ‘wombs’ they can be sterilised or impregnated according to ‘demographic needs’, and Qatar, a country with a deeply anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-feminist government, hosted the FIFA World Cup 2022. This is not only cause for great concern because “women’s rights [act] as a weathervane for democracy” (Tamés 2022: 1), but also because these setbacks seem to be symptoms of a widespread systematic disregard of the needs, wishes, and rights of women. McRobbie calls this phenomenon the so-called postfeminist ideology, which she describes as “feminism [...] taken into account”, meaning that the need for feminism has been obviated seeing that

³ Significantly, Margaret Atwood let historical events shape her narrative universes, particularly that of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), which arguably renders her feminist critique even more pungent. For more information, see the Penguin Editorial feature “[Margaret Atwood on the real-life events that inspired The Handmaid’s Tale and The Testaments](#)” (2019). [Accessed: 26 Dec 2022]

'equality' of the sexes has apparently already been achieved (McRobbie 2004: 255). Despite (or maybe because of) this decidedly postfeminist atmosphere, Professor Mary Beard, a "wickedly subversive" feminist, has become "Britain's best-known classicist" (Laity 2007: 1), that is, a celebrity in her field and beyond. In 2017, her most influential work, *Women & Power: A Manifesto*, was published to critical acclaim. There, Beard argues that many of the cultural practices that perpetuate gendered inequality have their roots in Ancient Greece and Rome, where women were rendered powerless and silent. While Beard did not single-handedly cause this proliferation of feminist rewritings, it is my hypothesis that her considerable popularity and influential work certainly helped to rekindle interest in critical engagement with the portrayals of women in classical narratives.

As an aspiring scholar in Anglophone literatures and cultures with a penchant for the classics, I want to know how these contemporary female authors adapted some of the most prototypically patriarchal narratives imaginable to render them more nuanced or even subversive. Simply put, the question I pose is as follows: What are the underlying 'mechanics' contemporary feminist authors use to transpose Greco-Roman mythology, both with regards to content and form, into subversive rewritings? It is this question that translates into primary research interest which in turn guides my investigation: Informed by feminist theories, I focus on four primary areas, which also serve to provide an underlying structure for the present thesis: gender, agency, voice, and power. My analysis is not based on a singular school of thought but is informed by various works and concepts of contemporary poststructuralist and (second and third wave) feminist theoreticians such as, *inter alia*, Roland Barthes (specifically his notion of the myth), R.W. Connell (hegemonic masculinities), Judith Butler (challenging gender binarism), Michel de Certeau (strategies and tactics), and Simone de Beauvoir (on the absence of female myths). Seeing that I wanted to avoid a disconnection between theory, analysis, and interpretation, there is no separate chapter to outline the theoretical basis beforehand. Rather, the relevant theoretical information is directly juxtaposed and interwoven with the two primary objects of analysis: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018). There are, of course, clear and concrete limitations to only studying two texts: first and foremost, it would hardly be viable (and scholarly sound) to infer general characteristics applicable to all

feminist rewritings from such a small 'sample size'. This is in part due to the very nature, length, scope, and purpose of the text at hand: While a Master's thesis might explore and open up new fields of scholarly inquiry, it hardly allows for an investigation that would allow for generalised statements that hold true for all examples of the genre at hand. Consequently, the insights generated are only pertinent and valid in the present context. Nevertheless, the objects of analysis chosen are, in my view, prime examples of their genre: On the one hand, they continue to be immensely popular and, at the moment of their publication, received critical acclaim as well as overwhelmingly positive reviews describing them as 'subversive' and 'feminist'. On the other, both works manage to fundamentally change the point of view and narrative structure while still mostly staying true to the original story.

The Penelopiad is based on the *Odyssey*, but it completely shifts the perspective. Instead of following the 'adventures' of Odysseus, the audience is offered unique insights into the life of the eponymous heroine. In previous adaptations authored by men, Penelope has traditionally been portrayed as the incarnation of the faithful, perfect, and above all patient housewife who waits for her hero husband. Atwood, however, gifts Penelope with acumen and wit so that her (often satirical) comments from the afterlife serve to shed a completely different light on Odysseus and her relationship with him. Instead of praising him to the skies, she portrays him as a violent, power-obsessed, and reckless patriarch whose conquests are based on the exploitation of others. Thereby, Atwood radically questions the extent of truth in Odysseus's (and, consequently, Homer's and Ovid's) tales as well as the one-dimensional way in which women are portrayed (either as 'monsters' or 'angels'). Seeing that neither Penelope's nor Odysseus's (or the twelve maid's) versions of events do not coincide, it is clear that there must be at least one unreliable narrator⁴. Readers thus have to decide for themselves whom – if anybody – within the story they choose to believe. Rendering the female experience visible, Atwood transforms Penelope from an objectified stereotype into an empowered (if admittedly bitter) subject.

⁴ For an in-depth discussion on unreliable narrators and truthfulness in *The Penelopiad*, see chapter 2.1.3 of the present thesis.

Similarly, Miller's *Circe* (2018) tells the story of the eponymous heroine, the daughter of Helios, who is rejected from the moment she is born because of her failure to meet the (beauty) standards of Titan society. While Circe is initially allowed to exist in her father's shadow, this changes when the man she loves, Glaucos, chooses the her cousin, the nymph Scylla, over her. Out of jealousy, Circe uses 'pharmaka' (potent, plant derived poison or drugs) to turn her into a monster – and takes credit for it. Pressured by Zeus, Helios then banishes Circe to the island of Aiaia not for transforming Scylla, but for clarifying that she has the power to tap into her (supernatural) abilities. Her independence as a solitary woman who wants to determine her own destiny and changes the world accordingly is perceived as a threat by gods and mortals alike. The character of Circe does not only highlight how female autarky and her refusal to submit are perceived as a danger to the patriarchal order, but also how women with agency are framed as 'witches' or 'madwomen'. In Miller's rewriting, Circe ultimately completely severs the connections to her family, freeing herself from the systemic sexism she has endured since birth. In other words, this novel seems highly suitable for a feminist analysis that focuses on the projection of patriarchal angst onto strong, independent female characters, the attempts to keep them in check and possible ways in which the patriarchy can be challenged.

The structure of the present thesis is as follows: In the introduction, I will subsequently elaborate on what sparked my interest in the topic in the first place: the connection between society and literary production as well as between mythology and Barthesian myth. Chapter one will provide a brief overview of the history of translations and retellings of classical texts in the Anglophone world as well as the cultural and literary repercussions thereof. The second chapter, which will make up the lion's share of this thesis's main body, contains the readings (i.e., analysis and interpretation) of *The Penelopiad* (chapter 2.1 and subsections) and *Circe* (chapter 2.2 and subsections). The subchapters are organised around the elements that I focus on in my readings: gender, agency, voice, and power. While these are naturally interconnected, this thesis demonstrates how each of these aspects is crucial for the successful subversive fictionalisation of classical texts. The primary focus lies, of course, on contemporary rewritings. However, some passages of earlier translations of Homer's *Odyssey* will also be examined, analysed, and compared. Thus, there is naturally an anachronistic element to my investigation: I am well aware that the

theories and concepts used are much younger than (some of) the source material. Consequently, I want to express that in my readings, I do not aim to 'correct' classical literature. Rather, I use a contemporary feminist theoretical framework to show how the chosen postmodern retellings of ancient myths subvert and redefine the – from a 21st century point of view – essentialist and sexist portrayals of women in mythology. The conclusion will then briefly summarise the key findings, highlighting similarities and differences between the two objects of analysis.

Where does the sudden interest in Greco-Roman mythology come from? While there is no definitive answer for this, it is certainly true that these myths have played a huge part in the development of Western culture. It is often viewed as the beginning of European literary history and continues to serve as the basis of contemporary literary production in the Anglophone world. For millennia, but especially since the Renaissance, classical myths have been synonymous with literary perfection, the ideal that each author, artist, and musician should aspire to. Even if active knowledge about classical mythology is declining, mythological tropes and allusions are omnipresent in contemporary literature and culture. Yet, myths are by no means unproblematic. According to William Doty, they are not only highly significant core narratives, but they “provide symbolic representations of cultural priorities, beliefs, and prejudices” (2004: 18). In other words, they create and reflect certain societal values as well as power relations between genders which, from a contemporary point of view, are often questionable. Consequently, classical mythology can hardly be considered (proto) feminist. In the majority of cases, the female characters in these foundational texts are but the fantasies, desires, and dreams of men: they are objectified, severely punished for any disobedience, and portrayed as inherently lacking agency and wit.

What about 'strong' goddesses such as Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite? Even they are all at the mercy of their even stronger male counterparts: Hera, Queen of Olympus and goddess of marriage was, ironically, raped by and shamed into marrying Zeus, arguably the most unfaithful and adulterous of gods. Unfortunately, Hera's lot was not at all unusual: The goddess of love and passion, Aphrodite, too, was in an unwanted marriage: Zeus essentially sold her to Hephaistos to free Hera, regardless of Aphrodite's explicit wish to be with Ares. In both cases, agency is actively taken away

from female gods. But what about Athena, best known for her power and wisdom? She possessed greater independence and autonomy than the other goddesses, yet ultimately, she was still subject to her progenitor Zeus, who even tried to kill her before she was born. Although over time she came to be considered her father's favourite, she still had to abide by his rules so as not to threaten his manly authority. Consequently, she was but another pawn in the patriarchal power play. These three stories are but examples of a sheer endless list of violence against women featured in these ancient tales. Greek mythology is literally imbued with accounts of gendered oppression experienced by female characters, both mortal and immortal. Think, for instance, of the fates of Penelope, Persephone, Hestia, Helen, Briseis, Galatea, and Medusa: all of them suffered tremendously at the hands of men.

From a contemporary feminist perspective, these narratives – exclusively written by men – are problematic on numerous levels, given that they frequently feature, *inter alia*, victim-blaming, the downplaying of male violence, and sexual harassment. However, they are also thousands of years old and could thus simply be marked down as 'outdated'. This arguably begs the question why a feminist scholar would choose to write a master's thesis revolving around classical mythology and, more precisely, contemporary Anglophone rewritings thereof in the first place. In essence, there are two primary reasons for my decision: First, as will be elaborated subsequently, the classical tradition is inextricably intertwined with (European) contemporary literary production. Secondly, the influence Greek mythology continues to exert on the cultural sector is by no means limited to the world of fiction, but arguably perpetuates patriarchal narratives. In other words, I believe it is crucial to investigate, evaluate, and interpret how present-day writers engage with what is often considered Europe's greatest (or at least most influential) cultural heritage. Despite (or rather, because of) their age, these myths play a fundamental role in what can be considered the Western literary genealogy and consequently, aspects such as the highly questionable depictions of women are passed on as well. After all, literary production is, contrary to what the Romanticists believed, not the result of some external, ephemeral and anachronic genius that has no connection to society. Rather, it happens within a societal and historic framework shaped by tradition. In the words of Geoffrey Miles,

[A] **continuous line of inheritance and influence** connects **ancient Greece and Rome with the modern ‘western’ world**, shaping our arts, our institutions, our values and philosophies. One small aspect of that tradition has been the **use of classical mythology in English literature**. (1999: 3; emphasis added)

Put differently, from the Middle Ages to postmodernity, Anglophone authors have returned, time and again, to these ancient tales. Consequently, (almost) regardless of whether they lived in the 14th, 18th or 21st century, educated readers⁵ would understand what it means to be Argus-eyed, to have a Damocles sword hanging over one’s head, to cut the Gordian knot, to have an Achilles heel, to open Pandora’s box, and to follow Ariadne’s thread. According to George Steiner, much of Anglophone literature (and, arguably, culture in a broader sense) relies on “a code of instantaneous recognition” (cit. in. Radice 1973: 13), that is, a shared knowledge-base with which to decipher intertextual references. This code of recognition taps into dominant and canonical narratives, of which the Greco-Roman myths are a prime example. A glance at popular artistic products in the last few centuries (especially during the Renaissance) reveals that Greco-Roman history and myth was a ‘continuous burner’ with the rich and powerful: it appeared in royal concert halls, courtly theatres, aristocratic libraries, bourgeoisie studies, and was even reflected in architectural styles. Several generations of artists were encouraged to stand on the shoulders of Greco-Roman giants. Think, for instance, of Sandro Boticelli’s *Nascita di Venere* (c. 1484-1486), Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s *Medusa* (1597), Claudio Monteverdi’s *l’Orfeo* (1607) to Georg Friedrich Handel’s *Acis and Galatea* (1718) and Luigi Cherubini’s *Médée* (1797). Pictural works associated with Greek mythology such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Proserpine* (1874) continue to be immensely popular, especially in educational contexts.

In brief, classical myths occupy a unique position within society, which in turn is reflected in the Western literary canon: Many, if not the majority of works that constitute it reference them, either directly or indirectly. It is no coincidence that Shakespeare’s oeuvre, including both his plays and his poetry, is filled to the brim with allusions to famous mythological characters such as Achilles (*Henry VI* part II, 5.1.106), Dido (*The Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.14), Ulysses (*Henry VI* part III, 3.2.193),

⁵ For centuries, being well-educated in a European context was near-synonymous with being knowing Latin (and possibly Ancient Greek) Literature. However, while the Classics have lost this dominant position in education in the last few decades, they have gained popularity in the literary world.

Hector (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.556), and Medea (*The Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.18), to name but a few. The usage of the 'myth code' is, of course, by no means restricted to Shakespeare or the Early Modern Period: countless poets and authors, including, for instance, William Wordsworth ("The World Is Too Much With Us" 1802-1807) and Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* 1818), frequently referenced Greek mythology. In the case of James Joyce, his early 20th century retelling of the *Odyssey*, *Ulysses* (1922) is not only considered his best work, but also one of the most important – if not foundational – texts of modernist literature. As mentioned earlier, the beginning of the 21st century is characterised by a surge of feminist retellings of Greco-Roman mythology. This new generation of feminist rewritings provides the two primary objects of analysis of the present thesis: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018). My choice fell on these two texts because they are, as will be analysed and explained in greater depth later in this paper, particularly suited to amplify women's voices and showcase their experiences. Both texts feature autodiegetic first person narrators, meaning that the women, namely Penelope and Circe, finally get to tell their own story. Essentially, Atwood's and Miller's works combine two cultural currents which, at first, seem an unlikely pair: the classical tradition, arguably strongly tainted by patriarchal structures, and feminism, the very thing that opposes the patriarchy. In 1987, Julia Kristeva argued that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1987: 37). These women writers are absorbing and transforming highly prestigious canonical works, adding female voices, and making them accessible to a new readership.

Many texts do not age well. This has arguably less to do with their artistic quality than with the fact that societal values and norms change, and so does what readers deem acceptable and what not. Think, for instance, of classics such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). From a contemporary perspective, this novel is highly problematic, given that it is littered with racist portrayals and racial slurs. To name another example, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912) has become a literary time capsule, justifying relentless British imperialism, colonialism, and the dehumanisation of ethnic minorities. George Orwell's *1984* (1949) portrays Julia⁶, the protagonist Winston Smith's love interest, in a stereotypical, flat, objectifying and clearly misogynous manner, and Bridget Jones, the eponymous heroine of Helen

⁶ American author Sandra Newman is retelling Orwell's *1984* from Julia's perspective in a forthcoming book with the eponymous title *Julia* (2023).

Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996; film adaptation 2001) appears to live in a postfeminist, sexist dystopia. Feminist scholars will make similar observations when critically engaging with popular children's stories and fairy tales. The list of problematic tropes and aspects, both in Grimm's and Disney's versions, is long: from the demonisation of the 'evil stepmother', the romanticising of rape and sexual violence, to the damsel in distress who feels entirely powerless without her shining knight in armour. To draw attention to the obvious misogyny in these classics, Italian authors and feminists Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo inverted the gender roles of well-known fairy tales and myths. In 2017, they published a short video called *If Cinderella were a guy* on YouTube, which tells the story of 'Cinderfella'. As the fairy tale unfolds, it becomes more and more ridiculous, even though Favilli and Cavallo changed nothing but the gender of the protagonist. The question at the end of the video hits the bullseye of the underlying problem: "We wouldn't read this to our sons. Why read it to our daughters?" (Favilli & Cavallo 1:24-1:29). This is a primary example for the way in which literary works, especially famous and popular ones, do not only reflect patriarchal values, but actively perpetuate them.

Greco-Roman mythology is not exempt from ageing 'badly': From a contemporary viewpoint, it is, in many instances, just as misogynous and brutal as fairy tales and other, more modern pieces of writing. The difference between the works mentioned above and the myths, however, lies not only in age, but arguably also in continued cultural status. For instance, *Bridget Jones* has been a household name for around 20 years now, and *Snow White* became widely known across the (Western) world in the 19th century. These myths, however, play in a completely different league when it comes to age: they have literally been read, told, and retold for millennia. To put things into perspective: classical mythology is several hundred years older than the Bible, and through the ages was read by a myriad of scholars, artists, nobility, teachers, and clergymen alike. Thus, it developed into the cultural code mentioned above and could be considered a unique and almost universal hypotext, providing a foundation for generations of readers and writers. In other words, classical mythology acts like the backbone of Western literary tradition; a backbone with a distinctly sexist, patriarchal tinge that is often not acknowledged. For instance, Miles argues that, "[t]he **language or code of mythology** [...] is **not a fixed one**. The mythic images may remain stable and simple, but the **interpretation of the story shifts**

from period to period and from writer to writer" (1999: 4; emphasis added). His claim rings true, at least to a certain degree. However, as will be illustrated in greater detail later in the present thesis, Miles fails to take into account that no matter how much room there is for interpretation, the original plot is still highly questionable and littered with violence and sexism. Due to its cultural status, classical mythology spread largely unchecked – approved by academic, societal, and cultural authorities – through and beyond the (former) Roman empire, creating a tremendous impact on all literary production that came after.

The influence of Greco-Roman mythology was, however, not limited to literature. It fulfilled a myriad of different purposes, all of which were crucial to either society, the arts, or scholarly interest. Essentially, these myths were not considered mere stories, but were of etiological character, explaining the natural world as well as societal order. In the words of the Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Madeleine Glennon, "[w]hile these stories sound fantastical today, **to the ancient Greeks they were quasi-historical**" (Glennon 2017: 4). Thus, they were elevated above the level of regular fiction, creating a mythical origin story for Greece and, in further consequence, Europe. As etiological tales, they arguably almost function like a Barthesian myth: justifying and legitimising the status quo in which women, both mortal and immortal, are invariably portrayed as inferior beings in dire need of male dominance: Some are objectified as beautiful but stupid and vain, others are seen as unworthy and lacking. And then there are some women-monsters who are stylised as the ultimate evil: terrible, manipulative, deceitful, ugly man-eaters who need to be subjugated, or even killed. In some cases, female characters are said to represent all of these traits above, sometimes even simultaneously. The legacies of these distorted, misogynous portrayals are alive and kicking, which makes feminist rewritings of these women's stories all the more important.

Although it reduces them to one-dimensional stereotypes, the demonisation of (unruly) female characters in myth has rendered them famous. Take, for instance, the original *femme fatale*: the Gorgon Medusa: She is arguably even more notorious than the ultimate patriarch, Zeus. Her name unfailingly conjures up a woman's face, either terribly beautiful or beautifully terrible, hemmed by live snakes that grow out of her skull in lieu of hair. She is, in the literal sense of the word, petrifying, turning anyone

who looks into her eyes to stone. In their book, *Female Rage: Unlocking Its Secrets, Claiming Its Power* (1994), Mary Valentis and Anne Devane recount that “[w]hen we asked women **what female rage looks like** to them, it was Medusa [...] [W]e were told that **Medusa is 'the most horrific woman in the world'** [...] [but] **none of the women** [...] could **remember the details of the myth**” (Valentis & Devane 1994, cit. in Wilk 2000: 217f.; emphasis added). While no ancient sources state that Gorgons rip men to shreds, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 19th century retellings do: “Their **brazen claws, horrible to look at**, were thrust out, and [...] the sleeping Gorgons dreamed of **tearing some poor mortal all to pieces**” (cit. in Higgins 2019: 5; emphasis added). To see why Hawthorne demonised and dehumanised Medusa even more, it is necessary to dip into her origin story. In Ovid’s version, Medusa once was a charming, lovely, and desirable maiden and a priestess to Athena (cit. in Higgins 2019: 3). She caught Poseidon’s eye, but when he approached her, she rejected him. Consequently, he raped the priestess violently in Athena’s temple, who turned her into a walking nightmare. She would later be slain by Perseus. In the Western collective memory, Medusa is a violent, bloodthirsty madwoman and Perseus the hero who obliterated her⁷. That Zeus and Danaë’s son killed a traumatised, ostracised, and exiled rape victim is safely hidden behind his glamorous reputation created by male authors (such as Hawthorne). Medusa’s tale is a primary example as to why feminist rewritings, the very *raison d’être* of the present thesis, are crucial to loosen the iron grip the male perspective holds on Western literary tradition.

Many sacred and etiological texts, including the Bible and the Quran, rationalise misogyny, nipping any possible criticism in the bud by referring to naturalised rules created by a glaringly sexist deity. Greco-Roman mythology is no exception, although it works slightly differently: Instead of directly stating that women are worthless and only defined in relation to a male relative (i.e., father, brother, husband, uncle), these narratives ‘perform patriarchy’. Put differently, they do not tell, but show why women are supposedly wretched creatures in need of male domination – especially the ones who refuse to subjugate themselves to men, such as Medusa, Scylla, and Circe. It is thus hardly surprising that many monsters in Greco-Roman lore are coded female. Classicist Debbie Felton wrote in 2012 that these villainesses “all spoke to **men’s fear of women’s destructive potential**. The myths then, to a certain extent, **fulfil a**

⁷ Think of Benvenuto Cellini’s famous statue, *Perseo con la testa di Medusa* (c. 1545-1554), which is located in the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence.

male fantasy of conquering and controlling the female” (Felton 2012: 27; emphasis added). In other words, women monsters exemplify the ‘terrible consequences’ of female independence and liberation, thereby justifying male control. Critic Jess Zimmerman puts this phenomenon in a nutshell when she argues that tales like that of Medusa are, in reality, “the **bedtime stories patriarchy tells itself**” (Zimmerman 2021: 13; emphasis added). The perspective in these narratives is decidedly male: instead of exploring the women’s motives, fear, and desires, they are sentenced without mercy (e.g., punished after having been raped), objectified, othered, and reduced to their rage. And ultimately, they are exiled and/or killed by the male authorities, who appear to be the knight in shining armour.

The myths including female monsters are, in reality, cautionary tales: They state societal taboos and frame the ‘villainesses’ as infringers of the morals and values of the patriarchy in order to justify their extremely harsh punishments. These stories arguably provide a narrative for accepted codes of conduct, where male rage and fury are not only tolerated, but encouraged. Women, however, are converted into scapegoats, often taking a double blow seeing that they suffer at the hand of men and are then framed for the very same action that hurt them (e.g., rape) in the first place. Tragically mirroring the story of Cassandra, they are robbed of their own voices because nobody – not even other women – will listen. Citing the example of Medusa, Cambridge classicist Mary Beard argues that “the beginnings of Western history [show] **a radical separation** – real, cultural, and imaginary – **between women and power**” (Beard 2017: 18; emphasis added). This linguistically explicit and performative separation in texts of immense societal significance has potentially inscribed misogyny in the very foundation of European culture, literary history, and, consequently, textual production.

Written by women, these new female rewritings of Greek mythology finally produce what has been missing for millennia: female voices and perspectives. In the following chapter, I will subsequently provide a brief outline of Anglophone retellings of classical myths, how they portrayed female characters, and the societal and cultural consequences thereof. In chapter two, I will examine how two select feminist retellings – namely Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Madeline Miller’s *Circe* (2018) – construct gender, agency, voice, and power both on the level of

content and style. Thereby, I seek to highlight how they differ both from other rewritings as well as from the classical versions and explore the implications of said alterations. One of the primary criteria for choosing these two works was that they both pertain to the epic cycle of the *Odyssey*, which facilitates comparisons between them. However, there are various other reasons why these writings lend themselves to be studied in this particular context: Firstly, they have a similar target audience. Secondly, they directly address the gender imbalance outlined above and offer alternative readings and interpretations of the famous classics. And finally, all three novels share, namely that they challenge the ancient masters' authority and grant classical female characters agency and voice.

1. Mythology and misogyny in Anglophone literatures

The story of classical mythology could have ended in the year 476 AD, when Romulus Augustus, the last Roman emperor, was deposed by Gothic chieftain Odoacer. It was the culmination of a lengthy process of continuous deterioration and decline of Rome's political power. But the decline of political power does not automatically entail a loss of linguistic and cultural influence – classical mythology is clearly proof of that. In the present thesis, gender construction, agency, voice, and power in classical narratives (as well as rewritings) serve as underlying structural elements to organise content, seeing that the cultural heritage from Antiquity continues to affect these aspects in particular. To borrow the words of Jess Zimmerman, “[t]he **legacy we’ve inherited from the classical era**, which underpins so much of **what Westerners see as ‘culture and civilisation’** [is] **a suspicion of women in general**” (2021: 3; emphasis added). From a contemporary perspective, misogynous and often contradictory beliefs are deeply rooted in Western cultural memory: Women are emotional and hysterical, yet somehow still desirable. Similarly, Medusa is an irrational monster, Hera is blinded by jealousy, and Helen is an unscrupulous seductress who is responsible for the destruction of Troy. Written by men, most female characters of Greco-Roman mythology lack voice and agency, and if they possess them, they are pigeonholed as power-hungry beasts. Put differently, these fictional women are incarnations of the misogynous narratives and tropes that feature in classical myths. Despite their age, classical sexist motifs and stereotypes can be found in children's books, courtrooms, documentaries, tweets, on TikTok, and

in Men's Rights threads on Reddit. In short, Greco-Roman mythology has arguably set a template that had a tremendous influence on Western literary and cultural tradition and, consequently, on society as a whole.

But if the Roman empire fell, how did the mythology survive? Greco-Roman culture and literature were maintained by an unlikely 'helper': The Christian Church. At first glance it might seem counterintuitive that Christians would keep pagan stories alive, but, in the words of Miles, "[t]o **preserve Latin literature** inevitably meant preserving **classical mythology**" (1999: 10; emphasis added). Put differently, given that the Church relied on the Latin language, it saved literary works written in Latin primarily for linguistic and historical reasons, thereby protecting Greco-Roman mythology from oblivion. The same cannot be said about the Ancient Greek language, which, at least during the so-called 'Dark Ages' (5th to 10th century AD)⁸ hardly anybody knew (Miles 1999: 10), and which was thus almost entirely lost. Consequently, one of the principal reasons why Greek mythology survived in the first place is because it was enormously popular and influential in Rome: Boys from patrician families read, thoroughly analysed and discussed it in secondary schools with a *grammaticus*, who would use Greek literature as an example for style and grammar. Seeing that being familiar with these myths in the Greek original was a symbol of status, many Roman poets, orators, and writers possessed extensive private collections and libraries featuring Greek works (Arkins 1994: 18). These would then be rewritten, retold, and referred to in Latin literature, particularly in the oeuvre of two of the most famous and admired writers of antiquity: Virgil and Ovid. Their work is filled to the brim with references to Ancient Greek myths, which, given their popularity in Antiquity and beyond, greatly contributed to the preservation of the classical mythology we know today.

To justify the protection of Greco-Roman myths, interpreters of the Church would ascribe allegorical meanings to the stories, thereby giving them a "Christian meaning" (Miles 1999: 10): While the *Odyssey* would be viewed as a metaphor for the journey through life, Cronos devouring his offspring would be likened to the cruel passage of time (*tempus fugit velut umbra*). From the 11th to the 15th century, English literature

⁸ The term 'Dark Ages', coined by Petrarch, has mostly been replaced with the more neutral 'Early Middle Ages', seeing that the adjective 'dark' suggest a period of intellectual obscurity, which, according to the New Cambridge Medieval history, is highly misleading (Halsall 2005: 90).

entered the so-called 'Ovidian Age', and with it began the revival of Greco-Roman mythology in Middle English. Written in rime royale sometime in the 1380s, Chaucer's long poem "Troilus and Criseide", considered by many scholars to be of even better quality than the famous *Canterbury Tales*, owes considerable debt to Ovid's *Heroides* (Fumo 2003: 278). With the dawn of the Renaissance, famous for its rediscovery of antiquity, classical mythology took Western literature and culture by storm. While there were arguably some continuities with the Middle Ages, political, scientific and sociological changes paved the way for an increased interest in the 'cradle' of European culture. Early modern Humanists then started looking for long-forgotten manuscripts in Latin, and after the fall of Constantinople to the Turkish empire in 1453, they were aided by Greek scholars who promoted the rediscovery of Ancient Greek sources. In the words of Miles, "[t]here was a new kind of respect for classical literature as a model for imitation: writers now strove, not only to grasp the wisdom of the ancient texts, but also to **imitate their generic forms, their style and their conventions**" (1999: 11; emphasis added). The influence of Greco-Roman mythology is practically omnipresent in Early Modern English literature, most commonly in the form of allusions. A primary example of this is Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (ca. 1590), where the gender construction of Venus and Diana reduces them to mere metaphors for sexuality and chastity, thereby limiting their agency and power. This revival and reverence of antiquity, however, did not only affect art, but Early Modern British society more generally. An example of this phenomenon was the 'new' secular (but still all-male) 'grammar school', the curricula of which focused primarily on Latin and Greek. This led to both the institutionalisation and the gatekeeping of classical languages and literature, converting them into the exclusive *lingua franca* of rich, powerful men. These would, in turn, provide the dominant translations and interpretations of Greco-Roman mythology. To demonstrate the significance of grammar schools, it suffices to say they educated three of the greatest Early Modern playwrights, all of whom were men: Ben Jonson attended Westminster School (London), Christopher Marlowe spent his youth at King's School (Canterbury), and William Shakespeare went to the King's New School (Stratford-upon-Avon).

These educational institutions played a great part in the propagation of 'classical culture', including its beliefs on the female. Mirroring the *grammaticus*, they instructed

their students in the so-called trivium, consisting of logic, grammar, and rhetoric (Christiansen 1997: 298). In these schools, the following skills would be practised intensively: memory (*memoria*), delivery (*pronuntiatio*), voice, mimic, gesture, “character” (also called *prosopopoeia*), as part of the *progymnasmata*, a typical exercise, which in turn proved very useful for theatrical performances (Christiansen 1997: 326; Astington 2010: 38-43). However, the curricula itself were not the only things grammar schools inherited from their classical predecessors: like in Ancient Rome, girls and women were excluded from academic life, including schools and universities. According to Beard, “[f]rom philosophy and politics to literature and art, the Western world has **inherited much from Ancient Greece** [...] [O]ne **disturbing cultural legacy** is the enduring **view of women as lesser beings** who should shut up and **stay out of the public intellectual sphere**” (2019: 2; emphasis added). In other words, Beard argues that the idealisation of antiquity nipped any discussion about changing women’s position and possibly even granting them more rights in the bud. In essence, Renaissance society forcefully stopped the female population from living up to their potential, thereby stripping away their agency⁹. The reason for this is that Greco-Roman mythology and Latin literature, which served as ideological guidelines, stylised women as inherently inferior, sometimes dangerous, and always in need of patriarchal guidance¹⁰. This narrative made it fairly easy for the Renaissance elite to legitimise misogynous practices through a strikingly effective logical fallacy, namely a so-called appeal to tradition (*argumentum ad antiquitatem*). Simply put, the principal point was that if women were (mostly) excluded from the public and academic sphere in Ancient Rome, then it must be the right thing to do. Ultimately, this line of argumentation was a protective mechanism to ensure the perpetuation of the patriarchy as portrayed in Greco-Roman mythology.

As the Renaissance came to an end during the 17th century, nascent scientific rationalism began to question the value of classical myths as a moral and philosophical model. Slowly, their status changed, at least in some areas of society, from ideological paradigms to primitive, if not barbaric, etiological tales used to explain natural phenomena. This dramatic change in attitude towards classical mythology – which, as will be illustrated shortly, is inextricably intertwined with the

⁹ For a discussion on removing women’s agency through gatekeeping, see Thiellement’s statement in chapter 2.2.1. of the present thesis.

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of how the patriarchy depends on ‘guiding’ women (i.e., forcing them to do the patriarch’s bidding), see chapter 2.2.4 of the present thesis.

construction of a gendered binarism between reason and myth – was discussed publicly in newspapers as early as 1712, as is exemplified by this opinion piece written by Joseph Addison:

When we are at school it is necessary for us to be acquainted with **the system of pagan theology**, and may be **allowed to enliven a theme or a point in an epigram with a heathen god**; but when we would write a **manly panegyric that should carry it in all the colours of truth**, **nothing can be more ridiculous** than to have recourse to our Jupiters and Junos [...] for a **Christian author to write in the pagan creed** [...] would be downright **puerility and unpardonable** in a poet that is past sixteen. (*The Spectator* 30th Oct 1717; cit. in Miles 1999: 13; emphasis added).

Addison's statement is a prime example for a change in attitude where Greco-Roman mythology is suddenly not revered anymore and seen as the ultimate truth. Rather, it is portrayed as an outdated if influential bed-time story that any real, rational man had grown out of. The reference to classical mythology has suddenly become an issue of gender: there is a clear interconnection between the concept of masculinity and rationality ("a manly panegyric"), which implies that the myths are irrational and thus inherently 'feminine', which is why a boy, who has not reached full 'manhood' yet, might be associated with them, but certainly no adult man. The gendering of these ancient tales as 'feminine' and the novel fascination with 'masculine' reason inherently contains a value judgement and reflects the belief of male superiority and female inferiority. While mythology was no longer seen as the vehicle for wisdom, its patriarchal values were thus still recognised as valid and desirable. Some philosophers, like John Locke, challenged the status quo: He argued that the notion of inequality between the sexes was not natural but created by men and should thus be revised (Cattunar 2014: 1). In addition, women authors and proto-feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges, and Catherine Macaulay fiercely advocated women's rights. Yet, despite the Enlightenment's promotion of ideas of tolerance, progress, and freedom, gender equality was slow to advance, and misogyny had a tight grip on society.

The discrepancy between the fascination with reason, which was very much in vogue in the 18th century, and an (inherited) devotion to Latin literature created a somewhat chaotic and contradictory situation: although Greco-Roman mythology was generally

depreciated, it continued to be of central importance in the arts. The period from 1660 to the 1880s is known as the golden age of English classicism, and the 18th century is often even referred to as 'Augustan', and with good reason: although allusions to mythology were at an all-time low in terms of frequency, the Augustan works that *did* follow in the ancient tradition arguably displayed an unprecedented mastery of the neoclassical imitation principles. It was these very principles that required the use of mythological language, yet allusions to classical sources were, as aforementioned, frowned upon or even openly ridiculed at the time. As a consequence, there was an influx of works pertaining to arguably more trivial genres, such as satires and travesties. In addition, there were some sound translations (Pope's Homer and Dryden's Virgil and Ovid), but hardly any serious treatment (in the sense of analysis and interpretation) of the matter (Miles 1999: 13). In other words, while rationalist movements labelled Greco-Roman mythology irrelevant and childish, it was still deeply entrenched in the cultural world. Not only did fossilised references to mythological themes, tropes, and general allusions pervade Enlightenment literature (as well as its music and painting), but so did many plot devices, structural elements, and literary idiosyncrasies. Knowledge of ancient languages and classical myths thus continued to be an indispensable cultural currency, particularly in the higher strata of society.

Paradoxically, Greco-Roman mythology reclaimed its undisputed centre stage position in the literary world via the very thing which had threatened it: scientific and scholarly inquiry. In the second half of the 18th and early 19th century, it came to be viewed neither solely as a source of ancient knowledge nor of dangerous effeminate pagan tradition, but simply as a tremendously important piece of literature in Western culture. Important figures such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley all received a thorough education in Latin and Greek and were outstanding classicists. Oxford librarian Stephen Hebron notes that in comparison to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, Romantic authors, artists, philosophers, and scholars were increasingly interested in Hellenism, that is, Ancient Greek culture and literature (Hebron 2014: 2). This newly found fascination spanned many areas of society: museums displayed Greek art, and books revolving around it, such as Joachim Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755; translated into English by Henri Fuseli in 1765), became tremendously

popular (Wiencke 2022: 2). In addition, scholarly works such as John Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1792), John Bell's *New Pantheon* (1790) and William Godwin's¹¹ *Pantheon* (1806) paved the way for a novel approach to the study of ancient, primarily Greek, literature: Instead of turning the myths into mediaeval or Christian allegories, Lemprière, Bell, and Godwin aimed to translate and recount these stories as closely to the original ones as possible (Miles 1999: 14). In a way, the Romanticists continued in the path of the Renaissance scholars: they rediscovered, revered, and revived parts of their literary history, thereby re-establishing as well as reinforcing a line of alleged cultural continuity.

Rebelling against the yoke of the Industrial Revolution and rapid technological, economical, and social change, the writers of the Romantic movement turned their backs on the glorification of reason and instead worshipped nature, romance, and fantasy – all the things deemed too 'feminine' a century earlier. In addition, the Romantic period is characterised by an obsession with mythical origins, which could be found not only in Greco-Roman mythology, but also in Welsh mythology and English folklore. Striving to return to a misconstrued and heavily sentimentalised history, they initiated a battle between "an epistemology that envisaged **an ordered, holistic universe** [...] and the opposing one that envisaged a **varied universe that needed space-time-specific (scientific) explanations**" (Bezrucka 2017: 1; emphasis added). Simply put, this period was characterised by a battle between innatism and empiricism, between nature and nurture, between past and present. However, the importance of amalgamating notions of power with masculinity was evident even in this period: Legitimising essentialist (and, as will be illustrated below, inherently sexist) lines of reasoning, Romanticists postulated theories centred around the concept of a transcendent 'genius', "which **sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind**" (Coleridge 1983: 11; emphasis added). Put differently, creative capacities were portrayed as being channelled by a natural 'spirit' force that was somehow connected to something great, powerful, and unfathomable (i.e., God) – and, consequently, virtually untouchable.

¹¹ William Godwin (1756-1836) was incidentally the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father of Mary Shelley, who made several references to Greco-Roman mythology in *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

The very term 'genius' is gendered: According to the Oxford English dictionary, it derives from Latin, meaning the “**male spirit of a family**, existing in the **head of the family** and subsequently in **the divine or spiritual part of each individual [...]** (in literature) **talent, inspiration**, person with talent” (cit. in Goh 2018: 5). The central concept of Romanticism thus literally promotes the idea that creativity, power, and capability are inherently male. As a result, a woman could never be (or be possessed / inspired by) a genius, regardless of the quality and popularity of her oeuvre. In the words of Marlon B. Ross, “[f]or even though the female is herself a writer, she is [...] creative in a [...] way that can be felt as **less threatening to the male poet. Because her gender ‘naturally’ places her in a different arena**, he can deemphasise any competitive urge between them” (Ross 1989: 30; emphasis added). I explore this idea of gendered abilities further in both my analyses of *The Penelopiad* (2005; chapter 2.1.2) and *Circe* (2018; chapter 2.2.1), seeing that it is intrinsically connected to agency and power. This concept of the (male) genius was, of course, an enormous backlash against the notion of empiricism and deductive reasoning of Enlightenment intelligentsia, notably Hume, Bacon, and Locke. Justifying the status quo using an invisible yet irrefutable 'genius' did not only contradict Enlightenment values, but arguably also nipped nascent proto-feminism in the bud.

With the end of the Romantic period, Greco-Roman mythology seems to – once again – temporarily lose all of its poetic allure for the majority of writers and their audiences, both of which were predominantly male and white. In the course of the 19th century, the world becomes increasingly capitalist and industrialised and is irrevocably and decisively changed by political reform, colonialism, and scientific progress. As a consequence, fantastical, ancient tales seem passé: for all intents and purposes, they are remote and irrelevant to a rapidly changing society. In “The Dead Pan”, Elizabeth Barrett Browning succinctly summarises this development (1844):

Earth outgrows the mythic fancies

Sung beside her in her youth,

And those **debonair romances**

Sound but dull beside the truth (232-5; cit. in Miles 1999: 15)

Society has 'grown up': from fantasy to reason, from poetry to prose. The sentiment described by Barrett Browning is, in many ways, similar to the opinion piece written by Joseph Addison in 1712, more than 130 years earlier. According to Patricia Rigg, most Victorian white male poets felt "an **anti-Romantic reactionary reticence** [...]" to express the inner self and project outward those passions that define the poetic self" (Rigg 2004: 75). Thus, mythological writing became increasingly unpopular with 'traditional' authors. However, it was arguably this marginalised position that ultimately re-kindled its literary attraction: Pre-Raphaelites¹², e.g., William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, were deeply fascinated by the Renaissance, the Middle Ages and, above all, antiquity not despite, but because of their remoteness from Victorian England. In a similar vein, the aesthetes, notably Oscar Wilde, Algernon Swinburne, and John Byrne Leicester Warren (3rd Baron de Tabley), masterfully use classical mythology "to create an **idealised dream-world, a vanished time which can be contemplated with wistful nostalgia**" (Miles 1999: 15f.; emphasis added). In other words, unlike the authors and scholars of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Romantic period, the (late) male Victorian authors refrained from using classical mythology as a means to make sense of their everyday lives. Rather, they view it as a sanctuary, an escapist fantasy to evade, at least for a little while, the problems of reality.

The same tendencies, however, cannot be observed in female authors of the same period. The second half of the 19th century brought about interesting developments with regards to women writers: according to Isobel Hurst, Victorian Hellenism granted female authors such as Jane Ellen Harrison, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning "an **exceptional status as female classicists in the nineteenth century**" (Hurst 2010: 491; emphasis added). Despite blatant sexism and obstacles in the academic field, a considerable number of women read, translated, and interpreted classical mythology in Greek and Latin in the late Victorian period. Thereby, they paved the way for a women-led reassessment of the ancient texts, not unlike the contemporary feminist movements that retell the classics from a female point of view. While most white, male writers were caught up in the aforementioned "anti-Romantic reactionary reticence", several female authors registered "the **revolutionary realities of their historical moment** [...]" through the **crafting of emotive poetic personas**

¹² As will be explored in further detail in chapter 2.2, the Pre-Raphaelites were fascinated by the power and agency of women in Greek mythology, thus popularising characters like Circe.

and opened up previously unheard-of possibilities of self-fashioning" (Fiske 2011: 470; emphasis added). Put differently, female intelligentsia took their chance to wade into previously uncharted waters not only by rivalling men in the academic world, but also by using mythology as a basis for (self-)expression. Thereby, they arguably also challenged the strict gendered differentiation between the private and the public sphere, seeing that as translators and rewriters of Greco-Roman myths, women could enter realms of society that were previously practically out of reach. However, whether or not they could have access to education was still determined by the men in their lives: Virginia Woolf, for instance, was denied classical higher education and thus forced to "delve into books painfully and alone" (Woolf 1975: 77), given that her father did not believe in women's education (Woolf 1982: 419f.). In other words, gatekeeping information that would have allowed her to more easily access the world of academia, the gifted authors' metaphorical wings were clipped by patriarchal constraints. Translator, poet, and writer Augusta Webster, the daughter of Vice-admiral George Davies and Julia Hume, is a counterexample: Having pursued an exceptionally progressive education for a girl with the support of her father, she principally translated tragedies that feature social issues common to her own time, such as problems related to "obligation, community, freedom, tyranny and oppression of women" (Hardwick 2001: 183). Webster was one of the female classicists that strategically exposed, highlighted, and criticised double standards inherent in Greco-Roman myths, while her white, male colleagues eagerly justified the status quo by explicitly villainising women.

Rewritings of the tragic tale of Medea, Circe's infamous niece¹³, clearly illustrate the significance of perspective and the gendered differences when it comes to translations, interpretations, and retellings of classical mythology. Myths might have gone out of fashion after the Romantic period ended, but they continued to be of high cultural relevance in many areas, including education and children's literature. Through Nathaniel Hawthorne's popular children's book *Tanglewood Tales for Boys and Girls* (1853), Medea (as well as Circe and Penelope) thus made her way into nurseries and family homes. Hawthorne describes the infamous daughter of King Aeëtes as follows:

¹³ Circe and Medea are traditionally said to share many personality traits, seeing that both tend to be portrayed as dangerous witches and man-eaters. It is thus hardly surprising that Medea features in Miller's *Circe* (2018).

Her black eyes shone upon him with such a **keen intelligence**, that he felt as if there were **a serpent peeping out of them**; and, although she had done him so much service only the night before, he was **by no means very certain that she would not do him an equally great mischief** before sunset. **These enchantresses, you must know, are never to be depended upon.** (Hawthorne 2017 [1853]: 126; emphasis added)

Hawthorne's portrayal of Medea is filled to the brim with intertextual references and well-known tropes associated with 'bad women': her snake-like gaze does not only make Jason (and men in general) feel uncomfortable, but arguably alludes to the biblical Eve and the mythological Medusa, both of which are held responsible for men's demise. Despite the fact that Medea helped Jason the night before, he does not seem remotely thankful for her powerful support. Instead, she is portrayed as a sly, unreliable witch with ulterior motives. Her agency, beauty, and intelligence are not viewed as valuable assets, but as threats to innocent, virtuous Jason. Hawthorne's lexical choices speak a clear language: Medea is described with words such as 'serpent', 'intelligent', and 'mischief', all of which render her character untrustworthy. In Hawthorne's version, Medea tells Jason that she is not only the niece, but also the student of powerful Circe, who taught her to be an enchantress (2017: 120). As will be discussed at a later point in the present thesis, Circe has an ambivalent reputation at best, and is demonised at worst. Like Medea, she is traditionally viewed as the archetype of the female predator: a dangerous, man-eating, man-slaughtering witch. The fact that Medea so readily talks about their connection highlights the apparent similarities between the two characters. The paragraph ends with an explicit warning not to confide in 'these enchantresses', meaning both Circe and Medea. Hawthorne's advice is thus not to be wary of one person in particular, but to be wary of the female gender in general and to have a suspicion of attractive, powerful, and skilled women who take their life into their own hands.

Victorian women writers Eliot, Webster, and Levy also explored the Medea myth, but their verdict differs greatly from Hawthorne's. Their focus lies not on some allegedly inherent flaws in Medea's personality, but on her tragic fate after she was cruelly deserted by Jason. They paint her as a complex, tragic heroine who is terrified by the thought of losing her children and ultimately driven into madness (Hurst 2010: 491). However, these women writers do not only show Medea in a different light, but also add depth to Jason's character. He is no longer seen as a guileless victim of the

witch, but instead must assume responsibility for his actions. This is perhaps best illustrated in Webster's "Medea in Athens" (1893), where Jason contemplates his life on his deathbed. Full of remorse, he claims to be equally guilty of destroying the couple's happiness causes him to regret his infidelity in the end:

Smiting the sand aw whirl with his angry hand,
Scorned at himself, "**What god befooled [sic] my wits**
To dream **my fancy for her yellow curls**
And milk-white softness subtle policy?
Wealth and a royal bride: but what beyond?
Medea, with her skills, her presciences, [sic]
Man's wisdom, woman's craft, her rage of love
That gave her to serve me strength next divine
Medea would have made what I would;
Glaucé but what she could. I schemed amiss
And earned the curses the gods send on fools.
(Webster 2000 [1893]: 80-90; emphasis added)

One of many crucial differences between Webster's and Hawthorne's version lies in the lexical choices. Here, Medea is not described as a 'serpent', but is associated with words such as 'skills', 'presciences', 'man's wisdom', 'women's craft', 'rage', and 'love'. She is a complex, multifaceted, and powerful character who transcends stereotypical gender roles (see 'male wisdom' and 'female craft') and is capable of both love and rage. In addition, in this version, the person who schemes is Jason, not Medea. While he is painstakingly aware that he is to blame for the tragic end of their relationship, he suspects foul play by some other Greek god because he cannot – or does not want to – fathom his own actions. In Webster's poem, Medea is not only clearly portrayed as more desirable than his 'trophy wife' Glaucé: "Glaucé **was never half so beautiful**" (6; emphasis added), but also more powerful, given that she was apparently able to match her husband's actions in terms of relevance ("Medea would have made what I would / Glaucé but what she could"). While, from a contemporary point of view, it is certainly problematic to elevate Medea's status at the expense of Glaucé's, Webster's poem is still remarkably progressive in that it does not openly villainise either of the women. Yet, it is clear that despite Webster's progressive stance, the female characters are heavily objectified and compared. She describes Medea being as both more beautiful and more skilled well as resourceful than

Glauké, thereby not only questioning Jason's judgement (the obvious question being, "Why would he go for the 'lesser' woman?"), but also creating a rivalry between the two women, nipping any attempt at sisterhood in the bud. However, I argue that the most important take-away from the poem is still Jason's deathbed realisation that it was his impulsive and immature decision-making that led to the couple's demise and, ultimately, to the children's death.

Webster's work is representative of a wider social and cultural movement that was inextricably intertwined with an increase of women entering 'higher' realms of education and society. According to Shany Fiske, literature, and particularly poetry, "helped [women] to **mediate the ideological opposition between private and public writing** during a period when the **gender designations of these two spaces were being seriously contested** for the first time" (2011: 470; emphasis added). Following Fiske's line of argumentation, there seems to be a discernible link between women's involvement in literary endeavours – such as reading, translating, and retelling Greco-Roman myths – and their progression towards equal rights. A prominent suffragist, Webster used the mythological material as a cultural vehicle to explore social injustice, comparing the plight of Hellenic and Victorian women. Bright, educated females like Webster getting involved with classical literature had two principal effects: On the one hand, studying and translating Greco-Roman mythology allowed them to reclaim the misogynous narratives that had been distorted by countless iterations of the male gaze. On the other hand, the mere possibility to receive a thorough education, to study subjects like classics and history, would also have increased their confidence and given them the proper tools to dissect and analyse their own situations. It is thus hardly surprising that many 19th and early 20th century suffragettes had a background in academics or at least fought to gain access to higher education.

Webster is by no means the only Victorian female classicist to use literature as a means to draw attention to glaring gender inequalities: In the long poem (sometimes also described as verse-novel) *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Barrett Browning taps into her own experience to recount the life of a female writer and the many obstacles she encounters. She describes the heroine's daily struggles in a man's world; more specifically how the character is trying to find a balance between work and love.

According to Alma Lutz, *Aurora Leigh* – deemed by John Ruskin to be the greatest poem written in English – was one of the most influential texts read by the American suffragette and women’s rights advocate Susan B. Anthony, who carried Barret Browning’s work with her wherever she went (Lutz 1959: 74). Many literary translations, interpretations and rewritings of 19th century female classical scholars, who were often also social activists, could be considered *littérature engagée*, that is, literature committed to defend a certain political, ethical, or social view (Crowly 2018: 84f.). Webster and Barret Browning advocated women’s rights, revisiting Ancient Greek notions to consider different options of the modern female identity emerging from a deeply patriarchal and misogynous past.

The 20th century produced some of the most iconic, imaginative, and diverse rewritings of classical myths. According to Miles, many English-speaking authors, poets, and playwrights, such as John Ashbery, Denise Levertov, Archibald MacLeish, Eugene Gladstone O’Neil, Kenneth Rexroth, Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, and Tennessee Williams, “found the mythology of the Old World a powerful vehicle for New World themes” (1999: 17). Far from becoming ‘extinct’, mythology permeated 20th century art. It speaks volumes that the “demonstration and summation of” modernist literature, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), is, in fact, a rewriting (Beebe 1974: 176). In other words, a completely new literary movement was created – or at least brought to perfection – using these ancient tales. *Ulysses* is but one of the myriad examples that illustrate two major findings: firstly, that Greco-Roman mythology continued to serve as an inspiration for as well as one of the pillars of Western literary production. And secondly, that the material of these Ancient Greek tales was – and still is – rich enough to allow for the creation of radically different and novel genres in modernity and, after World War II, in postmodernity.

After 1945, Greco-Roman mythology was conquered by more diverse writers, both on the level of race and of the level of gender. Examples of this include the 1973 rewriting of Euripides’ *Bacchae* by Nigerian author Wole Soyinka as well as Sir Derek Walcott’s chef d’oeuvre, his book-length 1990 poem *Omeros*¹⁴, where he reimagines the Trojan War as a Fishermen’s fight in the Caribbean, referencing Homeric

¹⁴ This work got Walcott, who is originally from Saint Lucia in the West Indies, the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature. It is noteworthy that the first and only Caribbean author to hold this particular prize received it “for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, **sustained by a historical vision**, the outcome of a **multicultural commitment**” (Swedish Academy 1992: 1; emphasis added; Streitfeld 1992).

characters from *The Illiad*. (Staff 2017: 3-5). Similarly, 20th century black women authors such as Gwendolyn Brooks (e.g., “The Anniad” 1949, and “In the Mecca” 1968), Toni Morrison (e.g., *The Bluest Eye* 1970, and *Song of Solomon* 1977), and Rita Dove (e.g., *The Darker Face of the Earth* 1994, and *Mother Love* 1995) began to appropriate classical myth (Walters 2007: 1). These writers used their own voice to intertwine Greco-Roman tropes with postcolonial experiences, thereby creating a unique, novel way of storytelling. Clearly, there are similarities between these postcolonial rewritings and the feminist ones that I analyse in chapter two: both use classical mythology as a vehicle to represent and performatively deconstruct dominant power structures that rely on markers of difference such as race and gender.

The most significant ‘new wave’ of myths in the 20th century – at least in the context of my master’s thesis – revolved around the topic of gender. According to Miles, this movement was different from the women classicists in the 18th and 19th centuries, seeing that these new translations, interpretations, and rewritings truly gave female characters in myths a voice for the very first time (1999: 18). Put differently, instead of merely leaving leeway for interpretation, feminist authors truly reclaimed the narrative by adapting and adding to the ancient stories so that the women were finally granted a personality and agency of their own. Angela Carter, ranked tenth in *The Times*’s list of “The 50 greatest British writers since 1945”, was one of the most popular female authors of her time to thoroughly reimagine and reinterpret myths (*The Times* 2008: 1): In her 1974 short story “The Loves of Lady Purple”, Carter offers a fresh take on the Pygmalion myth, adding a gothic horror quality to it. In her version, the protagonist is an Asiatic Professor who travels across Europe with his ‘Galatea’, a marionette named Lady Purple, who eventually turns into a real woman and feeds on his blood. Similarly, Sandra Gilbert lets her Bacchantes justify Orpheus’s murder in her 1984 poetry collection *Emily’s Bread* (Gilbert 1984: 42). And both H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Margaret Atwood gave a voice to Eurydice.

Filled to the brim with family drama, sex, and crime, classical mythology and its rewritings are still very much in vogue in the 21st century. In recent years, PoC¹⁵ and women writers have worked to extend the literary phenomenon started in the 20th

¹⁵ PoC = People of colour.

century in three major ways: by challenging the way gender is constructed, by giving agency to women, and by interweaving Greco-Roman mythology with bits and pieces of African, Asian as well as postcolonial stories (such as Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones* and Helen Oyeyemi's 2005 debut novel *The Icarus Girl*). It seems clear that when (post)modern women writers gain freedom, voice, and agency, so do female characters in novel adaptations of Greek myths. Consequently, the very same texts that were appropriated to perpetuate patriarchal values (such as promoting passivity in women, e.g., Penelope and Galatea) were and are currently being rewritten by feminist authors not to cancel them, but rather to provide alternative readings. In addition, 2017 marked a milestone in what can only be called a 'feminist revolution' in classics: Emily Wilson became the first woman in history to publish a translation of Homer's *Odyssey*¹⁶, and her work has since received critical acclaim from both literary critics and academics. Put briefly, informed by various waves of feminism, the 21st century is seeing a critical, subversive, and feminist revival of these ancient stories.

Latin and Greek have lost their status as prestigious academic parameters, and therefore, fewer people master these ancient languages. Yet, Greco-Roman mythology is unswervingly popular and continues to be seen as a stylistic model. In the 21st century, most classical myths are read in (Anglophone) translations, adaptations, and rewritings, which, I argue, have become veritable battlegrounds for new literary and cultural developments. As has been illustrated in this section, these rewritings invariably follow, indicate, or even shape the tendencies of their time: Renaissance writers (particularly playwrights) idolised antiquity in their works, Enlightenment authors wrote myth off as 'pagan humbug', and female Victorian classicists used it as a means to partake in the public sphere, drawing attention to sexual double standards and gender-based discrimination of women in everyday life. In the era of #MeToo, female voice, agency, and power have become the focal point of interest for (women) writers and readers alike. As the general awareness of gender-based inequality and violence rises, feminists reimagine misogynous tales and radically question the stereotypical portrayals of heroines and villainesses.

¹⁶ For an in-depth discussion of Wilson's translation, see chapter 2.2.3 of the present thesis.

In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how a new generation of female authors deals with issues of gender construction, agency, and power relations in these ancient tales. I will highlight not only how they used and adapted their source material, but I will also argue why it matters that they changed it in the first place.

2. Critical feminist readings: The Penelopiad (2005) and Circe (2018)

2.1 The Penelopiad (2005)

According to countless bumper stickers, T-shirts and coffee mugs, “[w]ell-behaved women seldom make history” (Ulrich 1976: 20). Penelope, queen of Ithaca, is both the confirmation and the exception of this rule: She is remembered¹⁷ for the very behaviour that continues to bury countless women in oblivion, namely complete submission and faithfulness to her husband by rejecting her many suitors. Her fame stems largely from the fact that she is married to the *Odyssey*’s protagonist and that she is viewed as a symbol of conjugal fidelity (Mackail 1916: 160). While Penelope’s own desires and aspirations fade into the past, she goes down in history for honouring her partner’s. There are some alternative interpretations regarding her actions: According to Italian art philosophy historian Giulia Sissa, Penelope “reacts [to erotic desire] with seductive wiles of messages and promises, and then by inviting them to demonstrate their excellence [...] in terms of something extremely personal and physical. [They] have to be on par with Ulysses in showing the might of their bodies” (2008: 26). In other words, Sissa claims that while Penelope does not sleep with her wooers, she enjoys their attention and explores her identity and sexuality without Odysseus. In more traditional readings, however, Penelope does not glorify female independence, but rather functions as a model for the perfect housewife and mother.

Canadian author Margaret Atwood imagines a radically different version of Penelope. Her novella *The Penelopiad* (2005), a revisionist rewriting of the *Odyssey*, was published in 2005 as part of the Canongate Myth Series. Significantly, Atwood is

¹⁷ One of her most famous pictorial representations is *Penelope and the Suitors* (1911-1912) by John William Waterhouse, who was heavily influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites.

considered one of the contemporary authors who have made most allusions to myths (in a more general sense). In the words of Sharon Wilson, “[s]o **evident are mythological and other folktale intertexts in Atwood’s literary art** that one might question whether any of her texts lacks such reference (2000: 220; emphasis added). Indeed, myth seems to be a constant topic in Atwood’s oeuvre: from her first published book, the 1961 poetry collection *Double Persephone*, over “Siren Song” and “Circe/Mud Poems” in 1974 to “Orpheus”, “Eurydice” and “Letter from Persephone” in her 1984 collection *Interlunar*. There is a particular reason why Atwood’s work is the obvious choice for an MA thesis investigating gender construction rewritings of myth: She does not merely reproduce myths, but rather **“calls into question the time-honored [sic] authority of patriarchal classical myths**, for instance by **giving their female characters a voice** [and] empowering them by presenting the events from their perspective” (Nischik 2020: 261; emphasis added). The following subchapters will explore how, both on the level of content and form, Atwood used and altered the mythological source texts to fit into the 21st century and, more importantly, to call out its double standards and inherent misogyny.

2.1.1 Gender

The construction and depiction of gender stereotypes is a – if not *the* – central theme in *The Penelopiad*. The first ‘clue’ that points towards a particular focus on gender is, of course, the title. Homer’s famous *Odyssey*, which has even entered the popular lexicon to describe a particularly arduous journey, is named after its eponymous hero: Odysseus. Similarly, Atwood named her novella after the foil character turned heroine: Penelope. This is thus not the story of Odysseus’s wife, but of Penelope as her own person. The focus on gender also becomes apparent even before Atwood’s novella officially begins: the Canadian author chose an excerpt from an English translation of the *Odyssey*, namely Agamemnon’s eulogy to Penelope, as an epitaph for her work. It is, again, no coincidence that this particular part includes a direct characterisation of Penelope that, at least to the educated female reader, metaphorically screams ‘woman written by a man’:

“Shrewd Odysseus! [...] You are **a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue!** How **faithful was your flawless Penelope**, Icarus’ daughter! [...] How **loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth!** The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of **the constant Penelope.**” (Atwood 2005: xiii; emphasis added)

The lexical choices paint a clear picture not of a living, breathing, complex person, but of the ‘ideal’ wife: she has virtue, is faithful, flawless, loyal, and always remembers ‘the husband of her youth’. Penelope is praised not for taking the helm after Odysseus leaves her, or for being immensely intelligent and coming up with ruses to keep her many suitors busy, or for raising his child solo. Instead, Agamemnon lauds her for *not* sleeping around like Odysseus and for allegedly waiting passively for the return of the boon and bane of her existence: her husband, the patriarch.

This eulogy gives several (if arguably limited) insights into how gender is constructed in the Homeric source text. Not only is the description of Penelope glaringly one-dimensional, but it supports Ostriker’s claim that in myth, women can only be portrayed as either ‘angel’ or ‘monster’ (1986: 316). For Homer, there is apparently little in between these two options where female characters are concerned, while there is a variety of possibilities for the characterisations of fictional men. It is almost as if these mythological narratives were created to support Judith Butler’s claim that gender is basically just a socially constructed binary that creates two different classes that are associated with (or rather, defined by) particular personality traits, behaviours, and even wishes: “men” and women” (1990; cit. in Schippers 2007: 89). Myths like that of Medusa show that there is no room for transgression from this discursively constructed system. ‘Non-female’ emotions, actions, and reactions such as showing rage or fighting back are taboo. In short, in Homer’s oeuvre, the male comfort zone is more important than a women’s freedom, mind, and body.

In addition, in the classical source text, ‘good’ women like Penelope seem to have next to no agency of their own – and that is portrayed as a positive attribute. According to Agamemnon, Penelope did not exactly marry Odysseus; instead, he *won* her by cheating in a race with the help of Tyndareus, her own uncle. It was custom to beat other suitors in a contest in order to get the hand of female

aristocracy. Therefore, women, and especially princesses, are seen not primarily as people, but rather (prized) possessions ("**your** flawless Penelope") that can be won, traded, and used at their husband's leisure. It follows that women, and especially wives, should act – or remain passive – according to their husband's or father's wishes.

In Atwood's version, by contrast, Penelope understands and despises her status as an object, clearly expressing how, at the young age of only fifteen, she was pushed into passivity and given away by her father and uncle:

And so I **was handed over** to Odysseus, **like a package of meat**. A package of meat in a wrapping of gold, mind you. A sort of **gilded blood pudding**.

But perhaps that is **too crude a simile for you**. Let me add that **meat was highly valued among us – the aristocracy ate lots of it**, meat, meat, meat, and **all they ever did was roast it**: ours was **not an age of haute cuisine**. (Atwood 2005: 39; emphasis added)

In the Homeric rendition, the literal winning of a wife is portrayed as completely unproblematic (as it was custom at the time), thereby serving, at least from a contemporary perspective, the "patriarchal regulation of social relations" (Mayer 2014: 307; translation by Nischik 2020: 266). Atwood's Penelope forces the reader to consider her arranged marriage from the female perspective, highlighting its blatant misogyny by comparing herself not only to an object, but to a particular piece of food, namely meat. There is arguably a clear reason why Atwood chooses this specific simile, namely because it points towards the culturally created link between objectification, fragmentation, and consumption, which connects slaughtering and sexual violence. In "The Rape of Animals, the Butchering of Women", Carol Adams explains that in our culture, the term 'meat' is used as a "free-floating image [...] severed from its ontological meaning", a process often referred to as "fragmentation" (1988: 1-4). In other words, 'meat' is semantically disconnected from its original referent (i.e., 'dead animal') and instead seen only in terms of its ability to be consumed. Consumption, in this particular context, is by no means limited to food, but extends to the realm of male sexuality. According to Adams, "[c]onsumption appears to be the final stage of male sexual desire" (1988: 1-4), as is expressed more explicitly in the common gothic trope of the (sexualised) bloodthirsty vampire

who desires a woman's blood¹⁸. Thus, one possible interpretation is that Penelope's marriage was essentially a celebration of her being sold by a man to a man to fulfil his sexual desires.

In contrast to Atwood, Homer clearly glorifies Penelope's alleged submissiveness to objectification and male control as a desirable and distinctively female quality. In other words, he not only legitimises but praises gender inequality. His description of Odysseus's wife perfectly fits what Connell calls "emphasised femininity", namely a "form [of femininity that] is **defined around compliance with this subordination** [to men] and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (1987: 184f.; emphasis added). It is thus hardly surprising that in the Homeric version (and most translations thereof), her greatest quality seems to be her uncanny ability to stay put in front of her loom for a decade while her husband goes on one adventure after the other. Her loyalty (read: passive submissiveness) is inherently connected to her gender expression. However, in the case of Atwood's Penelope, the fact that she is comparing herself to a piece of meat shows that she is aware of the effect the patriarchal constraints of marriage have on the female gender. Women are objectified, fragmented, and reduced to an object which is readily consumed by the aristocracy. They are dehumanised, their only worth seems to reside in the pleasure (and offspring) men can get out of them.

Atwood's Penelope is infinitely more complex, realistic and human than Homer's. While honouring the original characterisation and most distinguished personality traits, the Canadian author refuses to reduce Penelope to an apathetic, dull, and devoted trophy wife whose number one priority is to keep her many suitors at bay. The eponymous heroine of *The Penelopiad* is well aware of (and bitter about) her position and her reputation. In the following excerpt, she reflects on feeling inadequate, misrepresented, and unattractive, especially in comparison with another (in)famous female character, namely her cousin Helen:

As for me... Well, people told me I was beautiful, they had to because I was a princess, and shortly after that a queen, but the truth was that although I was not deformed or ugly, **I was nothing special to look at. I**

¹⁸ Examples of this include the enormously popular and influential oeuvre of authors such as Anne Rice (e.g., *Interview with a Vampire* 1976) and Stephenie Meyer (*The Twilight Saga* 2005-2020).

was smart though: considering the times, very smart. That seems to be what I was known for: being smart. That, and **my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and my discretion.**

If you were a magician, messing around in the dark arts and risking your soul, would you want to **conjure up a plain but smart wife who'd been good at weaving and had never transgressed**, instead of **a woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust** and had caused a great city to go up in flames?

Neither would I. (Atwood 2005: 21; emphasis added)

While Atwood's version conveys the same basic information, it differs from the Homeric text in several important aspects, both on the level of form and content. For instance, Atwood uses a completely different lexical repertoire in her description of Penelope. Words such as 'virtue', 'faithful', and 'flawless' simply do not appear, and are replaced with terms such as "smart", "devotion", and "discretion". Atwood's Penelope is exceedingly self-conscious about her own image: she keeps the original attributes that shaped her public persona ("That seem to be what I was known for"), but is well aware that this is by no means an exhaustive list, hinting at many qualities and character traits that were either lost in translation, or never made it into the original. Instead of having Agamemnon list Penelope's many virtues, Atwood lets her speak herself, thereby performatively (as well as metaphorically) returning the narrative power to her. Yet, there is arguably still an imbalance between the genders: Even in Penelope's own mind, her infamous cousin Helen seems more worthy of love, attention, and admiration not necessarily because of her own beliefs, but because of how men reacted to her. It follows that while Penelope shows great awareness of the female condition, she continues – at least to a certain extent – to respect a certain patriarchal value system.

Unlike Homer, Atwood extensively uses not only direct, but indirect characterisation to make the personality of Penelope come to life and to show the cracks in the image of the 'perfect' wife. Her Penelope does not only say that she is smart, but *what she says* is smart, too, as in: "Well, people told me I was beautiful, they had to because I was a princess, [...] but the truth was [...] I was nothing special to look at". Instead of basking herself in compliments and relying on external validation, she makes up her own mind and decides that beauty is not what makes her stand out from the crowd. In other words, Penelope does not only describe her character, but she performs it,

displaying a high degree of self-reflection and awareness. This is also illustrated by her refusal to paint the world in black or white by either idealising or demonising other women, particularly her cousin Helen. According to Nischik, the portrayal of women in Homer's epic led to the creation of the misogynous "virgin/whore dichotomy" (Nischik 2020: 262), which claims that women can either be a dream or a nightmare. Atwood's Penelope, however, does neither believe in misogynous pigeonholing nor in female rivalry. Instead, Penelope admits that her cousin has, both because of her actions and her looks, greater allure than herself: "[W]ould you want to conjure up a plain but smart wife [...] instead of a woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with Lust [...]? [...] Neither would I". This is not only a potent example of Penelope's emotional intelligence, but it also shows that Homer's one-dimensional portrayal of women reduced two great female characters to the angelic housewife who guards the private sphere and the devious succubus who acts as a scapegoat for the Trojan war. Atwood's Penelope does not seem to buy into it. While Helen and her cousin do not develop a deep sisterhood bond in Atwood's version¹⁹, they are no (longer) mortal enemies who have to compete for men's approval because of their gender. Thus, in the Canadian author's novella, Penelope refuses to antagonise her cousin simply because of her *man*-made reputation as an unruly *femme fatale*.

Another interesting aspect to consider when examining gender construction is the narrative technique. The Greek version of the *Odyssey* uses a classical third-person narration with a heterodiegetic narrator and external focalisation, which is mirrored in the English translation. In this particular part, Homer uses a male foil character, namely Agamemnon, who recently arrived in the underworld, to provide information about Penelope's personality traits as in, "How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius' daughter!". Homer describes Odysseus's wife by having an intradiegetic man enumerate her virtues from a male outside position without ever asking what is truly going on in her mind and heart. It is also worth noting that in the Greek original, this characterisation of the 'virtuous' Penelope, called a "favorable song" (ᾠοιδὴν ... χαρίεσσαν) is juxtaposed with the "loathsome song" (στυγερὴ ... ᾠοιδὴ) of the 'damned' Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife (Porter 2019: 174). The two characters represent the polarity which, at least in Homeric myths, is portrayed as inherent to the female gender. According to Irene de Jong, "Agamemnon presents Clytemnestra,

¹⁹ For more information see chapter 2.4.

who had maintained a 'low profile' in previous versions of the 'Oresteia' story, as **its main culprit**" (Jong 2001: 288; emphasis added). This is yet another example of the phenomenon described by Ostriker (1986), Nischik (2020), and Zimmermann (2021): namely, that women in (Homeric) mythology can either be extremely good or extremely bad and consequently, their characters are never nuanced and three dimensional, but rather seem to serve as unattainable ideals to strive for or warnings about the dire consequences of transgressions in the patriarchal system.

Atwood's version does the exact opposite, both with regards to form and content. At first glance, Atwood's Penelope seems to fit the labels given to her by men, both on an intra- and on an extradiegetic level: she is smart, devoted, and discreet. However, the Canadian author unveils how, in reality, Penelope often hides what she truly feels and puts on the act of the perfect wife. This is best exemplified by how Atwood constructs gender through employing a distinct narrative technique which is quite different from the Homeric version: she invites the readers to explore Penelope's innermost thoughts through first-person narration. Choosing an autodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation (e.g., "I was smart enough: considering the times, very smart."), she offers unique insights into Penelope's emotional world as well as her psyche. Not only does this create a feeling of proximity and immediacy between the readers and the character, but it allows the heroine to operate on two different levels at once: while she might fulfil her husband's wishes, her mind is still very much her own. An example of this is when Penelope recounts the return of Odysseus, dressed as a beggar: "His disguise was well enough done [...] but **I had a deep suspicion**, which became a certainty when I heard he'd broken the neck of a fellow panhandler [...] **I didn't let on I knew**" (Atwood 2005: 136f.; emphasis added) Penelope is the only one smart enough to recognise Odysseus, yet she does not share this information with anybody. Thereby, she does not only protect her husband from the suitors, but she also tricks the trickster. Atwood thus adds an element not only to Penelope, but to the women in mythology in general: Their traditional gender portrayals are called into question because of the limited perspective of men, underestimating the intelligence and skill of women.

2.1.2 Agency

The Cambridge Dictionary defines ‘agency’ as “the ability to take action or to choose what action to take” (2022) and is often linked with concepts such as free will, power, and freedom. The protagonist of *The Penelopiad* seems, at least in the chapters that revolve around her younger years, to lack exactly that: the power to act and the power to choose for herself. Her mother, the naiad Perioboea, is well aware of the fact that her daughter, as most women in Greco-Roman mythology, has very limited agency. Yet, Periboea believes that not having obvious (male) power and brute force will not stop Penelope from reaching her goals because she is part ‘water’, as is illustrated in the following passage:

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does. (Atwood 2005: 43; italics original; emphasis added)

The element ‘water’ in this part is clearly connected to Penelope. Not only is it stated explicitly (“Remember you are half water”), but it is implied by the alleged characteristics of water: according to Periboea, it does not resist, it is soft, it is patient, and it cannot stop anybody. All of these traits point towards passivity (i.e., the opposite of agency) and are, when applied to women, viewed as desirable in the patriarchy, seeing that it supports the culturally created dichotomy that men should be active ‘doers’, while women should be passive ‘recipients’. Thus, at a first glance, it may seem that water hardly serves to empower women to embrace their agency. Alexis Wick explains that in mythology, there is a “foundational association²⁰ [...] between women and water” (2013: 54), a connection that was equally made by Kristeva’s analysis of the ‘Narcissus myth’ in her 1987 book *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*. In a psychoanalytical reading, the feminine and water are symbiotic because both are life-giving. Wick even equals the womb with the ocean, stating that “the one is ontogenetic, the other phylogenetic” (2013: 55). While being the ‘primary producers of life’ certainly does accord some element of

²⁰ Unsurprisingly, the mythological personification of the sea, as well as the very word ‘sea’ in ancient Greek, is the female goddess ‘Thalassa’ (Ancient Greek: Θάλασσα).

agency to women, it simultaneously confines them to the private sphere. Greco-Roman mythology thus inherently connects female agency with the ways in which their biological features²¹ can be used, or rather, exploited, e.g., through male pleasure or motherhood.

This culturally constructed link between women and the aquatic has not only become a well-known trope in the literary world (and beyond), but it clearly continues to tie the female gender to the reproductive functions of the female sex, thereby drastically reducing their agency. In many Greco-Roman myths, Women are pigeonholed to fit into a society where the feminine represents nature and the masculine represents culture (Taggart 2014: 190), a differentiation which is also often portrayed as barbarism vs. civilization. Most female characters who dare to leave their 'natural habitat', namely the private sphere (or are dragged out of it, in the case of Medusa), face dire consequences, meaning that they are either antagonised or marginalised – or both. Kathleen Connellan even argues that “[m]ythological narratives that **dichotomise women as water (nature) and men as air (intellect)** have been **harmful to interpretations of the ‘feminine’**” (2007: 117; emphasis added). These juxtapositions of 'nature' vs 'culture' and 'men' vs 'women' feed into the belief that females are, for some reason, 'more natural', which means they are seen as intrinsically emotional, unstable, and in dire need of patriarchal control lest they develop too much agency of their own. The words of French historian Jules Michelet, who, incidentally, wrote a novel called *La mer* (1861), are a prime example of this patriarchal mixture of desire and angst. Michelet claimed to have found the very 'core' of men's relationship with the sea, but, in reality, he revealed even more about men's imagined relationship with women in 19th century Europe: “Voilà **le secret de [la] puissance [de la mer], [...] c'est une personne**; ils y sentent tous **une violente et redoutable maîtresse qu'on adore, qu'on veut dompter**”²² (Michelet 1861: 57f.; emphasis added). In his view, men love 'formidable mistresses', but this feeling is always accompanied by a potent desire to tame them, i.e., to control them. In other words, women who have agency (and even power) might be alluring, but they must never be allowed to truly exert it, seeing that this would be a threat to the patriarchal

²¹ In the context of the current analysis, a heteronormative worldview is assumed because it is dominant in Greco-Roman mythology. However, I am well aware that sex, gender, and sexual orientation are not in any way causally linked.

²² “This is the secret of [the] power [of the sea], [...] it is a person; they all feel in it a violent and formidable mistress whom they adore, whom they want to tame”. (my translation)

world order. Consequently, women with agency must be put in their 'rightful', or even 'natural' place where they are supposed to embrace their life of servitude to their fathers, husbands, or even brothers.

There is arguably another, and perhaps even more important, layer of meaning to the passage above. While Periboea does indeed advise Penelope not to resist because she is 'half-water', she also claims that her daughter will eventually choose her own path and that nothing and nobody will be able to obstruct the way of patient water. In other words, Penelope's mother tells her that if she plays her part well, that is, if she manages Odysseus's household successfully (Lafray 2019: 155), be patient and silent, that she would find a way to reach her own goals, i.e., to have more agency. This might seem like a false promise, seeing that, traditionally, not tacit complacency but open resistance and power are often directly associated with agency. However, in recent years, this link between female silence and the absence of agency has been challenged. Classicist Margherita Carucci argues the following about women's reticence in Antiquity,

I question the traditional polarity that equates speech with agency and silence with passivity and powerlessness; instead, I argue that the ideal of female silence or reticence, far from being merely 'absence of speech', was a mode of being for [...] women, who used it both as an opportunity to express agency and as a modality of [...] participation.
(2018: 189; emphasis added)

Carucci thus proposes a model of agency that, at first glance, seems to contradict the very essence of the concept, namely the ability to freely act or choose a particular path of action. The question that invariably comes to mind is how women who are silent could possibly be active societal (and political) participants. Indeed, Carucci's model arguably does not account for contemporary female agency in the Western world. Instead, she introduces the term "nuanced agency", which essentially describes the possible forms of female agency despite patriarchal constraints considering specific historical and cultural contexts (2018: 197). In other words, Carucci's model of female agency is far from complete, yet strives to showcase how women in antiquity fought for more emancipation without openly challenging the status quo so as not to directly endanger themselves.

Penelope makes use of this ‘nuanced agency’ at various different times throughout Atwood’s novella. While she never openly disagrees with any powerful man (at least not until she is in the underworld), Odysseus’s wife masterfully uses her silence as a tool for agency, for instance when her father begs her to stay with him after the wedding:

You’ve probably heard that **my father ran after our departing chariot, begging me to stay with him**, and that **Odysseus asked me if I was going to Ithaca with him of my own free will or did I prefer to remain with my father?** It’s said that in answer **I pulled down my veil, being too modest to proclaim in words my desire for my husband**, and that a statue was later erected of me in tribute to the virtue of Modesty. [In reality,] **I pulled down my veil to hide the fact that I was laughing.** [...] I could hardly wait to get away from the Spartan court. (Atwood 2005: 49; emphasis added)

Atwood added a double entendre to this particular scene that was not evident in the Greek original: By insinuating that her audience knows only a curated, clean version of the events (e.g., “You’ve probably heard”, “It’s said”), Atwood suggests that the traditional narrative is only one half of the truth, which is far more complex and does not include perfectly modest women. While the Homeric version states the basic plot correctly, it obscures an element which is central to the interpretation of the story, namely Penelope’s true motive. According to Atwood, she did not pull down her veil because she was modest, but rather because she thought her father’s demand was ridiculous and hated her life at the Spartan court. With this action, she silently but actively dishonours the wishes of the primary patriarch in favour of reaching her own goal: escaping to Ithaca, far away from the constraints and threats of her home. Thus, in Atwood’s novella, Penelope displays Carucci’s ‘nuanced agency’: Although the protagonist does not openly voice her agenda, she relentlessly pushes it forward within her means (by pulling down the veil) despite the fact that it is against her father’s explicit request. For a woman in her position, performing reticence instead of giving in to a patriarchal demand is no small feat, but a powerful “mechanism [...] of evading religious/male authority” (Janiga-Perkins 2018: 222). Therefore, remaining silent and pulling down the veil is neither an expression of modesty nor of subjection to patriarchal power structures, but of successful female agency under challenging historical and societal circumstances.

Atwood's novella allows for a completely new, feminist reading of the myth. Not only does it portray Penelope's character as decidedly more complex, rich, and relatable, but it also sheds a different light on the male personae involved, particularly her father. In the contemporary narrative, it is obvious that his daughter outsmarted him by simply not answering his request, denying it by exerting nuanced agency through performing silence²³. However, in Homer's version, Penelope's (arguably) true intentions are not only obscured, but distorted in favour of a more palatable narrative, namely that she was too modest to answer and desperately wanted to go from one male authority (her father) to the next (her husband). In light of Atwood's adaptations, I cannot help but read this 'original' story as a face-saving act for Penelope's father, given that religion and virtue lend themselves as plausible and socially acceptable reasons for her behaviour. After all, in Greco-Roman Antiquity, explicit female agency was frowned upon – unless it was but the execution of a (moral) authority, such as a patriarch, a god, or a religious maxim.

To conclude this subchapter, I wish to highlight that there is a connection between Periboea's water metaphor in *The Penelopiad* and Carucci's 'nuanced agency': Both describe a kind of agency which allows women to act despite considerable patriarchal constraints. Essentially, Periobea advises her daughter not to seek outright confrontation ("*Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you*"), but to find alternatives to ultimately get her way ("*If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does*"). In my reading, Penelope's mother recommends being patient and strategic, that is, to play the long game in a world that severely punishes open resistance and agency in females. Carucci's 'nuanced agency' shares this basic notion, namely that women who live in a profoundly oppressive and sexist system still discover possibilities of dissenting and exerting (at least partial) agency, often through carefully planned strategic action (or the lack thereof). Clearly, both Periboea as a fictional character and Carucci as a classics scholar are well aware that misogyny was thriving in Antiquity: women's wings were metaphorically clipped, and they were (often literally) confined to the private sphere. However, despite the suboptimal conditions of frequently finding herself between a rock and a hard place, Atwood's Penelope manages to increase her degree of agency slowly but surely.

²³ For more information on the connection between power, agency, and the 'performance of silence', see Margherita Carucci's 2018 article "Female reticence in republican Rome: Agency and the performance of exclusion". See bibliography.

2.1.3 Voice

The most substantial change Atwood made to the original myth is arguably the complete shift of perspective – from male to female. She does this by giving a voice not only to Penelope, who is both protagonist and narrator, but also to the twelve maids that Odysseus slaughters upon his return to Ithaca. This is an act of (late) rebellion, seeing that voice, agency, and power are linked: As discussed in the previous subchapter (2.2), if women like Penelope – both in fiction and in the factual world – wanted to keep even ‘nuanced agency’, they had to find ways around the profoundly sexist constraints of their time. Even then, they arguably could only influence, but never truly decide, their fate, seeing that any participation in the public sphere was frowned upon and that any kind of open resistance to the status quo would have led to social exclusion²⁴. Carucci explains that in Antiquity, there was a **“gender dichotomy in the use of speech”**: ‘Good’ women were supposed to reaffirm the **“traditional female virtues of modesty, chastity, and silence in the public [...] [S]peech and silence became signifiers [...] of moral virtues: [...] a woman’s public silence indicated [...] the virtue of her character”** (2018: 194; emphasis added). In other words, in Greco-Roman mythology, women are forced into reticence through fear and shame caused by cultural convention.

Women’s voices are of central importance in Atwood’s narrative. When Penelope breaks the silence, she also challenges the symbolic power that kept her quiet in the first place. This power “only becomes effective if it is **successfully masked as natural and inevitable**” (Sanli 2011: 287; emphasis added). Functioning like a Barthesian myth, a binary opposition between silent, honourable, and disobedient, loquacious women is constructed and naturalised. Thereby, women are subjected to symbolic violence which **“extorts submission, which is not perceived as such, based on ‘collective expectations’ or socially inculcated beliefs”** (Bourdieu 1998: 103; emphasis added). Thus, when Penelope finally uses her voice to show her perspective, even from the underworld, she does not only reveal her point of view,

²⁴ As will be discussed in depth later in the present thesis, this is precisely what happened to Circe.

but also dispute the patriarchal ‘fairy tales’ of righteous heroes (e.g., Odysseus) that serve to legitimise sexist power structures and male privilege.

The literary style of *The Penelopiad* differs greatly from the Greco-Roman renditions, for instance in that it is written in autodiegetic first-person narration. Unlike Homer, Atwood invites the reader to challenge every bit of information that is given. In the words of Nischik, “Penelope’s **questioning of epic authorities and norms** is, **self-ironically**, also **directed toward her own narration**” (2020: 264; emphasis added). This is best illustrated in a passage taken from the very beginning of the novella when Penelope gives the reason for telling her story:

Now that all the others have run out of air, **it’s my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself.** [...] **[I]t’s a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it**, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children – **folks with time on their hands. Once, people would have laughed if I’d try to play the minstrel** [...] **but who cares about public opinion now?** [...] So I’ll spin a thread of my own. (Atwood 2005: 4f.; emphasis added)

Penelope does not seek fame, but arguably retribution for all the things she has had to endure and, more importantly, all the times she had to keep her mouth shut, as in “it’s my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself”. She is fully aware that because of her gender, she would have been shamed for using her voice during her lifetime. She states that “people would have laughed if I’d try to play the minstrel”, which is exactly what happened to various women in Antiquity. In the first century AD, Latin writer and orator Valerius Maximus even wrote a chapter in his *Facta et dicta memorabilia* entitled “quae mulieres apud magistratus pro se aut pro aliis causas egerunt²⁵”, where he complains about women “quas **condicio naturae** et verecundia stolae ut in foro et iudiciis tacerent cohibere non valuit²⁶” (Valerius Maximus 8.3, in Shackleton Bailey 2000: 210), that is, who refused to keep silent in public places. Now that Penelope resides in the underworld, however, neither she nor anybody else seems to care much about the opinion of the public, who consists of shadows anyway. After all, virtues such as modesty are of little importance when she is dead,

²⁵ In English: “Women who pleaded before magistrates for themselves or for others”. Translated by David R. Shackleton Bailey (2000: 211).

²⁶ In English: “These women whose natural condition and the modesty of the matron’s robe could not make them keep silent in the Forum and the courts of law”. Translated by David R. Shackleton Bailey (2000: 211).

seeing that they no longer ensure her safety or position within the world. Penelope – like so many others – is thus only free to use her voice and tell her version now that she is removed from these patriarchal power struggles and societal constraints.

It is important to note that in the excerpt above, Penelope does not stylise herself as a great storyteller, quite the contrary: she claims that using her voice to tell myths is ‘a low art’ that ‘folks with time on their hands’ do. This claim is further substantiated by the fact that in Atwood’s novella, at least in the sections narrated from Penelope’s perspective, rather colloquial, blunt language is employed that, according to Nischik, “subverts the Homeric epic, elevated style” (2020: 263). This is illustrated, for example, in the chapter “Asphodel”, where Penelope complains about Helen being summoned by mortal men: “It was like a return to the old days to have **a lot of men gawping at her**. She liked to appear in one of her Trojan outfits, **over-decorated to my taste**, but *chacun à son goût*” (Atwood 2005: 20; italics original; emphasis added). What at first glance might seem to be mere ironical self-deprecation is actually much more than that: Penelope does not only say that telling myths is lowly, but she also demonstrates, or rather, performs it in her own writing. The lexical and syntactic choices she makes, for instance by employing colloquial vocabulary such as ‘gawping’ and using grammatical abbreviations (e.g., ‘it’s my turn’), convert Atwood’s novella into a critique of the authority of ‘venerable’, ‘stylistically perfect’ authors such as Homer and Ovid. Using crude women’s voice to re-tell the story, Atwood strips the myth of any unnecessary linguistic splendour that obscures the malicious doings of so-called ‘heroes’ such as Odysseus. Thereby, she suggests (and, in some instances, explicitly shows) that the truth that lies hidden behind all the artificial artistry is raw, human, ugly, and often misrepresented by writers.

Atwood’s Penelope does not only call the Homeric version of the *Odyssey* into question by proposing alternative versions of certain events. She also challenges the verisimilitude of her own voice. For instance, she admits that despite their reputation, neither Odysseus nor she are, in fact, particularly moral or trustworthy people: “The two of us were – by our own admission – **proficient and shameless liars** of long standing” (Atwood 2005: 173; emphasis added). In Atwood’s novella, they are not your stereotypical hero and damsel in distress. Rather, both of them are cunning, highly strategical characters who, on the surface, seem to stick to their (gender)

roles, while bending the rules as best as they can – and they are aware of it. Thereby, she redefines the gender stereotypes portrayed in the Homeric version and demonstrates that female characters are neither black nor white, but come in many different shades of grey.

The Penelopiad does not offer any objective truths. This is even stated clearly in the beginning of the novella, when Penelope reflects on her life: “Perhaps **I have only invented it** in order to make myself feel better” (Atwood 2005: 8; emphasis added). This poses a problem for the reader: According to Köppe and Kindt, any narrator who gives either incomplete or inaccurate information is – by default – unreliable (2011: 81). Consequently, by admitting that she may be dishonest, Atwood’s Penelope alerts the readership to the fact that the mere fact of having a voice is not connected to giving a truthful account of events²⁷. The effect of this is twofold: Firstly, she shatters what Peter Lamarque terms “the presumption of truthfulness”, namely the presumption that the audience can accept all explicit statements as fictional truth (1996: 61). And secondly, Penelope refuses to be reduced to a helpless female victim, but arguably uses her voice to mould the story to portray herself exactly as she wants to. Thus, Readers are left in the dark about what actually happened and have to make up their minds about what – or rather, whom – they decide to believe. The choice, however, is not limited to either Homer’s or Atwood’s version: there are also dissident voices within *The Penelopiad* who claim that Penelope was anything but a victim in her own story: In 11 sections, all of which pertain to different genres (from a nursery rhyme to an anthropology lecture to a court trial), the maids speak out and share their own version of events, which often contradicts that of Penelope. For instance, she claims to have shed bitter tears once Eurycleia, Odysseus’s old nurse, tells her that the “notorious whores” (Atwood 2005: 160) have been slaughtered:

“But **which maids?**’ I cried, **beginning to shed tears**. ‘Dear god – which maids did they hang?’ [...] ‘The ones who’d been raped,’ I said. ‘The youngest. The most beautiful.’ **My eyes and ears among the Suitors**, I did not add. **My helpers** during the long nights of the shroud. **My**

²⁷ Unreliable narrators are by no means limited to the world of Greco-Roman mythology. Think, for instance, of Caesar’s *Commentarii de bello Gallico*: Eight whole books written from the perspective of the aggressor glorifying an unnecessary war to push a politician’s career. For more information, see James O’Donnell’s *The War for Gaul* (2019).

snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves." (Atwood 2005: 159f.; emphasis added)

Penelope claims not only that she had nothing to do whatsoever with the murder of the twelve girls, but that she was devastated by it. To underline her emotional involvement, she not only explicitly states that she cried and calls the maids 'young' and 'beautiful', but she indicates possession through pronouns and gives them pet names, as in 'my snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves'. They are stylised as confidants, friends, arguably even her own kin. However, the maid's own version – in the form of a play – tells a very different story:

Eurycleia:

We'll stop their mouths by sending them to

Hades –

He'll string them up as grubby wicked
ladies

Penelope:

And I in fame a model wife shall rest –

All husbands will look on, and think him
blessed!

But haste – the Suitors come to do their
wooing,

And I, for my part, must begin boo-hooing!

(Atwood 2005: 151; emphasis added)

In their play, they do not portray the queen of Ithaca as an ally, a friend, or even a mother figure to the maids. Rather, Penelope and Eurycleia author the conspiracy that leads to their death. Thus, the reader is confronted with two very different accounts of the same story, which raises the question: Whom, if anyone, is to be trusted? According to Frank Zipfel, "**true in a fictional world** is what is told as an **existing state of affairs** unless there is **evidence to doubt the truthfulness of the narrator**" (Zipfel 2011: 118; emphasis added). This is exactly what happens in *The Penelopiad*: By contradicting both Homer's and (Atwood's) Penelope's versions, the maids invite the audience to question whether any one telling of a story can ever be entirely true. They performatively reassess the individual characters' involvement in

their murder. For instance, in the court trial they stage in one of their chorus interludes, the judge calls Odysseus's involvement in their slaughter "a regrettable but minor incident" that should not "stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career" (Atwood 2005: 182). It is essential to note that in the Homeric version, the maids are practically silenced. Their killing is described as follows: "[T]he women's heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long." (quoted in Atwood 2005: xvi; *The Odyssey*, Book 22, 1: 470-473). In *The Penelopiad*, they are finally given the possibility to tell their version of events – but so is Penelope, and their accounts do not match. I argue that ultimately, using various contradicting unreliable narrators shows that what becomes known as the 'true story' is not necessarily connected to voice. Rather, it depends on another, arguably much more vital asset: Power.

2.1.4 Power

Simply put, the majority of women in classical mythology generally tend to be portrayed as pertaining to two categories (*tertium non datur*): good, passive, submissive angels, and active, wicked, threatening whores²⁸. In other words, women with agency were seen as a threat to the status quo and thus punished. In the words of Beard, the beginnings of Western history [show] **a radical separation** – real, cultural, and imaginary – **between women and power**" (2017: 18; emphasis added). This chasm appears in a myriad of different shapes in Greco-Roman mythology, ranging from the frequent rape scenes to shaming women into certain behavioural patterns to seemingly inconspicuous everyday interactions and traditions that perpetuate the status quo. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope subverts the patriarchal power when she is in the Underworld, but she vividly recalls feeling completely powerless. Here, I return to the meat-metaphor she uses to describe her wedding, or, more precisely, how she is handed from one man to the other²⁹. This is a primary example of the gendered power relations that pervade Greek mythology, where – except for a few instances involving Athena – women are at the mercy of male family

²⁸ For a more detailed discussion on the angel/monster dichotomy, see the introductory chapter as well as subchapter 2.1.2 of the present thesis.

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion on the woman/meat analogy, see subchapter 2.1.1 of the present thesis.

members, deities, or even strangers. It is no coincidence that Atwood uses the term 'meat', specifically: According to Andrea Dworkin the portrayal of women as a "female piece of meat" (1981: 67), which, incidentally, often occurs in pornography, actually has more to do with power than with sex³⁰. In a similar vein, Atwood's choice of words thus does not only reveal Penelope's feelings of being a slave to men's whims but are indicative of a culturally sanctioned power imbalance between the genders that is based on the (sexual) subjugation of women.

From a 21st century point of view, the narrative universe of *The Penelopiad* displays all the aspects of rape culture, which, ultimately, is but another symptomatic manifestation of the patriarchal power hierarchies. In the words of Tracey Nicholls, "A rape culture is one that **normalises and excuses rape**, a social context in which the **desires of privileged aggressors are prioritised over the comfort, safety, and dignity of marginalised populations** that are seen as targets, as prey" (2021: 26; emphasis added). Put simply, the power struggle is projected onto the level of sexuality, so that even here, men can dominate and control women both literally and metaphorically. In Antiquity, the concept of marital rape³¹ as a legal or moral offence did, to my knowledge, not exist. However, in the narrative world of Greco-Roman mythology the practice itself was not only common, but embedded in a wedding tradition:

[...] **[T]he consummation of marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing.** There was supposed to be blood.

Once the door had been closed, Odysseus took me by the hand and sat me down on the bed. **'Forget everything you've been told,'** he whispered. **'I'm not going to hurt you, or not very much. But it would help us both if you could pretend. I've been told you're a clever girl. Do you think you could manage a few screams?** That will satisfy them – they're listening at the door – and then they'll leave us in peace and we can take our time to become friends.'
(Atwood 2005: 44; emphasis added)

³⁰ This is arguably also the case when Poseidon rapes Medusa: As a God, he has many other options, but by forcing himself on Athena's priestess in her sacred temple, he demeans not one woman, but two at the same time. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see the introductory chapter of the present thesis.

³¹ In the United Kingdom, until the late 20th century, lawful marriage and rape were seen as a *contradiction in terminis*: by law, marriage granted the spouse the right to the 'conjugal act' and therefore, rape was seen as impossible. This was overturned by the House of Lords in 1991 in the case of *R. v. R.*, which resulted in "the removal of a common law fiction which has become anachronistic and offensive" ([House of Lords, Regina Respondent and R. Appellant](#) 1991).

Two things happen in this excerpt: First, there is a performance of rape that is not only culturally justified but required. Without pain, screams, bloodshed, and, most importantly, defeat of the woman ('conquest', 'trampling of a foe', 'bloodshed'), the marriage is not considered legitimate, according to Odysseus. He tries to persuade Penelope to cooperate by offering to 'save' her from the ordeal: not by refraining from having sex with her, but by only pretending to hurt her during intercourse. One thing is perfectly clear: she cannot escape marital rape, but if she is 'a clever girl' and cooperates, it might not hurt as much. Odysseus stylises himself not only as yet another victim of patriarchal traditions, but also as Penelope's saviour. In the word of Jordan Flaherty, "Whether or not it's true that sex work is the world's oldest profession, **rescuing women is probably the world's oldest justification for male violence**" (2016: 44; emphasis added). Odysseus argues that he is not forcing Penelope to have sex with him for his own sense of superiority or power, but that he is merely complying with unfortunate cultural requirements. He portrays his actions as a social imperative that functions like a Barthian myth, "giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency eternal" (Barthes 2006: 300). Asking Penelope to be a collaborator in her own (staged) rape to make it more bearable, Odysseus masterfully depoliticises sexual violence and obscures the power hierarchy intrinsically connected to it. In the words of Melissa Grant, "We permit some violence against women to be committed in order to protect the social and sexual value of other women" (2014: 6). In the case of Penelope, she is both the woman being violated and the one whose 'social and sexual value' is protected: To be a good, legitimate wife, she must submit to her husband, relinquishing all her power³². In this passage of *The Penelopiad*, sex is (ab)used as a symbolic stage for the arranged marital power struggle in the patriarchy.

This brings me to the second interesting thing happening in the excerpt above: The subtle but equally pernicious ways in which gendered power struggles are externalised by men and internalised by women. Feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky reinterprets Michael Foucault's disciplinary power to describe how social forces coerce women to internalise certain behaviours, body language, and attitude. She calls this "the **disciplinary project of femininity**", which is essential to "the regime of

³² This patriarchal rhetoric revolving around 'good, worthy wives' can also be found in many religious and specifically Christian discourses: "As the church is subordinate to Christ, so **wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything**" ([New American Bible Revised Version 2001: Ephesians 5:22-33](#); emphasis added).

institutionalised heterosexuality [that characterises] contemporary patriarchal culture” (Bartky 1997: 139f.). Odysseus addresses Penelope not as if she were his wife, but as if he were talking to a young girl in need of guidance. While, from a contemporary perspective, she truly was a child bride (“I was only fifteen”, Atwood 2005: 38), I argue that Odysseus uses this type of address not to refer to her age, but rather to the distribution of power in their marriage. Having received Penelope from her father, Odysseus has assumed his patriarchal place. She is now, in the eyes of the Greco-Roman world, his possession, and he is setting the scene for their future relationship. As an extraordinarily shrewd and tactical person, Odysseus is not interested in an overt sparring match between spouses. Rather, he wants her to be his submissive accomplice: “This was one of his great secrets as a persuader – he could convince another person that the two of them together faced a common obstacle, and that they needed to join forces in order to overcome it.” (Atwood 2005: 45) The conversation they are having on their wedding night is thus not one between two equals, but rather Odysseus’s strategy to make Penelope an accomplice in perpetuating profoundly sexist patriarchal power structures.

It is only in the afterlife that Penelope reclaims her power and breaks free from this profoundly sexist internalised code of conduct by telling her own story. What happens to women – and even female deities – when they attempt to shake the sexist shackles off during their lifetime is the content of the next object of analysis: Madeline Miller’s *Circe*.

2.2 Circe (2017)

Circe and Penelope are like night and day: While Penelope is the incarnation of marital fidelity, Circe is the archetype of the predatory female and lives alone on her island, Aiaia. They both feature in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the obvious connection between them being Odysseus himself, who fathered a child with each of the two women. A wicked enchantress (Ovid 2008 [2]: 4.15) who is both feared and desired, Circe is independent, greedy, jealous³³, dominating and sexually active. In other words, the wicked witch of Aiaia is in no way a well-behaved woman like Odysseus’s

³³ This character trait is visualised in William Waterhouse’s *Circe Invidiosa* (1982), where Circe poisons her beautiful cousin Scylla to exact revenge against Glaucos.

wife. Yet, she is (in)famous not despite but precisely because of this array of negatively connotated qualities: Circe's character has been reimagined and reinterpreted countless times throughout Western cultural and literary history, causing a constant addition of various new layers to her personality and story. One of the most comprehensive literary depictions of the enchantress after Antiquity can be found in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*. In his oeuvre, Boccaccio provides a portrait of Circe based on what was known about her in the Middle Ages, complaining that she serves as a role model for many aspiring temptresses (2001 [1374]: 74). John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (1380), however, paints a different picture: Here, the powerful magician is not Circe, but Odysseus, who manages to get her pregnant through sorcery (1901 [1380]: 6.1391–6.1788). Her popularity and influence, however, is by no means limited to the English-speaking world: Spanish playwright and poet Lope de Vega even devoted a whole miscellany to her, naming it *La Circe – con otras rimas y prosas* (1624). In this version, Circe's love for Odysseus – like in the case of Glaucos and Picus – is unrequited. It is obvious, even from this infinitesimal selection, that Circe's character plays a variety of roles which coexist despite their blatant contradictions: Unifying irreconcilable traits, she is the temptress and the tempted, the powerful and the powerless, the coveting and the coveted.

There is, however, a red thread that connects all renditions of Circe's story: The witch of Aiaia has always been associated, in one way or another, with female power, agency, and sex. This is particularly true of her ability to turn men into animals. Countless writers, scholars, and philosophers speculated (and continue to speculate) about whether the change was more than just her magic. For instance, Socrates claimed that it was gluttony, for Andrea Alciato (*Emblemata* 1546) it was unchastity, and for Geoffrey Whitney (*Choice of Emblemes* 1582) it was passions that transformed Odysseus's men. But ultimately always Circe's magical abilities that triggered these changes from human to beast. Her powers are referred to in the works of several influential Renaissance and Enlightenment authors, such as, inter alia, Niccolò Machiavelli (*L'asino d'oro* 1516), Edmund Spenser (*The Faerie Queene* 1590), and Antoine Jacob (*Les Bestes raisonnables* 1661). But the fascination with Circe's ability to transform sailors into pigs did by no means end in the Enlightenment: The witch of Aiaia became increasingly popular in the mid to late 19th century, given that she was seen as a sorceress who could uncover a person's

innermost desires. In Matthew Arnold's dramatic poem "The Strayed Reveller" (1849), for instance, Circe's magic potion does not turn men into animals, but rather induces a drug-like poetic frenzy that those who have experienced it continue to crave. In Augusta Webster's version, the enchantress does not transform men either: Rather, it reveals their true nature, stripping away the thin veneer of civilisation: "But any draught, pure water, natural wine, / out of my cup, revealed them to themselves / and to each other. Change? there was no change; / only disguise gone from them unawares" (Webster 2000 [1893]: 184-193). Thus, Circe's power lies not in changing men, but in disillusioning them³⁴. Webster uses the ancient myth almost like a fable, criticising gendered power imbalances from a safe literary distance.

Like many other mythological *femmes fatales*, Circe was extraordinarily popular among the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which was founded in 1848 by seven English artists, poets, and critics. Young, yearning, mysterious women were their primary subject and they frequently returned to tragic female figures from highly canonical European literature, such as Circe, Medea, and Ophelia. In his collection *Poems* (1870), Dante Gabriel Rossetti – perhaps the most famous representative of the Brotherhood – wrote a sonnet in response to Edward Burne Jones's painting *The Wine of Circe*. In his text, Rossetti equals the witch's potion with death and shame, which is an indicator for Circe's status as the incarnation of evil and perversion in Victorian England. Yet, despite the witch's bad reputation, 19th century Britain was highly productive with regards to artworks, particularly paintings, of the enchantress. Examples include John Collier's *Circe* (1885), which was exhibited at the Chicago World Fair 1893, John William Waterhouse's *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (1891), and Wright Barker's *Circe* (1889), where she is depicted as a musician amongst lions and wolves. While the Pre-Raphaelites used mythological women as the subject of their art, they did, at least from a contemporary feminist perspective, not revolutionise or transform them in a meaningful way. These renditions, particularly the paintings, are captivating due to their artistic qualities, but clearly lack innovative spirit.

³⁴ Webster's rendition bears striking similarities to the Spanish baroque principle of *engaño* and *desengaño*, which was common in Siglo de Oro literature. For more information, see Christoph Strosetzki's 2014 chapter "Barock" in Iglesias, Carmen Rivero (ed.). *Spanische Literaturgeschichte: Eine kommentierte Anthologie*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

Around the turn of the century, American author Leigh Gordon Giltner included a poem called “Circe” in her volume *The Path of Dreams* (1900), which explores women’s sexual power through transforming men. In T.S. Eliot’s student poem “Circe’s Palace” (1909), the witch herself is not mentioned. Rather, her presence is implied through the many beasts, such as pythons, peacocks, and panthers. Circe is no longer a mere *femme fatale*, but, according to Miller, actively poses an emasculatory threat (2005: 71). Similarly, Hilda Doolittle’s collection *Hymen* (1921) features a poem of the same name, in which the protagonist mourns Odysseus’s sexual advances. In a similar vein, Margaret Atwood’s “Circe/Mud Poems” (published in *You Are Happy* 1974), which only refers to the witch in its title, revolves around the topic of gender politics. One of the most interesting iterations of the enchantress’s power is Carol Ann Duffy’s monologue “Circe” (*The World’s Wife* 1999), in which the eponymous protagonist tells her audience, consisting of nereids and nymphs, about the ways in which pork should be cooked. The text is filled to the brim with sexual innuendos, displaying clear dominance over the pigs (i.e., men). This brief overview serves to show that over the last century and a half, a myriad of artists have used the character of Circe and her magical abilities as metaphors to refer to gendered power relations. This, in addition to the fact that she is perhaps the most potent foil character to Penelope due to their diametrically opposed character traits, make a rewriting of her myth an obvious choice as an object of analysis in the context of the present thesis.

Hailed as “a bold and subversive retelling of the goddess’s story” (Alter 2018: 3), Madeline Miller’s 2018 novel *Circe* is a revisionist retelling of the eponymous heroine’s story. In contrast to Margaret Atwood, Miller is not only an author specialised in Greco-Roman rewritings but also holds a BA and an MA in Classics from Brown University and is thus an expert on the historical, cultural, and linguistic background of the *Odyssey*. *Circe* was a natural choice as one of the objects of analysis in the present thesis, not only because of its critical acclaim and widespread popularity, but because Miller wrote it specifically with female agency and gender construction in mind: “Circe as a character is **the embodiment of male anxiety about female power**. Of course she has to be vanquished. For the hero to succeed, **the woman has to be put in her place**, and that was always so disappointing” (Miller 2018: 9f.; emphasis added). Consequently, *Circe* was written with a clear goal

in mind: to break the stereotypical pattern that many classical myths share, namely that of the male hero who conquers a woman, either by marrying, raping, slaying, or exiling her (or any combination of the four). Questions revolving around the interconnectedness between power and gender lie, as I will strive to show in the following subchapters, at the heart of Miller's book. In *Circe*, there is a role-reversal of hero and villainess, changing the deep structure of the epic: suddenly, the *femme fatale*, Circe, occupies centre stage and takes control of both her life and her story, inviting readers to see the world from her eyes.

In many ways, Miller's *Circe* complements Atwood's *Penelopiad*. For one, both retellings form part of the *Odyssey* and are therefore set in the same narrative universe. Penelope, for instance, features in both works. However, she and Circe are, at least on paper, polar opposites: While Penelope is a mortal king's daughter, Circe is the ostracised yet immortal daughter of Helios, God of the sun. Odysseus's wife is, as aforementioned, the incarnation of the ideal wife – modest, ever faithful, trustworthy, and (uncomplainingly) restricted to the private sphere, her household. Circe, by contrast, is often portrayed as a wicked enchantress and temptress who led men astray by seducing them (Boccaccio [1374] 2001: 75f.) and ultimately turning them into pigs. Miller's version offers a decidedly more nuanced picture of her character and gender, the construction of which I will explore in greater detail in the following subchapter.

2.2.1 Gender

Circe is, in many ways, the archetype of the vamp: In the *Odyssey*, Homer describes her as a woman who both attracts and appals men. This is the essence of the *femme fatale*: she is a woman that is defined as being beautifully terrifying and terrifyingly beautiful at the same time. Consequently, in most rewritings, Circe tends to be described either as a lying yet irresistible virgin-faced man-eater³⁵ (Ménard 1876: 3f.) or a woman as “wicked and mischievous as the ugliest serpent that ever was seen” (Hawthorne 2017 [1853]: 76). Male authors throughout Western literary history have portrayed Circe as a character that combines the seemingly incompatible qualities of

³⁵ In the late 19th century, the ‘femme fatale’, also known as ‘vamp’, became terribly in-vogue as a fashionable literary trope (Scott 2005: 66).

a virgin and a temptress. Yet, the complexity of her personality is arguably hardly explored. In *Transformations of Circe*, Judith Yarnall argues that the different versions of Circe's myth "can be seen **as mirrors [...]** of the **fantasies and assumptions of the cultures that produced them. Circe herself, [...]** through the centuries, **has gone through far more metamorphoses** than those she inflicted on Odysseus's companions" (1994: 1f.; emphasis added). Put differently, the demonisation of her character (e.g., by portraying her as a vamp) seems to be connected to greater underlying misogynous trends in literature and culture.

While Yarnall's claim is arguably faulty in that it fails to acknowledge the fact that literature does not merely mirror but in fact shape cultural realities, it holds water in that textual production is obviously shaped by its socio-historical context. For instance, Albert Glatigny paints Circe as a powerful, merciless, and voluptuous opium nightmare in *Les vignes folles* (2012 [1860]: 5-17), which is a clear reference to the Opium Wars (1839-1860). Similarly, Miller adopts a decidedly 21st century feminist approach in *Circe*, seeing that she reveals the constraints of (neoliberal³⁶) body projects and beauty regimes. As will be explored subsequently, Miller highlights how gender construction and the worth of a woman seem to be inextricably intertwined with pleasing men: in order to be deemed 'valuable' and 'feminine', goddesses need to be attractive, beautiful, and able to bear equally good-looking children. Their appearances are judged from the very moment they are born, and their bodies seem to serve as a projection screen for (neoliberal) patriarchal desires and anxieties (Darling 2020: 1). This is best exemplified in the following excerpt: Right after Circe's birth, her father, the patriarch Helios, concludes that there is something wrong with his daughter because she does not meet his beauty standards. When her mother, Perse, asks if Circe can one day marry a god, he answers as follows:

³⁶ I am well aware that neoliberalism did not exist in antiquity. However, Miller lives in a world that has turned beauty and youth into capitalist commodities necessary to appeal to men. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that the comparison of beauty to currency is one of the anachronic elements she added to Circe's narrative.

“No. Her hair is streaked like a lynx. And her chin. There is a sharpness to it that is **less than pleasing**.”

My mother did not argue further. [...] She stood. Her **belly was gone, her waist reknitted, her cheeks fresh and virgin-rosy**. All our kind recover quickly, but she was faster still, one of the daughters of Oceanos, who shoot their babies like roe.

“Come,” she said. “Let us **make a better one**.”

(Miller 2018: 4; emphasis added)

While Circe is perfectly healthy, her physical markers of difference (such as the brown streaks in her hair) render her seemingly unfit to perform the kind of “aesthetic entrepreneurship” that is “her brand and her gateway” in the realm of the gods (Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017: 25-29). Thus, Circe lacks value in her world, given that she is not as extraordinarily good-looking as Perse. Unlike her, Circe will never be able to please a man enough on the level of physical attraction to make him want to marry her, which is seen as the ultimate failure – not only for herself, but also for her mother. The fact that Perse immediately wants to ‘make a better one’ is another indicator that she feels it is her duty to please the patriarch by producing a ‘good offspring’ – it is, it seems, the only way for her to secure her social status as a woman. Helios even explicitly states that “‘It is all Perse’s fault. All the other ones before hers were fine’”. (Miller 2018: 55). Seeing that the patriarch’s word is sacrosanct, Perse has to admit her ‘mistake’ and rectify it. Her gender identity and sense of (self-)worth are inextricably intertwined with her ability to serve the father, Helios: to maintain her position, she is required to please him visually and sexually and to provide him with ‘quality progeny’, which is why she eventually gives birth to Aeëtes, Pasiphaë, and Perses.

Perse is, in many ways, a foil character to Circe, given that both their views and the resulting actions could not be more different. While Circe recognises the pernicious effects the patriarchal system has on her (and on female dissident voices in general), Perse goes out of her way to maintain the status quo, seeing that she has some social standing because she fits the female ideal: she is beautiful, fertile, and submissive. However, the mother’s attractiveness is by no means enough to render her ‘successful’. Rather, it is her willingness to go to great lengths to “transcend [...] bodily functionality (farting, sex, pregnancy)” (Darling 2020: 8). Even as a goddess, she is affected by childbirth, but does her best – with the help of her sisters

– to conceal the physical reality of her condition so as not to appear ‘leaky’, ‘needy’, or unattractive to Helios, her patriarch husband. This is best illustrated in the following passage:

At my birth, an aunt – I will spare you her name because my tale is full of aunts – washed and wrapped me. Another **tended to my mother, painting the red back on her lips, brushing her hair with ivory combs.** A third one **went to admit my father.**
“**A girl,**” my mother said to him, **wrinkling her nose.**
(Miller 2018: 3; emphasis added)

Clearly, Perse is keen on hiding any part of herself that might be considered unattractive to stay in Helios’s good graces. According to Margit Shildrick, these female bodily functions, including the natural bodily functions associated with procreation, are often read as “evidence of women’s inherent lack of control of the body, and, by extension, the self” (Shildrick 1994: 25). Consequently, Miller’s construction of the female gender is linked to contemporary ideals of neoliberal feminism, which equals beauty with currency. This, in turn, leads to the social exclusion and othering of female goddesses who do not meet the beauty standards, as is exemplified when Circe’s siblings realise that she is not as pretty as them:

The two of them [Pasiphaë and Perses] were clever and **quickly saw how things stood.** They loved to sneer at me behind their ermine paws.
Her eyes are yellow as piss. Her voice is screechy as an owl. She is called Hawk, but she should be called Goat for her ugliness. (Miller 2018: 6; italics original; emphasis added)

By ostracising their older sister, Pasiphaë and Perses arguably strengthen their own position as the ‘good’ offspring. Essentially, their behaviour indicates that in Miller’s Circe, women’s “value is largely measured by their capacity to self-care and self-improve” (Favaro 2017: 288f.), that is, their ability to meet beauty standards and use their attractiveness as currency. Miller thus taps into the deeply capitalist notion that women need to use their bodies like money, a means of exchange for social standing. In other words, in order to prove themselves ‘worthy’ of male attention and the privileges that come with it, they need to have the right physical appearance.

To sum up, in Miller's rendition of the myths surrounding Circe the expectations piled onto the female gender are clearly connected to male approval. This is mainly achieved through producing offspring, acts of service and being aesthetically pleasing at all times. While Perse schemes to ensure that her beauty, as well as that of her two 'good' children, Pasiphaë and Perses, is recognised, her eldest daughter Circe is ostracised and othered not only for her ostensible innate plainness, but also for her failure to perform the alleged duties of her gender. Unable to secure a good match (such as a son of Zeus), she is an example of everything that women should not be: single, strong-minded, and, at least for a daughter of Helios, unsightly.

2.2.1 Agency

Although Circe is often stylised as the prototypical 'witch', that is, a malicious woman who uses her supernatural abilities to do evil, her bad reputation is actually rooted in her resilience against men. The term 'witch' itself is derived from the Old English 'wicce' describing a female enchantress whose practices of magic are malevolent (Bailey 2018: 22). In Miller's mythological universe, 'doing evil' is not automatically associated with an action being morally unsound or detrimental to others. Instead, it is very much linked to the question of who has the power to do anything at all, regardless of labels such as 'evil' or 'good'. Operating within a patriarchal system, the person who is given the most leeway in decision making is, of course, the father. Objecting to or, worse, disobeying the father is perceived as a great threat to the underlying patriarchal hierarchy – especially if the act of dissidence is performed by a woman (re)claiming her agency. This is best illustrated when Helios repeatedly tries to convince Circe – as well as the rest of the gods and goddesses – that she is but a powerless, unattractive little 'wench' and that Scylla's transformation was destined to happen. Following his line of argumentation, his daughter may be annoying but certainly innocent, seeing that she is simply too weak – physically, mentally, and socially – to ever cause any real damage. Circe, however, insists on the fact that she, with the use of 'wicked pharmaka' transformed her cousin into a terrible sea monster, thereby directly contradicting the patriarch:

“You are wrong,” I said.

[...] His face began to glow. **“What did you say?”**

“I saw those plants have power.”

[...] He stood, yet kept on rising, as if he would tear a hole in the ceiling, in the earth’s crust, as if he would not cease until he scraped the stars. And then the heat came, rolling over me with a sound like roaring waves, blistering my skin, crushing the breath from my chest. I gasped, but there was no air. He had taken it all.

“You dare to contradict me? You who cannot light a single flame, or call one drop of water? Worst of my children, faded and broken, whom I cannot pay a husband to take. Since you were born, I pitied you and allowed you licence, yet you grew disobedient and proud. Will you make me hate you more?”

(Miller 2018: 54; emphasis added)

The lexical choices alone highlight how Circe’s decision to stand against her father are viewed as the utmost affront. He describes her as ‘the worst’, ‘faded and broken’, ‘pitied’, ‘disobedient’, and ‘proud’. In other words, she is not only ugly and useless, but also fails to be of service to the patriarch and thus embodies all the qualities that a woman should not have³⁷. It is important to note that in this dynamic, Helios’s outburst of rage is not primarily caused by the fact that Scylla has been turned into a hideous oceanic creature, but by Circe’s ‘disobedient’ behaviour, namely her demand to be recognised as possessing agency of her own. The actual offences, namely the turning of Scylla as well as Helios’s misogynous and patronising comments, fade into the background. However, Circe’s refusal to silently absorb any patriarchal comments misconstruing the truth is portrayed as the real problem. Essentially, Circe asks her father to admit that he continues to underestimate her. Changing Scylla into an aquatic monstrosity, she did not only demonstrate that she is capable of making her own choices, but that her actions are powerful enough to pose a very real danger to the underlying patriarchal system. When forced to acknowledge her agency (and power), Helios switches from belittling Circe to demonising her, enumerating her flaws, the worst of which is that he ‘cannot pay a husband to take’ her, seeing that she ‘grew disobedient and proud’. It follows that a woman is only acceptable (at least within the godly society Miller portrays) if she is ‘wife material’³⁸. In other words, in order to not be ostracised, she needs to meet naturalised standards not only in terms of outward appearance, but – perhaps more importantly – in terms of obedience to

³⁷ See chapter 3.1.

³⁸ There are, of course, some notable exceptions such as Athena. However, even Athena is only allowed to live the way she does because Zeus, after initial rejection, gave her his blessing.

men, which is a complete contradiction to any kind of female agency and independence.

In *Feminist theory: from margin to center*, bell hooks wrote that “being oppressed means the absence of choices. It is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor” (hooks 1984: 5). It is highly probable that when she made this statement, she did not have Greek mythology, but rather contemporary society in mind. Yet, this is exactly what happens to women in Miller’s *Circe*: There is a tacit agreement that women are required to be beautiful, serving damsels if they wish to thrive (or even survive) in Helios’s halls. While there might be an illusion of choice for those deemed unfit (such as Circe) at first (‘[s]ince you were born, I pitied you and allowed you licence’), Circe’s story shows that in reality, women have no leeway at all. As punishment for contradicting her father (rather than for transforming her cousin into a submarine beast), she is famously exiled to the island of Aiaia, which she is not allowed to leave. Consequently, Helios takes away her choices with regards to free movement as well as company, effectively isolating her from the world and thereby further reducing her agency. However, away from her father’s halls, Miller’s Circe starts to develop true independence for the first time and, with it, discovers a new strength she never knew she had:

I learned to plait my hair back, so it would not catch on every twig, and how to tie my skirts at the knee to keep the burrs off. I learned to recognise the different blooming vines and gaudy roses, to spot the shining dragonflies and coiling snakes. [...] **I was drunk, as the wine and nectar in my father’s halls never made me.** No wonder I have been so slow, I thought. All this while **I have been a weaver without wool, a ship without the sea. Yet now look where I sail** [...] I learned that **I could bend the world to my will**, as a bow is bent for an arrow. [...] I thought: This is how Zeus felt when he lifted the first thunderbolt.
(Miller 2018: 71-73; italics original; emphasis added)

Instead of being discouraged by the rejection, Miller’s Circe finally feels free enough to explore her potential by categorising and tapping into the power of the flora of Aiaia, or rather, her own. It is important to note that the work Circe does, which includes herbalism, weaving as well as brewing potions, is traditionally viewed (and undervalued) as ‘women’s work’. And it is in these ‘feminine’ actions that she discovers not only that she does not need patriarchal society, but that she is actually

better off without it, seeing that it was holding her back all along. Instead of striving to prove herself worthy in a world designed around male desires that has marked her as different and inadequate from birth, she turns her prison into a refuge from patriarchal demands where she can finally thrive.

Circe's forced isolation has the exact opposite effect to what Helios expected (and wanted): He seems to believe that if he locks her away and isolates her from his patriarchal court, she will not only be unable to exert her powers anymore, but also, her spirit will be broken, rendering her harmless and defenceless. Due to his hubris, Helios underestimates Circe's potential with regards to magic as well as with regards to her self-sufficiency and independence. As the primary beneficiary of the system surrounding him, the patriarch is obviously convinced that removing a family member from it is the ultimate punishment³⁹. He acts under the assumption that isolation, exclusion from one's family and the considerable reduction of one's sphere of influence are punishments that invariably lead to extreme distress. However, Helios (as well as the other members of the godly court) fails to recognise that the world he has shaped is deeply unjust towards certain groups, particularly women who, like Circe, do not meet society's expectations. Taking her experience into consideration (i.e., being harassed, bullied, and hurt on a daily basis), it is rather unsurprising that she is happier, more productive, and, ultimately, more powerful when she is physically removed from Helios's court and shunned by her family. Essentially, his entire plan rests upon the erroneous assumption that she will have fewer possibilities to develop her power when living in isolation when, in reality, the absence of paternal control and constant power struggles give her room to grow.

Witches are dangerous because they possess agency and power of their own. Essentially, they are the patriarchy's *bête noire*, seeing that this oppressive system tends to operate much like a cultural hegemony: making victims believe, consciously or subconsciously, that the rule of the father is the inevitable norm. Essayist, author, and journalist Pacôme Thiellement sees a clear connection between patriarchal

³⁹ It is important to note that Circe was, of course, not the first minor goddess to step out of line. In Miller's novel, she is first inspired by another famous titan, namely Prometheus, who is punished severely for bringing humans the gift of fire (see Miller 2018: 11-18).

desire to take away women's agency as well as their choices and the stereotypes of witches:

The whole power question comes down to **separating people from what they can do**. There is no power issue if people are self-sufficient. For me, the history of witchcraft could equally be called the history of independence. [...] Those in power must constantly be making examples out of people, **demonstrating that we couldn't go on without them**. On the international political level, the most troubled territories are always those that want to be independent. (Thiellement 2014, quoted in Chollet 2022 [2018]: 64; translated by Sophie R. Lewis; italics original; emphasis added)

Following Thiellement's line of argumentation⁴⁰, when Helios sent Circe to Aiaia, he exiled her for two primary reasons: Firstly, he wanted to remove her from the places and resources involved in her first magical attempts. In other words, he tried to contain her agency. Secondly, he wanted to show her that she was unable to survive on her own so that she would beg to return to the court and admit that she was wrong about her own abilities all along. This would be the ultimate demonstration of female subordination. However, Miller's feminist subversive rewriting is not about Helios, but about the defiant eponymous protagonist: "as an adapted work, *Circe* removes the humiliation and submission of women as a core element of heroic male storytelling" (Hovind 2022: 18). Consequently, Helios's 'punishment' does not smother Circe's agency, but clearly fuels it, seeing that she has lost every reason to be loyal to her family and follow the rule of the father. Outside the patriarchal system, she is finally able to access all the materials and resources she needs to develop her (magic) abilities to the fullest.

2.2.3 Voice

Voice is a crucial element in Miller's retelling: She gives Circe the possibility to narrate the story of her life with a (seemingly) honest, yet critical perspective that is clearly informed by feminist movements and theories. Miller has stated repeatedly in

⁴⁰ Thiellement argues that these systems of oppression do not only discriminate on the basis of various markers of difference (see Hall 2017) besides sex, such as race and nationality, which harks back to Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (see Crenshaw 1989).

interviews that she believes the portrayal of women in myth is one-sided and outdated: “Women are helpmates, they’re wives, they’re mistresses, and then they’re dead. [...] I wanted [Circe] to be pushing back” (Miller; quoted in Hovind 2022: 18). This desire to provide (antagonised) female characters with a voice and agency of their own is arguably one of the principal reasons why Miller has chosen to rewrite their stories in the first place. Thereby, she follows a tradition of criticising, challenging, and retelling Greco-Roman mythology that exposes and fundamentally questions the sexism that is inherent in its narrative structures and typical (gendered) character constellations. In the words of the famous French feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir:

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth. [...] A myth always implies a subject who projects his hopes and his fears towards a sky of transcendence. Women do not set themselves up as Subject and have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship. Men have shaped for their own exaltation great virile figures: Hercules, Prometheus, Parsifal; woman has only a secondary part to play in the destiny of these heroes. (Beauvoir 1956: 162; emphasis added)

According to the philosopher, these ancient tales arguably cater exclusively to the needs and desires of men, while female characters are little more than pawns needed to support the male hero’s storyline. Beauvoir believed that only providing the male perspective leads to the confusion of fiction and faction, meaning that after a while, it seems only *natural* that women are sidelined. Essentially, like in Barthian myth, a culturally created narrative (i.e., heroes are male) is portrayed as an inevitable law of nature. By giving Circe voice as well as agency, Miller “is able to question and challenge the portrayals presented in Homer’s narrative in a modern climate which [is] more interested in the [female] point of view” (Hovind 2022: 18). Like Atwood, Miller also chooses first person narration and internal focalisation, telling the story through Circe’s eyes and thereby providing a completely different viewpoint. In addition, the author has fictionalised certain elements (such as, for instance, Circe’s romantic relationship with Daedalus and her involvement in the birth of the Minotaur), which does not only serve to render the character more credible, but also to fill the glaring gaps Greco-Roman mythology left behind: “[I]n Miller’s version **Circe, who is passed over in a few dozen lines in the Greek original, matters**

deeply" (Preston 2018: 4). In other words, Miller is not rewriting the tale solely based on Ovid and Homer, but she is actively reimagining the heroine's life using a contemporary feminist lens, creating a mythological woman character that female readers can identify with. By giving a voice to Circe, the author is arguably paying homage and seeking literary justice for a literary character that, for millennia, has been reduced to a knowledgeable yet wicked villainous temptress who lures innocent men into their demise.

In the context of the present thesis, the question *how* the story is retold is just as important as *what* is written – and there are crucial differences in style, not only between Miller's version and the original, but also between *Circe* and *The Penelopiad*. Unlike Penelope in the latter, Miller's Circe is not telling the story retrospectively and in an ironic and even bitter way. Instead, she seems to state her truth in a clear, straight forward, and arguably somewhat understated fashion, and at least within the narrative universe, there is little reason to doubt Circe's words. In a way, her way of storytelling and rebellion is mirrored as well as foreshadowed when she meets Prometheus, who is viewed as the ultimate black sheep in her family. Yet, when she interacts with him, he seems much friendlier, calmer, and saner than the rest of her family:

"Thank you for your kindness."

I did not know if I was kind, I felt I did not know anything. He spoke carefully, almost tentatively, yet his treason had been so brazen. My mind struggled with the contradiction. *Bold action and bold manner are not the same.* (Miller 2018: 17; italics original)

Circe's thoughts on Prometheus are essentially a prediction of her own voice: as a narrator, she does not seem like an evil temptress, but like a (mostly) calm, courageous, intelligent, and even kind woman. Her actions may seem 'bold', but, as will be explained in greater detail below, there is always a good (enough) reason for them, rendering her character relatable. Consequently, readers invariably question the verisimilitude of the original version. This becomes most apparent when comparing Miller's rewriting of the pig episode with the original. In an interview following *Circe*'s release, she asks: "**[W]hy is she turning men into pigs?** She's so often portrayed as villainous, but [...] she ends up being one of the most helpful

deities [Odysseus] encounters. I always thought she got bad rep. Who was she really?" (Miller 2018; quoted in Hovind 2022: 17). Homer's work does not provide a satisfactory answer regarding Circe's reason. According to him, the motive why she transforms men into pigs is simply her evil character as well as her villainous predisposition. In other words, Homer essentialises Circe's character as inherently malevolent and wicked, particularly towards men, the stereotypical *femme fatale*⁴¹ – as if this were reason enough for her to transform seemingly innocent sailors.

Miller is clearly not satisfied with such one-dimensional, misogynous portrayals that reduce Circe not only to a side-character, but to an unreasonable and oversexualised one at that. Thus, the parts Miller fictionalised serve to offer alternative explanations for her heroine's actions so as to render her character development more plausible and show that she is not the man-eating vamp she is traditionally associated with. In the words of Tuhin Sen, "the eponymous spokeswoman Circe, the vilified witch of Homer's tale, both fumes over her unfair portrayal in the epic and mocks [...] Western literary tradition [because it demeans] the status of women" (2020: 48). This is best exemplified when Miller gives the audience an exceedingly graphic description of Circe's underlying motive:

The man threw me back against the wall. My head hit the uneven stone and the room sparked. I opened my mouth to cry out the spell, but he jammed his arm against my windpipe and the sound was chocked off. **I could not speak, I could not breathe.** I fought him, but he was stronger than I thought he would be, [...] [t]he sudden weight of him shocked me. [...] With his right hand, he tore my clothes, a practised gesture. With his left, he kept his weight against my throat. [...] **The sleep-spell I had been going to say was gone, dried up, I could not even have cast it if I wanted to.** But I did not want to. [...] **These herbs had another use,** and I knew what it was. I drew breath and spoke my word. [...] **As it turned out, I did kill Pigs that night after all.**
(Miller 2018: 164f.; emphasis added)

The roles of oppressor and oppressed, of perpetrator and victim are very much reversed in Miller's version. Circe was originally planning on putting the men who had feasted in her house and treated her like a servant to sleep. She changed her mind only after the captain had raped her, an act which, according to Stine-Mari Hovind,

⁴¹ See chapter 2.2.1 of the present thesis.

“appears as both realistic and horrifying” (2022: 17). Miller uses her protagonist both as a narrator and focaliser (through internal focalisation), which not only renders her (re)actions more plausible, but consequently also challenges the portrayal of women in earlier versions.

Circe’s rape does not appear (explicitly) in the original Homeric myth. However, although Miller added several episodes such as this later, they arguably do not alter, but merely unveil the gendered power dynamics that most female characters in Greco-Roman mythology are subjected to. It also has to be stated clearly that feminist authors were by no means the first or only ones to make changes to the story. In the past, many ‘traditional’ male translators have frequently made rather questionable linguistic choices when labelling and describing female characters. In an interview with Wyatt Mason, Emily Wilson, who, in 2017, was the first woman to translate the *Odyssey*, argues that these men perpetuate stereotypical and highly problematic female roles: For instance, male translators often refer to Penelope’s maids as ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’, instead of the semantically much closer, ‘maidservants’, which, from a 21st century perspective, is the semantically much closer to the word ‘slaves’. Thereby, Wilson claims, these young women are portrayed as accomplices when, in reality, they were victims with little to no agency to resist (Mason 2017). Male responsibility was thus hidden by making these young women out to be lewd and salacious, even when this does not correspond to the original meaning of the Greek text. Consequently, giving a voice to these mute female characters and even adding on to the original story, Miller arguably (merely) counterbalanced the (deliberately) misleading linguistic choices of generations of male translators.

2.2.4 Power

This last subchapter of section two revolves around power relations in *Circe*. One of the reasons why the novel has repeatedly been characterised as subversive and feminist is because unlike in the original, Miller’s Circe sternly and consistently refuses to be dominated by the men in her life, be it Helios, Aeëtes, Hermes, or

Odysseus. Apart from the episode with her unrequited love for Glaucos which ended in Scylla's transformation, Circe is categorically opposed to owning or being owned by someone, particularly men. Especially after being raped, she grows very cautious and calculated around (most) men and never lets her guard down – which is exactly what happens in Homer's version. Here, Helios's immortal daughter is at Odysseus's mercy because for some reason, her potions have no effect on him. She dramatically throws herself at Odysseus's feet, surrendering to him in an act of total submission, begging for clemency and ultimately sleeping with him:

Without a word, **I drew my sharpened sword**
and in one bound **held it against her throat.**
She cried out, then slid under to take my knees,
catching her breath to say, in her distress: [...]
“Hale must your heart be and you tempered will.
Odysseus then you are, O great contender, [...]
Put up your weapon in the sheath. We two
shall **mingle and make love upon our bed.**
So mutual trust may come of play and love.
(*Odyssey*, Book X: 361-378; emphasis added; 2004 transl. by A.S. Kline)

The fact that a mere mortal like Odysseus is able to vanquish a sorceress like Circe, who has successfully defeated many men before him, with an ordinary sword is, from a contemporary perspective, somewhat suspicious. Although she manages to turn his crew into pigs, power is ultimately tied more to gender than it is to (godly) pedigree or skill: After all, Odysseus is often seen as masculinity incarnate and thus his manliness trumps her magic abilities. It is also no mere coincidence that the weapon Odysseus uses to fight Circe bears great resemblance to the phallus. In addition, the resolution of the power struggle is sexual domination, both physically and symbolically: notice how the possessive pronouns change after Odysseus draws his sword: *her* bed immediately becomes *our* bed. While there is talk of ‘mutual trust’ that is apparently generated during sex, Odysseus' victory over Circe is unmistakably a metaphor for female surrender in the face of male power. This scene in the *Odyssey* serves as an unambiguous reminder that even if women attain agency and power, they will in the end still be conquered by men. Their confrontation was, at least in Homer's version, never about trust in the first place, but served primarily to determine who was stronger. In my contemporary reading, this part demonstrates that women's power must not only be censored in real life, but also in fiction – lest they consider challenging the status quo.

There is something to be said about the sexual symbolism in Circe's story, seeing that it is not limited to Odysseus's sword. Although it is not mentioned in the excerpt above, the witch of Aiaia owns and uses a herding staff, which also looks fairly similar to a phallus. Yarnall argues that Circe's ability to use pharmaka as well as her staff (from rhabdos, Ancient Greek ῥάβδος: staff or wand) are intrinsically connected to gender and power:

Circe turning men to pigs is **a signifier of a reversal of power (by gender)** – the drug in the drink is what turns the men to pigs, but there is an emphasis on **her herding staff**. Yet because this moment illustrates more clearly than any other **female dominance over the male, the rhabdos has come to seem potent, a symbol of phallic powers improperly assumed**. (Yarnall 1994: 12; emphasis added).

Although her 'supernatural powers' are directly linked to domestic, feminine labour such as herbology and weaving, Circe infringes on 'male territory' because she can bend the world to her will: suddenly, the gender roles are reversed, and she occupies a masculine space, which is the one that dominates, as opposed to the traditionally submissive female position. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1990 [1984]), Michel de Certeau describes the link between space and power with his concept of strategies and tactics: a "strategy" strives to permanently claim the space (*propre*) of an 'other' (e.g., the other gender), thereby threatening them and shifting the power relations (1984: 21). This is exactly what happens in the case of Circe: According to McClymont, her witchcraft is actually less connected to "magical power [than to] dominance obtained over the male sex" (2008: 23), which she expresses by assuming a position of power usually reserved for the patriarch. Essentially, until Odysseus's arrival, Circe is truly the mistress of Aiaia, and exerts direct control over any living being on her island – just like her father Helios does in his halls.

Miller's *Circe* challenges such traditional portrayals of the first encounter of Odysseus and the eponymous protagonist. Remembering the encounter years later, she shares the following metafictional critique with the reader:

Later, years later, I would hear a song made of our meeting. The boy who sang it was unskilled, missing notes more often than he hit, yet the sweet music of the verses shone through his mangling. **I was not surprised by**

the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. Humbling seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep. (Miller 2018: 181; emphasis added).

Circe's criticism echoes Miller's own feminist stance on the portrayals of women in classical literature: most of them are not heroines in their own right, but primarily serve as a narrative element in the hero's story⁴². It is thus hardly surprising that Miller's rewriting is different in that the heroine has her own storyline. On the surface, Miller sticks to the 'hard facts': Odysseus and his crew beach in Aiaia, they find Circe's house, she turns the crew into pigs but is unable to do the same to their captain, whom she sleeps with. Following Forster's distinction of story and plot, Miller kept the story (which comprises the chronological sequence of events) thus essentially stays the same, but changed the plot (i.e., the underlying logical structure and reasoning; Forster 1927: 93f.). In other words, Miller refuses to simply blame everything on the witch's 'evil heart'⁴³ or her 'womanly weakness'. She also does not portray Odysseus and Circe as rivals for the symbolic rhabdos, i.e., the power to dominate the other person. Rather, they are described as two tacticians who each try to outwit the other, only to realise that they are equally cunning as they face each other: Circe has already transformed his men, while Odysseus has prudently rejected the wine and is now holding moly, therefore protecting himself from her powers:

"You have not drunk," I said. **"That is clever. But I am still a witch, and you are in my house."**

"I hope we can settle this with reason." He had put the goblet down. **He did not draw his sword, but his hand rested on the hilt. [...]**

"I think you are Odysseus," I said. "Born from that same Trickster's blood."

He did not start at the uncanny knowledge. He was a man used to gods.

"And you are the goddess Circe, daughter of the sun." [...]

"Most men do not know me for what I am."

"Most men, in my experience, are fools," he said. [...]

"Prince Odysseus, we are at an impasse. For you have the moly, and I have your men. I cannot harm you, but if you strike at me, they will never be themselves again."

"I feared as much," he said. [...]

"I propose a truce," I said. "A test of sorts." [...] **"I have heard [...] that many find their trust in love."** (Miller 2018: 177-179; emphasis added)

⁴² For a more extensive discussion of the topic, see Beauvoir's criticism in chapter 2.2.3 of the present thesis.

⁴³ See chapter 2.2.3 of the present thesis.

Compared to (the translation of) Homer's version, Miller's account of Circe's first meeting with Odysseus seems much more level – while both characters involved are defensive, none is clearly weaker or stronger than the other. In my reading, there are two reasons for this: Firstly, Odysseus is well aware that he finds himself in front of the 'daughter of the sun' (who could kill his crew in a heartbeat) and thus does not throw phallus-shaped sharp objects in her face. And secondly, returning to Certeau's strategy and tactics, this version of Odysseus is clearly a tactician, who "insinuates [himself] into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking over in its entirety" (Certeau 1984: 21). Put differently, Miller's Odysseus does not seek to permanently dominate, but to temporarily coexist in the same space as Circe. Miller's slight adaptation of the plot thus changes the gendered power dynamic completely: the Homeric original portrays them as rivals for the same masculine space that serves to exert control over others. However, seeing that Miller's Circe and Odysseus are not interested in mutual domination but rather in peaceful, productive coexistence, the original power struggle is rendered void.

At the end of the novel, Miller's Circe arguably accomplishes a feminist feat that Atwood's Penelope does not: she manages to escape the influence of her family, including her father, the patriarch Helios. When her son, Telegonus, leaves to serve Athena, Circe realises that due to her pedigree, she is doomed to lose all the mortals she loves (sooner or later) and spend eternity with her immortal family: the Olympians and the Titans she cannot stand. This is not the future she wants, and thus she finally challenges Helios to lift her exile so that she may choose her own path:

"I seek an end to my exile," I said. [...]

He did not even pause. **"Disobedient as ever, and overbold. Calling me here for foolishness and nothing."** [...]

"Do you remember," I said, "when Prometheus was whipped in your hall? [...] I stayed behind, when all the rest of you left. I brought him comfort, and we spoke together. [...] [I]f you do not see my exile ended, I will expose you again. I will tell Zeus what I did. [...] **I think Zeus would be glad to know how deep the Titan mutiny goes, don't you?"** [...]

"You dare to threaten me?" [...]

"I do!" [...]

"If I do this thing," he said, "it is the last I will ever do for you. Do not come begging again. [...] You have always been the worst of my children. [...] Be sure not to dishonour me."

“I have a better idea. I will do as I please, and when you count your children, leave me out.”

His body was rigid with wrath. He looked as if he had swallowed a stone, and it choked him. (Miller 2018: 311-313; emphasis added)

As aforementioned, according to Thiellement, one of the primary pillars of the patriarchy⁴⁴ is making people believe that they cannot survive without it, that cutting ties with the patriarch equals a death sentence. Circe has lived on her own for centuries now, but even so she experiences primordial angst when Helios threatens her during their final confrontation: “It was my oldest fear, that white annihilation. I felt it shiver through me. But enough. At last, enough” (Miller 2018: 312). Once the witch realises that she cannot allow herself any longer to be ruled by fear, the patriarchal spell is broken. She can finally access all her power, seeing that she has accepted that Helios will never approve of his ‘disobedient’, ‘overbold’, and ‘foolish’ daughter and thus liberated herself from his influence. Consequently, she challenges him (‘You dare threaten me?’) in order to reclaim (not beg for) what should have been hers all along: her freedom, independence, and agency. Seeing that Helios does not grant her wishes willingly, Circe has to blackmail him by threatening to tell the only person who is higher up on the power hierarchy: Zeus. This is highly effective, seeing that – perhaps without fully realising it – Helios himself is caught up in a much bigger power-struggle. While he might think himself powerful and free, his anger and fear over Circe’s successful attempt to liberate herself (‘His body was rigid with wrath’) show that on some level, he understands that he is just another patriarchal puppet who has to maintain the illusion of control. In other words, using Helios’s fear of Zeus as leverage to negotiate the terms of her freedom, Circe beats her father at his own game.

In my reading, Miller demonstrates two things in the excerpt above: Firstly, Circe’s power was never rooted in her connection to her father’s court, quite the contrary: the constant bullying and marginalising she experienced served as an inhibiting factor that she had to overcome gradually. Consequently, it is likely that she will not only survive, but thrive without the negative influences of her immortal kin. Secondly, the passage above shows that Helios’s threats do not expose his daughter’s

⁴⁴ See chapter 2.2.1 of the present thesis.

weaknesses and fears, but rather his own. While he theoretically does possess the power to “end [Circe] with a thought” (Miller 2018: 312), he is well aware that the survival of the oppressive system he benefits depends on the exploitation of other family members. As a patriarchal figure, he rules over all goddesses and gods in his realm (so-called “subordinated masculinities”, see Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). If they leave (or, in Circe’s case, are annihilated), he (gradually) loses his subjects, and with it, his power – after all, a King is of little use without his entourage. In other words, Helios can only maintain his current position as long as his family members continue to serve as pawns in his power play. Killing his own kin would automatically raise questions over his ability to dominate and control. Thus, he has no choice but to cut his losses by giving in and releasing Circe.

In the end, Miller’s rewriting provides her female readership with the things Simone de Beauvoir demanded: poetry, dreams, and projects of their own⁴⁵. She opposes patriarchal subordination not through telling her truth retrospectively (as Atwood’s Penelope does), but rather through reclaiming her agency and leaving the oppressive system behind altogether. Ultimately, she wins her most important battle not with strength or cunning, but simply by realising how pernicious her father’s rule is and deciding to not be a part of it any longer. Put differently, the most important step towards her freedom is her dismantling the internalised patriarchal values and removing herself from the system: “But enough. At last, enough.”

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has investigated the construction of gender, agency, voice, and power in selected rewritings of classical mythology. The introduction has provided information on how, from a contemporary feminist perspective, the depictions of women in the majority of Greco-Roman myths are outdated and highly misogynous. Furthermore, in this chapter I have postulated a hypothesis on why rewritings of classical mythology are increasingly popular. In addition, this part of the thesis has served to justify my choice of primary texts to analyse, namely Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Madeline Miller’s *Circe* (2018). My primary

⁴⁵ See chapter 2.2.3 of the present thesis.

reasons can be summarised as follows: First of all, they are prime examples of their genre, namely feminist rewritings of classical mythology. Both works are often described as ‘subversive’ and ‘feminist’ and continue to not only be extraordinarily popular, but also lauded by critics and scholars alike. They manage to maintain a complex balance: While these two retellings stay true to the original story for the most part, they shift certain elements in the plot as well as the narrative structure and perspective, transforming former female side-characters into protagonists. Essentially, Miller’s and Atwood’s texts are rewritings by women, about women, for women. Another reason why I chose these two works is that both radically question the extent of truth in the Homeric version and provide plausible explanations as well as alternatives for interactions involving women in myths that, from a contemporary perspective, make little sense (e.g., Circe throwing herself at Odysseus’s feet and begging him for sex⁴⁶). Furthermore, the initial part of the thesis also gives information about the overall structure of this thesis and briefly discusses its *raison d’être* by touching upon how Greco-Roman mythology contributes to the perpetuation of misogynous stereotypes in Western culture and literature.

Starting with the fall of the Roman empire and ending with the 21st century, the first chapter after the introduction provides a rough delineation of the history of Anglophone translations and rewritings of classical mythology as well as the literary and cultural repercussions thereof. This overview is, of course, by no means exhaustive and pays particular attention not only to the portrayal of female characters within Greco-Roman mythology and its retellings, but also to several generations of English speaking women writers, translators, and classical philologists⁴⁷. In this chapter, I thus essentially illustrate how in the course of the last few centuries, female voices have progressively become more established in the literary world surrounding Ancient myths, both on and off the page.

The second chapter comprises the main body of the present thesis and contains my feminist readings (i.e., analyses and interpretations) of Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Miller’s *Circe* (2018). The areas I have focused on are gender, agency, voice, and power, which is mirrored in the structure of the subchapters, numbered

⁴⁶ For an in-depth discussion of this scene, see chapter 2.2.4 of the present thesis.

⁴⁷ Such as, inter alia, Emily Wilson, Jane Ellen Harrison, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster, and Amy Levy.

consecutively in accordance with the categories mentioned above. While they are closely intertwined, I have strived to identify and select passages where each and every aspect is foregrounded. In my investigation of gender construction in *The Penelopiad* (chapter 2.1.1), I have found that the character of Penelope is transformed from a flat, one-dimensional stereotype of a wife into a complex, conflicted, and simply more credible character. She no longer fits into the angel/monster dichotomy (as described by Ostriker 1986: 316) and recognises the gendered limitations she faces. In addition, I have also discussed how, in Atwood's retelling, women are not merely objectified, but seen as a piece of meat to be devoured, which in turn is connected to the cultural link between male sexual desire and consumption (Adams 1988). Lastly, I have argued that by showing Penelope's thoughts and feelings as opposed to how she is treated and perceived in the patriarchal diegesis, Atwood challenges the virgin/whore dichotomy that reduces female characters to grotesque stereotypes.

With regards to agency (i.e., the ability to act; chapter 2.1.2), I have chosen to examine passages that highlight how Penelope is portrayed as an aquatic creature that should bend to stronger forces, such as male desire ("Water does not resist"; Atwood 2005: 43). I have argued that Atwood questions the portrayal of gendered dichotomies: air, intellect, and agency are associated with men, whereas water, emotion, and passivity are traditionally seen as female. This subsection has also shown that while Penelope does have little agency in the contemporary sense, she does display what Margherita Carucci terms "nuanced agency", which can roughly be described as silent resistance to the status quo.

Concerning Penelope's voice (chapter 2.1.3), I have argued that the mere act of having the eponymous heroine act as an autodiegetic narrator is subversive. This is primarily due to the fact that the shift of perspective serves to question the truthfulness of the Homeric version. However, Atwood refrains from portraying Penelope's version as the 'correct' one as opposed to that of Odysseus. Rather, she introduces another narrative entity: the twelve maids, who present yet another account of what has happened, which contradicts both that of Penelope and Odysseus. Thus, I argue, Atwood creates a general linguistic and narrative uncertainty, given that at least one of the narrators – if not all of them – are

unreliable. In this chapter, I have followed Nischik's (2020) line of argumentation and assert that the audience is invited to question and decide for themselves the degree of verisimilitude in every literary voice. Essentially, I have claimed that the very make-up and narrative features of *The Penelopiad* reject the idea of a singular objective truth in fiction.

The last aspect I have investigated in Atwood's novella is power (chapter 2.1.4). Here, I have explored Mary Beard's (2017) argument that classical literature perpetuates a radical separation of women and power. In my reading, Atwood supports this claim by showing how sex is used as a projection site for a gendered power struggle, which, from a contemporary point of view, translates into a normalisation (and even celebration) of rape culture. My line of argumentation is based on Dworkin's (1981) theory of the mechanics of pornography and rape, which are, according to her, not rooted in sexual desire, but in male fantasies of domination of the female gender. In addition, I argue that *The Penelopiad* also shows how women internalise this power struggle through what Bartky terms the "disciplinary project of femininity" (Bartky 1997: 139f.), which leads them to internalise behaviours that render them 'docile', ultimately turning them into accomplices of their (violent) fathers, brothers, or husbands. In my reading, Atwood's Penelope regains part of her power – as well as her voice – in the afterlife, when she is freed from societal pressures to obey and please men.

In my reading of Miller's *Circe* (2018), I have followed the exact same structure as with Atwood's *Penelopiad*. The first chapter (chapter 2.2.1) has focused on gender construction and the primary findings can be summarised as follows: With regards to gender construction, Miller refuses to continue the tradition (shaped by 19th century European authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louis Ménéard, and Albert Glatigny) of portraying Circe as the epitome of the vamp or *femme fatale*, i.e., the ultimate temptress. Instead, following Judith Yarnall's (1994) line of reasoning, I have argued that Miller shifted the nature of Circe's gendered struggle by portraying her caught in the woes of a profoundly patriarchal society that rates women solely based on beauty and servitude to men. When Circe does not meet her father Helios's standards, he blames her mother, Perse, for having given birth to a subpar child. In addition, I have shown that Perse served as a foil character to her daughter: The mother twists and

turns so as not to suffocate under the societal expectations piled onto her, while Circe, unable to fit in, pushes back and eventually liberates herself.

The next point I have investigated in Miller's *Circe* (2018) is agency (chapter 2.2.2). I discussed how Circe has traditionally been portrayed as a malevolent witch for controlling her own fate and taking her own decisions. In the Homeric version, there is no mention of Circe being banished to Aiaia and thus, I have argued that in Miller's version, her punishment served to show the consequences of a woman acknowledging her own agency. In the case of Circe, this translates to her insisting that she was responsible for Scylla's transformation and that it was not, as Helios claimed, fate. Essentially, the confrontation between Circe and her father that Miller fictionalised unveiled that the women in this narrative universe have to either submit to the patriarch or live with the consequences of being ostracised. In my reading, Circe's (physical) expulsion from the oppressive family system (which, I claim, operates similar to a cultural hegemony) played a key role in the discovery of her potential. In my line of argumentation, I have used Pacôme Thiellement's (2018 [2022]) notion that (female) agency is directly connected to 'separating people from what they can do', i.e., their potential. This, in turn, serves to make women believe they cannot survive without the patriarch. A 'witch' like Circe, who knows her worth and power and is doing excellently on her own, is a living, breathing example that women are not dependent on the patriarch. In my reading, due to her agency and power, the character of Circe has continued to serve as a projection screen for patriarchal angst for centuries.

Regarding Circe's voice (chapter 2.2.3), I have argued that by expanding and creatively fictionalising her storyline (Preston 2018: 4), Miller offers an alternative representation, or a contemporary feminist take, of the narrative world of Greco-Roman mythology. Thereby, she creates 'womens' poetry', challenging the (original) versions written by men who, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "describe [the world] from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth" (Beauvoir 1956: 162; see also Hovind 2022: 18). There are notably several differences between the ways in which Atwood and Miller use their protagonists' voices: While Atwood's Penelope ironically and bitterly tells her story retrospectively

from the grave, Miller's Circe seemingly tells her life as it happens, sharing her thoughts and revelations with the readership via internal focalisation. Furthermore, Miller uses Circe's voice to question her reputation as an evil temptress with a blackened heart who randomly turns innocent men into pigs. In this feminist version, the roles are reversed: The men (attempt to) rape Circe, which leads her to either kill or turn them into swines. I argue that while Circe's rape does not feature explicitly in the Homeric version, Miller's alterations serve merely to highlight (not adapt) the underlying power dynamics at play. Seeing that, according to Emily Wilson, women have time and again been misrepresented linguistically in translations and classical retellings (translating 'maidservants' as 'sluts' and 'whores') (Mason 2017), I argue that Miller counterbalances these misogynist distortions.

In the last subchapter of section two (chapter 2.2.4), I have examined the gendered power relations in *Circe*. I have argued that Miller manages to strike a complex balance between not changing key events in the story while at the same time shifting the relationship dynamic between Circe and men. This is exemplified best when she meets Odysseus for the first time: Instead of kneeling before his sword, a phallic symbol, and offering him sex to save her own skin, Circe is portrayed as his equal, who is just as powerful and clever. They have sexual intercourse not because Odysseus wants to physically and sexually dominate Circe, but because they are interested in and attracted to each other. In addition, I have explained that Circe's ability to use pharmaka (with her staff) reverses the traditional power relations: She, the woman, can exert influence on men and thus occupies a dominant position (Yarnall 1994: 12), which is diametrically opposed to the traditionally submissive one. In my reading, I connect Circe's power to Michel de Certeau's notion of tactics, where an entity permanently claims spaces (in this case, Aiaia), thereby excluding the 'other' (in this case, men) (1984: 21). Effectively, Circe reigns over Aiaia, and exerts power over any living being on it, thus having a somewhat similar position to the patriarch – just to a much lesser extent. In addition, I argue that Circe's greatest demonstration of power happens at the end of the novel when she refuses to continue obeying her father and actively threatens him to get what she wants: freedom. Miller thereby shows that her agency is not connected to her progenitor's approval, but that she is actually far more potent on her own. Ultimately, Circe's

successful quest for independence lays the feeble foundations of the patriarchal system bare.

In essence, my research has shed light on how two contemporary feminist rewritings of the *Odyssey*, namely *The Penelopiad* (2005) and *Circe* (2018), contribute to change the portrayals of the two eponymous heroines. Focusing on the categories of gender, agency, voice, and power, I have produced close readings of excerpts from Atwood's and Miller's versions, which I have in turn compared to several other renditions from various literary periods, ranging from Antiquity to postmodernity. My primary goal has not been to pass judgement on earlier versions, but to highlight how slight shifts in perspective and infinitesimal alterations in the plot – which are inevitable in retellings and translations – can produce meaningful changes in ancient literary works. There are, of course, concrete limitations to my work due to the nature of the task at hand and the scope of the present text: just as one swallow does not make a summer, one Master's thesis can hardly cover a whole genre that is up and coming. Consequently, I hope to have shown that there is ample potential for future research. Ultimately, I have strived to highlight how feminist rewritings of classical myths simultaneously subvert, honour, and continue the literary tradition that birthed them, thereby opening the door to ancient mythological texts for a whole new generation of engaged, critical (women) readers.

30 825 words.

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