Why Myth Matters: The Value of the Female Voice in Greek Mythology

Kylie Rogers

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WHY MYTH MATTERS:
THE VALUE OF THE FEMALE VOICE IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY

by Kylie Elizabeth Rogers

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

Advisor: Prof. Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Reader: Dr. Caroline Wigginton

Reader: Dr. Mary Hayes
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I will primarily examine how the retellings of Greek myths from the female perspective provide insight into the importance of myth and why these stories are still relevant today. Specifically, I will examine three major figures: Circe in Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, Penelope in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, and Medusa in Marjorie Garber’s *The Medusa Reader*, along with a few other minor characters featured in Nina MacLaughlin’s *Wake, Siren*. By studying the fresh perspectives provided by the narration and journeys of these characters and connecting them to plights and experiences that are currently affecting women as evidenced by political and social events such as the #MeToo movement, I hope to demonstrate the power and effectiveness of the messages that can come from these retellings, and how they can impact a modern audience and even contribute to future feminist progress.
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INTRODUCTION

2017 was an eventful year for me. It was the year that I graduated from high school and the year that I began my journey as a student at Ole Miss. As a young woman going off to college, I was warned countless times to take extra care in order to stay safe; I was instructed to always have a friend with me if I went out at night, to cover my drink, to locate the Emergency poles on campus just in case I was being attacked in some form or fashion. I had no enemies, I never sought out any level of danger, and yet those precautions were routine and relevant to my life and the lives of all the girls my age. Now, as I prepare to go off to law school and make the move to a bigger city, I hear the same warnings. Don’t walk anywhere alone at night, consider buying some pepper spray or a Taser gun, take a self-defense class or two. As a woman, I am constantly at risk of being subject to sexual violence. The frustrating part is, although I am not the one committing the violent acts, I am the one who has to prepare for them.

2017 was also an eventful year for feminism, as it was the year that the #MeToo movement was revived, and women from all over the world were beginning to open up and share their experiences with sexual violence and how it has impacted their lives. It was the year that a trend on Twitter rewrote the narrative of abuse towards women, altering the tone so that inappropriate behavior from men, whether in a personal or professional setting, stopped being excused or swept under the rug. The trend of victim-blaming was exposed and identified as a problem that needed to be fixed. Most of all, the immense number of stories being shared by women and survivors demonstrated the fact that this violence and harassment is alarmingly relatable. While the #MeToo movement ignited these conversations about sexual violence and
contributed to a certain level of change, it was only the beginning. People are talking about change, but just as many are still mistreating women and holding onto their misogynistic mindset.

As I previously noted, I still hear the same warnings about the simple risks of existing as a woman in society, and I still feel unsafe much of the time as a result. The difference that I can personally feel due to #MeToo and other progressive feminist movements is that now, if I were to experience any form of sexual harassment or abuse, I know that I can tell someone about it and be believed, supported, and taken seriously. These things should be considered rights and not privileges, but as history can tell us, that has certainly not been the case.

In many of the classic tales that mark literary history, the female narrative is usually centered around being the object of desire or prize for the male hero, if there is a focus on the female perspective at all. Fairy tales, for example, are known for the “damsel in distress” trope and making the female characters canonically weak or passive in nature. In 1979, author Angela Carter published *The Bloody Chamber*, which takes these classic fairytales like “Beauty and the Beast” and “Red Riding Hood” and rewrites them through a feminist gaze, ensuring that is instead the female characters of these stories who hold the power in the end. One study explains, “In deconstructing the tales, Carter reveals the false universalizing inherent in many so-called master narratives of the Western literary tradition” (Brooke 67), and that, “Carter’s fairy tale heroines survive both within their narratives and our collective cultural experience, enduring mental abuse, physical violence, and humiliation by refusing to be intimidated by, and even at times prevailing over social stereotypes and sexist ideologies that limit their subjectivity” (Brooke 68). Through Carter’s exposure of the misogyny within traditional fairy tales and her powerful reclaiming of the female narrative, she opened up the discussion for the realities of
female literary representation and allowed readers a chance to reconsider the problematic undercurrents of lessons they had likely learned as children when they were told or read these stories. Carter’s work, however, was just the beginning.

The very recent wave of retellings of Greek myths through the female perspective, seen in novels such as *Wake, Siren* by Nina MacLaughlin, *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood, and *Circe* by Madeline Miller, with publishing dates that range from 2005 to as recent as 2019, are incredibly important narratives to be told, because they too reveal the opportunities for social and political progress that arise from taking female characters from classic Greek myths and giving them the autonomy and voice that they lack in the original versions. Reimaginings of Greek myths and mythological figures remain commonplace to this day, with figures like Zeus and Hercules still considered household names. People know their stories, their powers, the lessons to be learned from their experiences. Everyone loves a strong, victorious hero like Achilles, Hercules, or Odysseus. The issue is, these stories are also loaded with misogyny and the objectification and villainization of female characters, and these messages, though not as obvious, are nonetheless passed along to readers and listeners over time, just like the lessons that the fairy tales that Angela Carter worked to expose and rewrite. The feminist retellings of Greek myth work to address this pattern and dismantle the acceptance of these views and the behaviors that go along with them, recasting female characters like Circe, Medusa, and many others, whose stories often involved being sexually assaulted or raped and then punished for the male character’s actions, and giving them an independent voice. The voices of these women from Greek myth, when brought together, then resemble more of a chorus, and their stories become a loud and clear call for change that is needed in the actions and minds of society in order to create a safer and equal space for women to not only exist, but freely express themselves. Many of the
issues brought to light by these retellings, such as the narrative of victim-blaming and the chilling normalization of the mistreatment of women, are just as familiar to modern audiences as they were back when the original myths were written, as evidenced by modern feminism and events like the #MeToo movement. The stories that came out of these movements could just as easily be myths, each woman a nymph or goddess victimized by a patriarchal society. By putting a modern spin on these classic myths, authors like Madeline Miller and Nina MacLaughlin make these stories accessible and digestible for a modern audience so that they can understand the persisting relevance of these stories and characters, highlighting the connection between women of the past and women of the present, and allowing that history to support their argument for a better future.

Essentially, through the examination of modern feminist retellings of Greek mythology and exploring their specific elements such as characterization, language, and setting, combined with the connections of these female characters’ experiences to discussions of modern day feminism and feminist movements like #MeToo, I aim to identify how the shift from male to female-centered retellings of Greek myths function as a valuable contribution to feminist theory and contemporary literature due to their unique ability to bridge the past to the present as well as fiction to reality. Each retelling I discuss in this thesis takes a different approach to sharing the stories of their characters, but just as each character’s story echoes that of another, each retelling, no matter how different the format, blends with the others to form a greater message about the realities of the female experience and the presence of sexual violence in the lives of real and mythical women alike. Overall, I plan to use these findings to demonstrate why it is still a worthwhile endeavor to retell these old stories, and to highlight the positive effects they can have on a society that is still dealing with so many of the same issues. I will focus primarily on three
major female figures in Greek mythology (Circe, Penelope, and Medusa), in addition to a collection of others, and discuss the elements of their retellings and the messages that can be delivered through these fresh perspectives on classic myths. Then, I intend to connect the characters’ experiences to those of modern day women, particularly in relation to the #MeToo movement, in order to validate the necessity of these stories not only continuing to be told, but rewritten.
CHAPTER I: WAKE, SIREN

In Nina MacLaughlin’s novel *Wake, Siren*, each chapter features a new character from a wide range of Greek myths, from a tree nymph to the mother of Hercules. She uses a large variety of styles for each story, some set in modern times while others remain firmly planted in the distant land and time of classic Greek legends, and each one has its own unique voice. For the purposes of this study, I will be examining the chapters focused on Daphne, Callisto, Thetis, and Eurydice, all of which involve some sort of rape or abuse, and all of which further the greater message of MacLaughlin’s work, which could be identified as an alarm, blaring and demanding that attention be paid to the terrifyingly common thread of sexual violence that weaves ancient and modern timelines together, and refusing to sugarcoat the truth any longer.

Daphne is the character who opens *Wake, Siren*, and she is among the more famous nymphs, known for turning into a tree in order to escape the arms of Apollo. In her chapter, she says, “He couldn’t help himself, that’s what people told me afterward. And my father’s words, the ones I’d ignored, about my looks preventing my freedom, had their ring of truth” (MacLaughlin 11), quickly introducing the strategy of placing the blame onto the victim, insinuating that her physical appearance means that she is asking for it, or even that her subjection to sexual violence was inevitable purely based on the fact that she was found conventionally attractive, whereas Apollo is acquitted and needs no further explanation for his actions other than that he cannot refrain from forcing himself on someone he finds desirable. The scene of the chase, which is chronicled in frightful and depressing detail (readers know as soon as the chase begins how it will end), escalates the longer Daphne tries to outrun the god, and she
says, “It was making him feel small, and when men feel small they are dangerous” (MacLaughlin 12). A simple statement, and a simple truth. According to one study, “the kind of narrative represented by Apollo and Daphne, which she calls ‘the rape trauma’ archetype, is one of the most pervasive archetypal structures in women’s fiction. The female protagonist is thwarted in her attempt to become a fully mature human being; she becomes enclosed and entrapped in patriarchal structures…” (Moss 37), and what this archetype demonstrates is that even though narratives surrounding women facing sexual violence have been repeated over and over again, it is still happening, and until recent movements like #MeToo (and sometimes, even then), has still largely been overlooked. That is because when these stories were told within the male gaze, the patriarchal structures previously mentioned were still in place. Daphne, as a beautiful nymph, was expected to be violated. Apollo was just being a typical Greek god. MacLaughlin diverts from that male gaze through her retelling of Daphne’s story by chronicling the reality of the fear and the panic that come with being attacked, not simply chased, a term which downplays the reality of the encounter, making it sound more like a game than a violent act. This chapter, along with all the chapters in MacLaughlin’s novel, does not shy away from the violence that occurs in these myths, and instead inspires justice for female characters like Daphne who have had the tragedy of their stories romanticized. With Daphne’s story being one that represents a greater archetype in women’s fiction, its revision and retelling can serve like a thread being pulled in order to start the unravelling of centuries worth of misogyny, allowing not only women, but society as a whole to re-examine how these stories have affected the way that violence against women has been treated over time, and ideally, creating a space for discussion on how women’s narratives should be handled from here on out.
Callisto, a girl of Artemis’s hunt and lover of nature, is yet another character from Greek mythology who had her innocence shattered when she was attacked and brutally raped by Jove (also known as Zeus) in the middle of the woods, which was accomplished by Zeus taking the form of Artemis and lulling Callisto into a false sense of trust and complacency. Afterwards, the shame she expresses at being “ruined,” the cold reaction of the true Artemis and the rest of the girls upon seeing her ravaged body, and the ultimate punishment of her being transformed into a hideous bear by Hera are overwhelming and heartbreaking to read. By the time she is transformed into a bear, she has already given birth to her son, and when she tries to approach him, he goes for his bow in order to shoot and kill her. Callisto opens her arms, ready to die and end her suffering, but once again, Zeus interferes, whisking them into the sky and turning them into a constellation. The stories of constellations are often dreamy and romantic, but MacLaughlin’s take on Callisto is anything but. Callisto narrates the story as a star, and says, “I am not invisible. But I don’t want them to know that when I seem especially bright, when I blaze in the sky, it’s because I’m remembering that afternoon when my body was no longer my own” (MacLaughlin 42). This vivid imagery is both beautiful and tragic, and is further emphasized in the lines, “There are so many other stars, all of us burning. And I see all the stars around me and I wonder, Are you the same as me? Is this what we all are? Fires fueled by fury, burning through the nights?” (MacLaughlin 42). Callisto asks important questions, and suggests that there are so many more stars, so many more voices that have not yet been heard, but burn just the same. An article exploring one female scholar’s study of Callisto’s original story states, “her experience felt startlingly familiar, in spite of the fact that it was literally unfamiliar...I realized the extent to which her experience incorporates the common motifs in literature by and about women; later yet I recognized the way her rape reflects a patriarchal culture’s control and definition of
women’s sexuality” (Wall 4), which supports the idea that there are many other women, or stars, who can relate to Callisto’s experience and therefore can benefit from the reality of Callisto’s story being shared. That reality is this: Callisto was tricked by Zeus into trusting him, and that trust was then broken and immediately followed by an act of sexual violence that ruined her life. Zeus went on without another thought, and Callisto never escaped the effects of what was done to her. The familiarity that scholars and readers find in Callisto’s story and the novel as a whole can contribute to feminist progress by creating a further sense of unity among women and survivors so that they feel less alone in their experiences, so that when they see these stories that echo their own being represented in literature, they can feel comfortable and empowered enough to address the situations and patterns of behavior as they happen in real life, and then the conversation can move toward how those behaviors can be stopped or prevented in the future.

Thetis, another character who is given a chapter in Wake, Siren, is primarily known in Greek mythology for being the mother of Achilles, a reputation which highlights the way that female characters in these myths were often defined by their relationship to a man. The other famous attribute tied to Thetis is the story of her rape, in which Perseus is instructed on how to hold her down in order to prevent her escaping by transforming into various animals. Thetis’s chapter tells the story of her rape, and the strength with which she fought, as the majority of the chapter matches the pace of a frenzied fight for one’s life, detailing each animal she transforms into as she tries to fight Perseus off, the sentences speeding up as she shifts again and again, frantic to find a form that her attacker cannot hold. Eventually, she is no longer able to keep up the fight, and the pace of the chapter slows to a chilling halt, as she says, “I lay there like a corpse. It was the final shape I took that day, and for the first time afterward, I did not choose the shape my body took” (MacLaughlin 273). She does indeed become pregnant, and she details,
“Over the coming months, a slow swell, a growing, my body not just mine, and out came
Achilles, who will have no trouble outdoing his dad who bound my hands and held on”
(MacLaughlin 273). This is the first hint of the protectiveness and devotion Thetis has to her son,
which will later be proved during the Trojan War. Thetis, like Callisto, loves her son despite the
trauma from which he was conceived, a testament to her strength, and another reminder of the
various threads that can connect very different female characters and produce stories with a
range of different outcomes yet eerily similar messages about the trauma associated with rape
and how it can forever alter the course of a woman’s life.

Eurydice’s story is one of the ones that is transposed in a more modern setting, and
tackles the emotional abuse that women often experience in relationships, a facet not as common
with the original myths (mostly because those mainly involve rapes instead of actual
relationships). In MacLaughlin’s retelling, Eurydice is a musician and child of a “rock god.” She
speaks casually, discussing her favorite bands, phases she goes through, her parents’ relationship.
About her parents, she divulges, “Creative people have different sorts of temperaments and
different sorts of tempers. If you’re worshipped by a stadium full of screaming people and come
home and the mother of your child can take you or leave you, it’s jarring for the ego”
(MacLaughlin 356). At this point in her story, this does not have a major impact on her
personally, but as she enters her own romantic relationships, the toxicity she has witnessed in her
parents’ lives becomes evident in her own. She picks partners who mentally and verbally abuse
her, making her feel small and taking away her confidence little by little. When she meets “O,”
which stands for Orpheus, who is a musician, poet, and prophet in classic Greek mythology, it
seems like love at first sight, but that hope quickly spirals as the relationship becomes her most
toxic one yet, escalating from mental and verbal abuse to physical abuse as well. When talking
about her feelings when they fight, Eurydice reveals, “But my power was silence. While he roared, I absented myself, took the heat out of myself away, emptied myself out of my eyes. I became a statue” (MacLaughlin 365). Based on her once lively voice and clear enthusiasm about music, this hollowed out version of Eurydice is a tragic diversion from her true self, but because she had been taught to believe that love was hurtful, she thought nothing of the pain that accompanied her relationship. Despite the toxicity of their relationship, Eurydice agrees to marry O, but while trying to cover up a bruise on her arm on her wedding day, has second thoughts, and leaves him at the altar. At the club where she goes to hide out, he finds her and performs their wedding song for her, and though she is initially tempted to go through with the marriage, she ultimately lets go and leaves him for good. Eurydice’s story functions as a discussion of the many forms that abuse can take, and poignantly describes the difficulty of getting out of an abusive relationship. Eurydice may escape hers in the end, but it is understood that the emotional trauma she endured as a result of the relationship will last much longer. Though Eurydice’s trust of men was not broken sharply in one single act the way that Daphne’s or Callisto’s was, the gradual breakdown of her trust and the erosion of her sense of self as a result of her toxic and violent relationship helps branch classic stories like nymphs being attacked in the woods to stories that are much more reminiscent of modern day relationships and domestic abuse.

The overall effect of MacLaughlin’s novel is the overwhelming sense that the trend of sexual violence towards women is an incredibly violent and damaging phenomenon that transcends time. That is obviously common sense, and will be demonstrated continuously throughout this study, but with this novel it produces a uniquely powerful sense of frustration and exhaustion. Every single chapter is a new woman, a different character who faces fear and pain and trauma all because of their womanhood, and eventually reaching the end feels like a
relief, because at least the tragedy is over. Except, that could not be further from the truth. The point of MacLaughlin’s many shifting settings, time periods, and styles is to demonstrate that no matter how differently each woman tells her story, they all have the same problems in common. They all face the same type of discrimination. Recent progress in feminism such as the #MeToo movement propogates the same idea: the vast majority of women experience some form of sexual harassment or abuse in their lifetime. The abuse tends to make victims feel isolated, and that is why discussing these topics openly, even by means of a quick hashtag on Twitter, is worth the feelings of discomfort or pain. For every girl who is dealing with trauma, for every human being on this planet who loves a woman, these stories cannot be watered down or hidden away. With Greek myths, which have already greatly influenced literature and culture over time, flipping the perspective from the male to the female gaze can undo the harmful acceptance or rationalization of sexual violence and rape, therefore allowing Greek mythological figures and stories to adapt to modern times without continuing to promote behaviors and ideas that should be left in the past.

CHAPTER II: PENEOPE
In classic Greek mythology, Penelope is known as a famous queen of Ithaca and the wife of Odysseus. She is often coined as the “quintessential faithful wife” (Atwood 15), and is noted for her intelligence, as previously mentioned in *Circe*. In the original myth, Penelope patiently waits for Odysseus to return from his travels for 20 years, and in the meantime keeps suitors at bay by outwitting them, saying that she would pick a new husband and king after she finished weaving a funeral shroud for her father, but each night she would undo the weaving she had done the day before in order to drag out the process. Margaret Atwood, famous author of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, conducted a version of *The Odyssey* from Penelope’s point of view, called *The Penelopiad*, which “both spatially and temporally sets contemporary against ancient times…” (Staels 106), in order to provide a unique take on Penelope’s character and her own journey. In the introduction, Atwood says, “I’ve chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids” (17), referring to the maids in the original myth who were hanged for disloyalty upon Odysseus’s return to Ithaca, and she does so by having these characters reflect on their stories from beyond the grave.

Atwood’s portrayal of Penelope is very different from Miller’s, and she gives Penelope a much more snarky, lighthearted tone. As one article states, “Penelope and the female slaves gain common human characteristics with which they establish a close relationship with the present-day reader, for they display emotions such as jealousy, distrust, insecurity, and so on” (Staels 105), and it feels as if Penelope is revealing secrets to a friend through her narration, which is simultaneously intimate and entertaining. Through her eyes, it is also possible to see Penelope’s own flaws and insecurities, with one study claiming, “Atwood does not hesitate to imagine the animosity Penelope might have felt towards Helen, and most notably, Penelope’s responsibility in and guilt concerning the execution of her maidservants” (Suzuki 275). Atwood has chapters
narrated by the maids scattered throughout the novel, and these chapters are both more creative in form and more serious in tone, ranging from poems to songs to imaginary depictions of court cases. Suzuki’s analysis continues, “Atwood endows the maids, though outsiders, with a privileged perspective and voice as satirists who eloquently critique the ideology of the dominant order that normalized their slaughter by condemning them as unchaste and disloyal” (272). The contrast of the surprisingly frivolous and humorous Penelope and the outrage and sorrow of the maids not only makes for a very interesting read, it creates a sort of vocal duality that allows for Penelope and the maids to function differently in regards to the type of message and purpose they bring to female-centered retellings and, like MacLaughlin’s *Wake, Siren*, creates the greater sense that women can have vastly different characteristics, personalities, backgrounds, and experiences, and despite those differences, each voice is valuable in shedding light on some part of the female narrative or experience.

For the most part, Atwood’s Penelope is not exactly a great model for feminism. She does not appear to be a reliable narrator, as she goes back and forth on whether or not she slept with any suitors while Odysseus was away, she spends a lot of time being hateful toward Helen and bringing her down out of jealousy, and she is often weeping or whining in a childlike way that is the complete opposite of the stoic Penelope that is seen in most depictions of her character, both in the original myth and in retellings like Miller’s *Circe*. While this Penelope might not be the perfect vessel for a feminist message, there are still some relevant issues and behaviors that she points out, such as when she debates whether or not she should defend herself against the rumors she hears about her story in the afterlife, “What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself, she sounds guilty” (Atwood 20), a thought that has only become more relevant with time and situations such as the case of Supreme
Court nominee (now Justice) Brett Kavanaugh and the sexual misconduct allegations that he faced. In this case, the primary woman accusing Kavanaugh of this behavior, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, faced “credible death threats and violent vitriol” as a result of speaking out, and “essentially, the situation is a boiled-down version of what it means to be a woman: The burden lies on you to prove your worth and your truth” (Gardner). Like Penelope indicates, women are assumed to be the guilty ones in a sexist society, just as Callisto was treated as the guilty party by Artemis and Hera even though Zeus was the one who attacked her. The burden placed on women to have to go to excess lengths to prove their truth is also reflected in Penelope’s original story and her retelling when she has to go to such great lengths with her ruse with the weaving of the funeral shroud in order to keep anxious suitors at bay as she waits for her husband to return home.

Penelope goes back and forth between being aware of the sexism present around her and within her marriage and being insecure and in need of validation from Odysseus. For example, early on, Penelope acknowledges how a patriarchal society perceives her intelligence, “Cleverness is a quality a man likes to have in his wife as long as she is some distance away from him” (Atwood 48), but later imagines that the ultimate praise from her husband would be his placing her above Helen, “How pleased he would be with me! ‘You’re worth a thousand Helens,’ he would say. Wouldn’t he?” (Atwood 104). This interpretation of Penelope’s character allows her to be flawed, allows her infamous intelligence to give way to moments of tears and laughter, of jealousy and insecurity. She is human and prone to thoughts that reflect a sort of internalized misogyny, but she also has moments of clarity and frustration regarding the ways she was treated and perceived throughout her life, and in her afterlife, due to her being a woman. With misogyny being so deeply woven (pun intended) into traditional stories and myths, as well
as the rules of society, it is no surprise that women are also susceptible to the acceptance of sexism, and that these thoughts and beliefs often have to be unlearned. Penelope’s flawed representation in Atwood’s work may not make her a perfect vessel for modern feminism, but it makes her realistic, which is still valuable to the focus and discussion on the female perspective and how myth can adapt over time and continuously bring new dimensions to the same stories and characters that have existed for centuries.

One such dimension and new discussion that Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* brings to the table is the way that class and status can affect a woman’s voice and the importance placed on her story and perspective. When Penelope felt the increasing pressure of the suitors who were growing steadily impatient for her to pick one of them as her new husband, she briefly acknowledges the threat of sexual violence from the suitors, “I knew it would do no good to try to expel my unwanted suitors…If I tried that, they’d turn really ugly and go on the rampage and snatch by force what they were attempting to win by persuasion” (Atwood 129), and is saddened when her maids are on the receiving end of such violence, “So the Suitors helped themselves to the maids in the same way they helped themselves to the sheep and pigs and goats and cows. They probably thought nothing of it” (Atwood 137), but mostly maintains her casual, chipper tone. The maids’ chapters, on the other hand, are riddled with outrage, injustice, and agony. These chapters break up the witty voice of Penelope with sharp, painful reminders of what was done to them. They call out, “We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents…” (Atwood 30), and, “We were animal young, to be disposed of at will, sold, drowned in the well, traded, used, discarded when bloomless” (Atwood 87), refusing to allow the reader to forget the true seriousness of what occurred during this often overlooked detail of the famous myth. The stark contrast between Penelope and the maids’ chapters to serve as a way to demonstrate how
class and status can affect the view and treatment of injustice, with the mistreatment and rapes of the maids and the senselessness of their deaths practically being brushed over in Penelope’s perspective, which instead tends to go on and on about trivial matters and petty jealousy, while the maids have to jump through all sorts of hoops just to be heard, and even then, they are still not given as strong of a voice as Penelope.

Another upsetting fact about the maids is the term “maids” itself, as it covers up and glosses over the reality of their agency, which was essentially nonexistent. In Emily Wilson’s translation of *The Odyssey*, which was the first time the myth was translated by a woman, she discussed the Greek word which allegedly translates to “maidservants,” but, as was noted in her interview with *The New York Times*, it is “an entirely misleading and also not at all literal translation, the root word meaning ‘to overpower, to tame, to subdue’...rather, they were slaves” (Mason). This mislabeling of the maids or enslaved women further demonstrates the lack of importance that was previously placed on accurately telling the story of these women. The importance of terms cannot be underestimated, because the proper identification and acknowledgement of one’s self or experiences makes it possible for them to more fully understand their circumstances and communicate those circumstances to others. That is one of the many reasons why the continued focus on retelling stories like these Greek myths from female perspectives and through a feminist gaze can help create positive change; if women are able to properly identify and reclaim themselves and their experiences, they are then able to express themselves independently and connect with other women who can relate to those experiences. Those connections and discussions are what lead to progress. That being said, the progress can be slow, and with difficult subjects like rape and sexual violence, especially among lower classes and minorites, people are more eager to brush the issues aside rather than face
them, a point which the enslaved women touch on in the lines, “Point being that you don’t have
to get too worked up about us, dear educated minds. You don’t have to think about us as real
girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice. That might be too upsetting. Just discard the
sordid part. Consider us pure symbol” (Atwood 187), a chilling and unsettling statement which
illustrates how often women’s voices are silenced because topics like rape and gendered violence
are considered undesirable or unpleasant, and it is easier on the minds of others to simply pretend
it is not happening rather than confront the issue. One major goal of Atwood’s appears to be
giving the enslaved women the acknowledgement they deserve, as they say, “We’re here too, the
ones without names. The other ones without names. The ones with the shame stuck onto us by
others. The ones pointed at, the ones fingered” (Atwood 212). Atwood even gives them the final
word, and ends the novel with them transforming into a flock of owls and flying away, which
could symbolize the thought of the women finding peace after finally being able to share their
story.

In order to also give justice to Atwood’s Penelope, it must be addressed that she too can
be said to possess a sense of resistance in her own right. One journal argued, “As a metaphorical
shroud weaver, she is endowed with the power of destruction (‘unravelling’) and creation
(‘rewearing’). Her ruse of creative destruction—her parodic repetition and unmasking of male-
dominated myth—is part of her resistance to male power” (Shaels 109), a flattering depiction of
Penelope’s actions that reminds readers that though her voice might suggest lightheartedness and
a tendency toward frivolity, her actions speak volumes about her true character. She further
defends herself when elaborating on the frequently used imagery of her “web” or shroud that
represented her clever trick against the suitors, “I did not appreciate the term web. If the shroud
was a web, then I was the spider. But I had not been attempting to catch men like flies: I’d merely been trying to avoid entanglement myself” (Atwood 140).

Penelope, though seemingly self-centered at times throughout *The Penelopiad*, truly did not ask for or deserve the incredible pressure put on her by the suitors. If the roles had been reversed and Odysseus was left waiting on Penelope for 20 years, there would not have been a single ounce of pressure to wed again. He could bed anyone of his choosing, and marry in his own time if he desired, but it always would have been an option, not a requirement. The fact that Penelope withstood such pressure rooted in sexism for two decades is a noteworthy accomplishment, and it is reminiscent of the experiences women face today working in male-dominated fields such as engineering and certain sciences, consistently handling not only the pressure of their job, but the additional poor treatment and pressure they receive merely as a result of being a woman. That might seem like a bit of a reach, but one of the greatest benefits of retelling myths and stories like Penelope’s is that they are still applicable to modern day life, and can hopefully be used time and time again to help people find guidance, solidarity, or to simply learn from the cyclical nature of history. Atwood’s particular retelling, similarly to *Wake, Siren*, supplements the plot of the original myth with modern language, tone, and additional plot and perspective in order to make the women from these myths more relatable to a modern audience, which in turn makes the stories of their trauma and the mistreatment that they faced, present in both the original and the retelling, even more powerful as it stretches across time. Additionally, *The Penelopiad* illustrates the ability of a feminist Greek retelling to take minor characters such as the enslaved women and bring them to the foreground of the story, thereby calling attention to additional factors other than gender that can affect the portrayal of a woman’s story, which is a conversation that coincides with the current discussions circulating in modern feminist
movements today. One study on Atwood’s novel wisely concludes, “The Penelopiad selfconsciously confirms that timeless myths and archetypes are infinitely malleable and will survive as intertexts as long as artistic creativity exists” (Staels 110).

CHAPTER III: MEDUSA
Another famous Greek mythological figure who represents a myriad of views on feminism and the female experience is none other than Medusa. Known for her head full of snakes and eyes that turn people to stone, it is easy to disregard Medusa as one of many monsters present in the legends of Greek heroes. In actuality, the story of Medusa has since been retold, and she is now regarded as a major symbol for female empowerment and reclaiming agency from male-dominated society. In the book entitled *The Medusa Reader*, Marjorie Garber writes, “Poets have called her a Muse. Feminists have adopted her as a sign of powerful womanhood. The most canonical writers (Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Shelley) have invoked her story and sung her praise and her blame” (1). This is a far cry from mere monster or villain, and that is because Medusa’s story has always been a bit more complicated. Garber continues, “What is most compelling in the long history of the myth and its retellings is Medusa’s intrinsic doubleness: at once monster and beauty, disease and cure, threat and protection, poison and remedy…” (1), a duality which can create a wide variety of retellings, with some praising Medusa as a survivor, some mourning her tragic fate as a victim of sexual violence, and some making her out to be one bad but incredibly intriguing villain.

The original myth is summarized in *The Medusa Reader*,

“The exquisitely beautiful Medusa, one of the three Gorgons of Greek myth and the only mortal one, was said to have dallied with—or, in other versions, to have been raped by—the sea god Poseidon in the Temple of Athena. As punishment for this transgression, Athena transformed Medusa from woman to monster, changing her luxuriant long hair into a tangle of hissing snakes. A spectator gazing at Medusa would henceforth be turned to stone” (Garber 2)
While these aspects of Medusa’s story remain fairly constant, her mental state once becoming the monster is where the real fun happens. Feminists have been particularly drawn to the myth, and “have long seen Medusa as an emblem of emancipation” (Garber 3), thereby making her image a symbol of pride and freedom from the bonds of patriarchy. Following this take on Medusa, essays like Helene Cixous’s perfectly capture the message of Medusa’s story, delivering powerful lines like, “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (885), which in turn encourages women to face their fears and defy the oppressive values placed on them by society. An article on the shifting nature of Medusa’s symbolism across time and culture states, “In Western culture, strong women have historically been imagined as threats requiring male conquest and control, and Medusa herself has long been the go-to figure for those seeking to demonize female authority” (Johnston), highlights the value of reclaiming a narrative once meant to suppress women, because what feminist theory has done by transforming the symbol of Medusa is make it so that instead women feel motivated to be strong rather than conform to the weak and submissive model of a woman that the patriarchal society depends on. Furthermore, “Medusa’s mythical image has functioned like a magnifying mirror to reflect and focus Western thought as it relates to women, including how women think about themselves” (Bowers 217), which opens up the popular discussion of female eros among the feminist scholars, which is described as “‘assertion of the life force in women, of creative energy empowered,’ but it has undergone continuous assault from the male gaze, for ‘men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and possession’” (Bowers 217). This sense of action and possession immediately brings to mind the many instances of gods having their way with any female that crosses their path, and that they are owed the sexual encounter simply because they want it. Feminism argues for the unraveling of
that mindset in order to free the women and allow them to express themselves without fear of being victimized or judged. Some feminists, ones who especially lean into the powerful villain side of Medusa’s fanbase, feel as though “contemporary women artists who embrace Medusa with full awareness of her dark power exhibit a fierce integrity and free expression of female eros” (Bowers 234), and these artists seem to suggest that the key to embracing one’s female eros is to put fear aside and embrace darkness rather than hide or shy away from it.

In addition to inspiring much feminist theory, Medusa has also stood the test of time by becoming a larger symbol in a wide range of popular culture that spans multiple mediums. She has been reimagined through various forms of art such as Benvenuto Cellini’s sculpture Perseo and a painting entitled Head of Medusa, which now hangs in Florence (Bowers 222), a love song sung by Edith Sitwell, a “bitter vision of romantic love” (Bowers 228), and can even serve as a symbol in people’s dreams, “Feminist psychoanalysts have found that women who dream of themselves as Medusa often see their dreams as ‘expressing the need to find the source of their own creative energy’” (Bowers 230). The story of Medusa can even apply to recent political elections, as Hillary Clinton was often compared to Medusa during her run in the 2016 Presidential Election against Donald Trump. An article on the matter states, “people can buy products emblazoned with an image of a stoic Trump raising the severed head of a bug-eyed Clinton, her mouth agape in silent protest—an allusion to a sculpture by the Italian Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini” (Johnston), which is not only a reminder of the persistence of misogyny in our society, but also the power that a Greek mythological symbol can hold even now, which is why the reclaiming and retellings of Greek myth from a feminist perspective have the potential to be so valuable. Hillary Clinton, like feminist fans of Medusa, took a similar route and reclaimed the comments and names meant to attack her and instead rebranded them to send her
own message, as evidenced by her taking on the “Nasty Woman” name that Trump had tried to use against her and making it her own. All these factors add up to the idea that Medusa’s story is so much more than an old Greek myth. If one empowered female figure from Greek mythology can inspire so much societal growth and beauty, even one as monstrous as Medusa, there is no telling what could be possible when bringing more of these female stories to light. Or, in Medusa’s case, to dark.

Nina MacLaughlin’s novel *Wake, Siren* also features a Medusa narrative, and it focuses mainly on the anger associated with sexual violence and the minimalization of its effects on the victims. The Medusa chapter is told in first-person, and she says in a tone filled with tension that could be felt even on print, “The words for what happened next are not ‘seized and rifled.’ Not ‘deflowered.’ And not ‘attained her love.’ The word is force. The word is violence. Violation” (MacLaughlin 161). Here MacLaughlin is pointing out the absurdity of using soft language involving love and flowers to capture the violent act of rape. Medusa’s words are as sharp as a snake’s tongue as she repeats, “Force. Chaos. Force. Violence. Chaos. Force. Violence. Rape. Rape. Rape…” (MacLaughlin 189), forcing readers and the world to reckon with the reality of what was done to her. Medusa also points out that Poseidon, the one responsible for what had occurred on that fateful day in the Temple of Athena, went right back to ruling the seas. “Unscathed. Unpunished. Continued with his life as though returning home from a morning’s errand to the butcher and the bank” (MacLaughlin 190) as Medusa describes it, providing an interesting twist by using modern language and setting to drive the point home. This is not a story that gets left in the past. It is not just how things were back then. It is a problem. It is violence against women that goes unpunished. It is difficult to read this chapter, and this novel in general, without feeling that same anger. At the end of her chapter, Medusa reveals, “It’s not the
snakes that are so petrifying to people. It’s not the serpents writhing from my head that turn people to stone. Don’t you know? It is my rage. I hope for a day when a fury as white-hot as mine can be held by another, accepted, understood, maybe even shared” (MacLaughlin 163-164). Medusa and MacLaughlin do not spare words here, they do not coat the message behind the story in vague images or riddles. There is a sense of urgency here, and it refuses to be ignored, almost as though Medusa’s gaze pierces the reader through the words.
The driving force behind this thesis was my introduction to the novel *Circe* by Madeline Miller. As I read Circe’s story, I found myself deeply invested in her personal development, cheering as she discovered her own strengths, empathizing as she dealt with various levels of pain that ranged from sexual abuse to the struggles and joys of motherhood, and even shedding a tear or two when she finally got her happy ending (at least, I choose to believe she did). My reaction was not a unique one, as Miller’s novel quickly became a #1 New York Times bestseller and is in the process of being adapted for a television series on HBO. Reviews praise the novel’s “exhilarating voice” (Kirkus Reviews), and note that Miller, in her “characterization of this most powerful witch” makes Circe “as close as possible to human—from the timbre of her voice to her intense maternal instincts” (Messud), and find that the story is “pitched in a register that bridges man and myth” (Edemariam).

In order to appreciate the dazzling and deeply human portrayal of Circe’s character in Miller’s retelling, it is also important to be aware of how Circe was originally depicted in Greek mythology. Circe is the daughter of Helios, the sun god, and of the ocean nymph named Perse. She is a sorceress and minor goddess who is mostly known for her role in the classic tale of *The Odyssey* by Homer, in which she traps Odysseus and his crew on her island for a year and turns his men into literal pigs (not to worry, Miller makes excellent use of this metaphor in her retelling). Miller’s version is a fictional autobiography told from Circe’s point of view, and Odysseus’s entrance is only one of the many events that takes place throughout her life. It is a story of incredible personal development, appreciation for humanity, and uniquely female strength demonstrated through elements such as independence, empowerment, female friendship, and motherhood.
In the beginning of Miller’s *Circe*, we see Circe as a character who is relentlessly mocked for her ugliness and horrible voice, which is often described as frail or thin, by her own family. As a result of this bullying, she is initially a naive, meek character, and desperate to please those around her, especially her father, Helios. The catalyst for Circe’s transformation is her being banished to an island called Aiaia after admitting that she used sorcery to turn Scylla, a nymph who stole the eye of Glaucous, Circe’s first love interest, into a horrible monster. Circe freely confesses to this crime to her father, but he refuses to believe her. It is only when her younger brother Aeëtes announces that Circe did indeed possess the power to do such a thing that it is even believed in the first place. This appears to be an intentional choice on Miller’s part, demonstrating how Circe’s power could not even be acknowledged until it was confirmed by a male figure. Yet, once her abilities as a witch are
accepted as the truth, she is not met with awe or respect; instead, she becomes a threat, feared by the other inhabitants of the island. This moment in Circe’s story is reminiscent of Medusa’s and how powerful women are treated differently than powerful men, with the societal instinct being to suppress or isolate these women rather than celebrating their power. When discussing the spell she cast on Scylla with her brother, Circe is surprised to hear that Aeëtes does not condemn her actions or share her sense of guilt. In fact, he thinks, if anything, that Circe did Scylla a favor by giving her a monster’s glory. He says to Circe, “‘Even the most beautiful nymph is largely useless, and an ugly one would be nothing, less than nothing...But a monster, she always has a place. She may have all the glory her teeth can snatch. She will not be loved for it, but she will not be constrained either’” (Miller 127-128). This is a heavily loaded statement, and it provides insight into multiple facets of the male perspective, as well as an opportunity for a more modern spin on today’s attitudes toward feminists. First of all, Aeëtes’s view that beauty is the only attribute that could make a nymph even marginally worthwhile is a reminder that minor female characters in Greek mythology usually serve as objects of desire for heroes or gods, and that is the only purpose they are given. Secondly, Aeëtes also says that even amongst the nymphs whose beauty makes them superior, they are still “largely useless,” which indicates that even the small glimpse of purpose that women could acquire in these stories amounts to almost nothing, and if the best of them get almost nothing, then the majority truly have nothing at all.

The comment about monsters always having a place stood out in its relevance to modern feminism, and especially the anti-feminist reactions seen in media and society today. People often attack feminists for being too aggressive (the term “FemiNazis” comes to mind), but following Miller’s logic, the continuation to push feminist issues is worth the fight, because although women who stand up for equality might experience hate or backlash, they will also
experience greater freedom from the oppression present in patriarchal society. This is idea is supported by Susan Faludi’s 1991 novel *Backlash* and subsequent articles examining this work, with one such article claiming, “an anti-feminist backlash occurs not when women have achieved equality but when there is any possibility that we might. It’s a preemptive strike” (Moore). This means that the resistance of feminist ideas in modern culture, and the making of outspoken feminists into monsters, should not persuade those women to succumb to silence. Instead, it should motivate them to keep going, because it means that true equality is on the horizon. Medusa certainly fits into this conversation as well, as her story has been a sort of tug-of-war between those who want to cast her as an evil monster meant to threaten society and those who view her as a symbol for the power of female authority, and as one source says, this tension is marked by Medusa “materializing whenever male authority feels threatened by female agency,” and with the beheading of Medusa “representing the same effort to legitimize male privilege by muting female authority” (Johnston), all of which connects Medusa and her modern day relevance to the relevance of Circe’s retelling and the useful insights and lessons that can be gleaned from her myth as well.

Circe’s own freedom and confidence begins to bloom once she arrives at Aiaia, which ends up being more of a paradise for her than a place of exile. Without the cruelty of her family weighing her down, Circe learns the extent of her magical abilities, as well as her strength of character. For the first time in her life, Circe begins to gain a sense of who she really is. She becomes confident enough to keep up with and even impress Hermes, the messenger god and Olympian, who begins to visit her island and eventually becomes her lover. He reveals that he has heard a prophecy about Circe, which is simply that the hero Odysseus will visit her island. She asks for more details, but that is the only information the prophecy reveals. Promptly, Circe
responds, “That’s the worst prophecy I’ve ever heard” (Miller 177), a humorous approach with a much larger effect, as it highlights the minimization of Circe’s character as seen in the original story and how women in these myths were only mentioned in relation to how they served the male characters, similarly to how Penelope’s function as a character in the original myth was to symbolize the perfect faithful wife to Odysseus, despite his transgressions with Circe and other women throughout his story. At this point in Miller’s version, readers are well aware that there is much more to Circe than being Odysseus’s hostess, especially considering that he has not even arrived yet.

While Odysseus has not yet made an actual appearance in Circe’s life at this point, she does soon start to deal with men coming to her island, usually sailors in need of rest and food. Initially, Circe is delighted to have visitors, especially mortal visitors, as she has always been deeply curious and fascinated by humanity. Her excitement is heartbreaking, as it immediately gets shattered once she reveals to the first crew that she is not a wife or a daughter, but is in fact alone on the island, aside from the nymphs who were sent to assist her. Upon hearing this information, the captain of the crew pins Circe up against the wall and rapes her while the rest of the crew watches, a shocking and brutal scene that does not shy away from the horrifying effect that such an act has on a woman, both physically and mentally. Right before the act is committed, Circe can sense the shift in attitude and intent among the men, yet just like many women, she desperately tries to convince herself that she is mistaken, “All the men were rising now, their eyes fixed on me. And I still said nothing. Still I told myself I was wrong. I must be wrong. I had fed them. They had thanked me. They were my guests” (Miller 334).

This mentality, and the pattern of broken trust immediately followed by sexual violence, echoes the stories from *Wake, Siren*, particularly the stories of Daphne and Callisto, and it is
when these patterns are identified and addressed across multiple stories that they can be collected as evidence and then used to promote the need for change in regards to the treatment of women in society. While these patterns have been found in multiple retellings and myths, the mental and emotional trauma that Circe demonstrates during the rape scene is far from fictional, and it is echoed in experiences of women spanning centuries, because women have continually been trained to ignore their own instincts when it comes to gendered violence, and to internalize the blame. One study on this pattern of behavior suggests that, “As men’s heterosexual violence is viewed as customary, so too is women’s endurance of it” (Hlavka 339), and that, “Coupled with the presumption that women are the gatekeepers of male desire, heteronormative discourses have allowed for men’s limited accountability for aggressive, harassing, and criminal sexual conduct” (Hlavka 339-340). Although these concepts have been known to keep women from speaking up publicly or openly discussing their experiences with sexual violence, it should be noted that distress and trauma that women experience as a result of sexual harassment and abuse has always been present. Circe’s mindset during her rape scene covers multiple emotions, ranging from shock to anger to bitterness, seen especially in the lines, “I remember what I thought, bare against the grinding stone: I am only a nymph after all, for nothing is more common among us than this” (Miller 335). All it would take is replacing the word “nymph” with woman” and that could apply to the world today just as easily as it applied back then. Circe goes as far as to express surprise that she had not experienced other major instances of sexual harassment or assault before that day, saying, “Maybe the true surprise, I thought, was that it had not happened sooner. My uncles’ eyes used to crawl over me as I poured their wine. Their hands found their way to my flesh. A pinch, a stroke, a hand slipping under the sleeve of my dress” (Miller 340).
These problematic behaviors are happening to a goddess just as easily as they happen to mortal women, which goes to show just how far male entitlement can reach.

After surviving this experience and getting her revenge by transforming the crew into swine, Circe becomes a hardened version of herself, no longer excited or eager to welcome guests into her home. She goes into each situation with men expecting them to try and harm her, and most of the time, she is correct in doing so. She states, “I did not pretend to be a mortal. I showed my lambent, yellow eyes at every turn. None of it made a difference. I was alone and a woman, that was all that mattered” (Miller 344). It is moments like these in Miller’s retelling that demonstrate the power of this novel, not just because it showcases a strong, independent version of Circe, but also because it reveals moments of pain and defeat. Here, Circe is more of a fully developed character than a symbol, and her story relays a more complete, honest depiction of the female experience, creating a sense of openness with the reader that allows them to empathize and connect with her character. While figures like Medusa are given renewed value through their usage as symbols to incite motivation and empowerment, Miller’s retelling of Circe functions differently by creating an entirely unique plot and in-depth characterization that incites empathy and newfound understanding of a character that previously hardly had any story at all, therefore developing this new type of feminist symbol in which strengths and weaknesses of a female character are equally represented and accepted. Due to how recently stories like Circe and Wake, Siren were published, the full impact of these stories on individuals and greater social and political change is yet to be seen, as the discussion of feminist literature and its impact on current feminist movements is not widely remarked on in academic circles, as one study notes, “even though women have made advances in higher education on multiple levels, research that is explicitly feminist is underrepresented in mainstream higher academic journals” (Ropers-
Huilman and Winters 667), which is why I hope that this study can help contribute to a relatively new discussion and foster future conversations about how feminist retellings of Greek myths are uniquely able to capture and comment on topics of that bridge present and past as well as fictional and nonfictional all in one work, which encourages renewed lessons and perspectives on both history and outlooks for the future.

Another timeless element of female narratives that Miller’s retelling engages with is the one-dimensionality of the female villain. In Circe, there are several female characters who are not “good” per se, but they also do not easily fall into the category of the villain. Each character is more complex and explored deeply, demonstrating the different responses women can have to some of the same problems. The most prominent example of this is Circe’s sister Pasiphaë, who is initially cast as a vain bully who only cares about her own sense of importance, and who sends for Circe before giving birth to the Minotaur, one of the most famous monsters in Greek mythology. Circe’s strained relationship with Pasiphaë is a natural result of the cruelty Circe experienced at her sister’s hands in her youth, and so it truly shocks her when her sister reveals that she also hated their parents and other family members. Circe questions her on this, specifically regarding her relationship with their brother Perses, whom Pasiphaë had always been closest with. Pasiphaë responds, “You know nothing of Perses. Do you know how I had to keep him happy? The things I had to do?” (Miller 261), hinting that she was also a victim of abuse, and had hidden it the entire time. She rants to Circe about her naive view of their father and the other men from their home, “Let me tell you a truth about Helios and the rest. They do not care if you are good. They barely care if you are wicked. The only thing that makes them listen is power” (Miller 259), a perspective that explains much of Pasiphaë’s behavior, even if it cannot excuse it. Miller could have easily left Pasiphaë with an evil stepsister style role, but instead
made her much more intriguing and much more real by giving her a background involving her own trauma and a different response to being mistreated. Circe still refuses to liken herself to her sister, but it does shift the reader away from the quick categorization of women as either perfect or evil, which is often how they are portrayed in male-dominated myths and stories. Author Sarah Appleton Aguiar thoroughly discusses the concept of evil women and their portrayals in literature in her book entitled *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, in which she explains, “The bitch has been present in literature for centuries; she is recognizable as the monstrous presence in Greek tragedy, and she appears in numerous biblical incarnations as well as classical and cultural mythologies” (5), and she criticizes past feminist works for focusing too much on pure female nobility, instead advocating for these types of female characters to be given their own space and acknowledgement, “In fact, what becomes clear in certain feminist fiction that celebrates the reclamation of the bitch is that the female protagonist finds that the bitch is, in reality, a necessary part of herself” (6). This sounds exactly what Circe is struggling to do after her revealing conversation with Pasiphaë; Circe sees herself as the virtuous, noble female protagonist, and does not want to admit that she could be anything like her sister, who she views as the typical representation of the female evil. Yet, Miller’s inclusion of Pasiphaë’s own trauma, which deepens her character without removing her flaws, mistakes, or general attitude or demeanor, gives the reader the opportunity to take the next step that Circe cannot seem to: the acceptance of the “bitch” character as one with her own agency and value. Appleton Aguiar continues, “a woman who does not acknowledge her own inclinations toward evil, unsavory behaviors, flaws, failings, and downright nastiness may find herself as objectified as any other silenced heroine. Indeed, morality itself may reside in the heart and mind of the bitch” (6), and though Circe may reject her similarities to her sister, she does go on to acknowledge her
inclinations toward evil, seen when she faces Scylla and admits to having created a monster of her own, just as Pasiphaë birthed the Minotaur. She also uses that “downright nastiness” to blatantly threaten her father at the end of the novel in order to end her exile on Aiaia, demonstrating the power that comes with a woman embracing her own darkness, which echoes the sentiments of feminist theory surrounding the subject of Medusa and how women can achieve full independence from the male gaze by reclaiming facets of their personality and perspective that have been deemed as unsavory in the past. With the creation of this entirely new life story in *Circe*, Madeline Miller was able to incorporate negative tropes such as the female monster associated with classic Greek myth and transform them into elements that more accurately reflect the realities of the female experience, which turns the literary conversations about women away from harmful stereotypes and toward depictions that empower women as complex beings rather than one-dimensional images. To summarize, Pasiphaë says, “They take what they want, and in return they give you only your own shackles” (Miller 260), and by writing this novel, Miller appears to be attempting a way to break free of those chains.

Another element of the female perspective that is illuminated through Miller’s *Circe* is the raw, honest journey of motherhood. Circe becomes pregnant with Odysseus’s child right before he leaves the island, and she does not have the glamorous experience that is typically described in popular portrayals of pregnancy. Despite her divinity, Circe has an incredibly painful pregnancy, and this section of the novel passes through unmarked time due to the fact that Circe is in too much agony to be a clear narrator, only able to express constant pain. Unfortunately, once Telegonus, her son, is born, things do not get much better for the new mother. Telegonus screams constantly and will not rest no matter what Circe tries, and it is difficult to read this part of the story without sharing in her sense of exhaustion, fear, and
underlying sense of love and motherly devotion. Circe says, “I did not go easy to motherhood. I faced it as soldiers face their enemies, girded and braced, sword up against the coming blows” (Miller 429), a humanizing reminder that motherhood is not always a smooth ride or something women should just naturally be perfect at, as is the common perception. Admirably, Circe does not give up on herself or Telegonus, even after learning that Athena, one of the most formidable Olympians, is determined to kill Telegonus due to some unexplained destiny he will have later in life. Circe never wavers in her determination, “I had said I would do anything for him, and now I would prove it and hold up the sky” (Miller 453). One study on female stereotypes in literature touched on past portrayals of motherhood, “Mothering, when it is portrayed at all, is shown from the viewpoint of the child (male) who either resents it or idealizes it; the genuine happiness and difficulty of mothering doesn’t exist in traditional literature” (Wolff 206), and with this in mind, it only makes the retelling of Circe and her story through Miller’s work more powerful, as it not only breaks away from tradition by detailing the honest perspective of the mother, it also has its roots in traditional literature, which means that by taking an aspect of a story that was not previously shown and putting it on display, this retelling of a Greek myth has branched traditional and contemporary literature in a way that empowers women rather than diminishing them.

Circe’s dedication to protecting her son continues to be tested as Telegonus comes of age and becomes increasingly curious about his father and the outside world. Eventually, Hermes visits him and tells him to go to Ithaca to meet Odysseus, a fateful journey that not only results in Telegonus accidentally killing his father, but also in Telegonus bringing Penelope and Telemachus, Odysseus’s wife and first son, back to Aiaia with him. This brings two very important female figures in Greek mythology together: Circe and Penelope. They share a
connection to Odysseus, but as evidenced in this retelling, the two women are much more than that. Penelope is known for her intelligence, and earlier in the novel during Odysseus’s stay at Aiaia, he described his wife to Circe, “‘My wife though,’ he said. ‘She is constant. Constant in all things. Even wise men must go astray sometimes, but never her. She is a fixed star, a true-made bow’” (Miller 394). This description holds true, as Penelope remains calm and thoughtful in the presence of her late husband’s former lover. Circe, however, is intelligent in her own right, and soon realizes that Penelope has an additional motive for taking her son to Aiaia, and soon Penelope reveals that she is trying to hide her son from Athena as well and has brought more of the goddess’s wrath upon Circe. Instead of the two women becoming enemies, which most people would expect, especially considering that the two both had a romantic relationship and a child with the same man, they become allies and eventual friends. They manage to face Athena together and give both sons what they want: Telemachus, a life of anonymity, and Telegonus, a life of exploration and glory. This requires a great personal sacrifice for Circe: letting her son go. She manages to let him go and lead his own life, and though it pains her, she chooses his happiness over her own feelings, exhibiting a unique type of strength only a parent, and especially a mother, could understand. Once Telegonus is gone, Circe no longer wishes to remain on her island, and is bold enough to demand a conversation with her father, Helios, after all this time. She used to cower before her father, but here she dominates the conversation, and demands release from her exile. Rattled by her confidence and strength, Helios agrees, and Circe is free from her exile and family ties at last. Penelope, however, decides to stay on the island and become the new witch of Aiaia, determined to use her notorious willpower to master witchcraft. Circe ends up getting the life and love that she always wanted, without sacrificing her own self-worth to do so.
In the conclusion, as one study of Miller’s novel says, “She unravels her imagined future, her deepest desires and we read how she would have written her story if it were entirely up to her. By doing so, she completely undermines the reputation that male mythmakers have built for her” (Govers 24), which perfectly sums up the ending of Circe’s story and its overall effect. We see Circe’s future unfold with Telemachus, and it is a happy one, and one that feels deserved after all that Circe went through. It is a long tale of suffering and victory, just like the tale of Odysseus. Circe is an equally formidable protagonist with a voice all her own, and through Miller, it is heard loud and clear. This modern retelling of a famous Greek myth brings together so many different elements of female existence, and how important it is to acknowledge that women are still facing so many of the exact same problems involving gendered violence, perception, and representation. This story is able to be modernized because in its essence, it is not a myth. It is reality.

CHAPTER V: #METOO

So many myths have been discussed over the course of this thesis, and yet despite some stories involving witchcraft or snakes for hair or turning into trees, the experiences the women face in these myths never feel unfamiliar. That is because the problems that plagued mythological women still affect the very real women in society today. One study on this matter
states, “Despite the impact on all, sexual violence remains a gendered crime, with more girls and women affected, reflecting misogynistic and patriarchal attitudes inherited from ages past” (Bethel 1). Women are still being forced to deal with misogyny, with the constant threat of sexual violence, with the fear of speaking out about what has happened to them. In recent years, a new wave of feminism has ushered in some major progress, but there is still much work to be done. Some of that progress is credited to the #MeToo movement, which initially began in 2006 when sexual assault survivor Tarana Burke coined the phrase “Me Too” in order to help women and girls of color who had also survived sexual violence, and was reignited in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano wrote the tweet, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet,” closely following accusations of inappropriate behavior by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. Milano’s tweet spread like wildfire, and soon more and more people were coming forward with their own stories of survival. According to one source, “Within the first twenty-four hours, it had been retweeted half a million times. According to Facebook, nearly 50 percent of US users are friends with someone who posted a message about experiences of assault or harassment” (Tambe 197). One particularly powerful testimony was that of Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney, who tweeted that she was sexually assaulted by former team doctor Lawrence G. Nassar, who went on to be sentenced to 60 years in federal prison on child pornography charges (Chicago Tribune). Throughout 2017 and 2018, major names like Weinstein, actor Kevin Spacey, rapper R. Kelly, and many more were forced to face consequences for their inappropriate behavior towards women, and this period has since changed society’s attitudes towards allegations of sexual misconduct, which is now (or at least, is now supposed to be) taken extremely seriously.
Like any major social or political movement, not everyone supported the message behind #MeToo. According to an article on the effects of #MeToo, “This male entitlement has been evident in the response to #MeToo. We are encouraged to feel sympathy for these men at the ‘injustice’ that has been visited upon them…” (Savigny 127). I have to agree with the article’s incredulous tone, because while there are always going to be people who lie and take advantage of good causes such as this movement, the majority of women making these claims are not liars or out to get the men of the world. Myths like Medusa’s and Daphne’s serve as reminders that this violent male behavior is as old as time itself, and it is clearly so common that the same acts were featured again and again in these Greek myths and in many stories after. What these “victimized” men are likely feeling is a new sense of accountability, which is necessary in order to create change and a safer environment for women in the future. After all, the #MeToo movement was aimed to “expose the myriad of ways in which sexism is woven into and through our mediated culture” (Savigny 127), and this exposure, though at times uncomfortable, is the first step toward finding a solution.

Though it still feels like yesterday, years have passed since the revival of #MeToo, and the question now is what needs to be done next in order to keep up the momentum. “#MeToo as wider phenomena can be illustrative of an era that we are in, and an era that can be changed; we have been provided opportunities to repoliticize sexism. The collective voice of women’s abuse has challenged our dominated media narratives” (Savigny 135), a process that feminist retellings of Greek myths like Circe were a part of, and this direct challenge to the male-dominated narrative hammered out a space for more voices to come forward, for more stories to be written or revolutionized. These topics are receiving significant attention, and feminists will hopefully continue to capitalize on this opportunity, because “we can be angry, creative and change the
conversation. Because as #MeToo reminds us, we really do need to change the conversation” (Savigny 128).

An additional change that would be fruitful to add to the conversation, and one that I would argue should be the next greater step in #MeToo and feminist movements as a whole, is the further discussion and exploration of how women of various backgrounds are affected differently by feminism, and how to bridge the inequality of justice being given amongst women of differing race, ethnicity, class, and status. Just as Penelope and the enslaved women commonly referred to as her maids handled the topic of the enslaved women’s experiences with rape and even their deaths differently in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, women of different backgrounds are experiencing various degrees of benefits associated with feminist movements like #MeToo. As Tambe’s article on the subject states:

“Critical race feminism offers important insights when exploring the question of whether this is a white women’s movement. The answer is complicated—both yes and no. Obviously, sexual violence and harassment are not white women’s problems alone. They have been a pervasive workplace experience for women of color—whether we are talking about enslaved women or the vast majority of women in low-wage service professions...But if we look at US media coverage of the movement and the most striking spokespersons as well as casualties in recent scandals, it is certainly white women’s pain that is centered in popular media coverage” (199)

I find this to be especially disappointing due to the fact that it was an African-American woman who actually started the #MeToo movement back in 2006, and sincerely hope that more people, in media and scholarly articles alike, continue to call attention to this disproportionate representation and demand that women of all races and backgrounds have their experiences with
sexual violence and harassment acknowledged and brought to light. Tambe further states, “The dynamics of #MeToo, in which due process has been reversed—with accusers’ words taken more seriously than those of the accused—is a familiar problem in black communities” (200), and uses the lynching of black men as a result of unfound allegations of the sexual violation of white women as an all too familiar historical example. These are all valid points that demonstrate flaws in the #MeToo movement, and ones that should not be ignored, even in studies such as these, which are meant to highlight the positive effects of such a movement. Progress is certainly not a perfect process, and just as authors like Miller, Atwood, and MacLaughlin shift perspectives of Greek myths from male to female in order to show never-before-seen sides to classic stories, recent history can also benefit from shifting perspectives and constant reevaluation, as it allows for the movement to truly move forward rather than staying stagnant in one place or time.

Through the #MeToo movement, the world has become much more aware of the sheer size of the problem of sexual violence against women, and now this conversation can shift toward what needs to be done to rewire the mentalities of people who think gender discrimination is acceptable. “#MeToo needs to be more than just the next wave; we have to fundamentally undo the sexist structures that bind” (Savigny 135), an extremely daunting task that requires time, but as evidenced by the numerous mythological figures discussed in this thesis, time goes on and issues persist, so dedication to a less violent and more equal world should persist just as strongly. To close this paragraph, but not this conversation, I turn to none other than Oprah Winfrey, who during her 2018 acceptance speech at the Golden Globes stated, “It’s not just a story affecting the entertainment industry. It’s one that transcends any culture,
geography, race, religion, politics, or workplace” (Chicago Tribune). I would argue, then, this movement is of nearly mythical proportions.

CONCLUSION

Many names and stories have graced the pages of this thesis, from a minor goddess turned confident witch to popular talk show hosts, and my goal was to finish this work with a greater message of female empowerment in literature and in life. One research source claims, “Women in this modern age are speaking up for themselves...But the great female figures of
literature, being mythical or dead, have a harder time of it, cemented as they are in decades or centuries of tradition—concocted (almost all of it) by men” (Rodax 581), and I believe that with such great novels like Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, Marjorie Garber’s *The Medusa Reader*, and Nina MacLaughlin’s *Wake, Siren*, that cement has loosened and threatens to break, freeing these female characters from the bonds of patriarchy and allowing them to exist independently.

All the primary novels I chose to evaluate in this study were indeed written by women, and as essayist Helene Cixous claims, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies...The future must no longer be determined by the past” (875), and I think that while focus on the future is infinitely important, the impact of the past cannot be ignored, which is why what female authors like Miller, Atwood, Garber, and MacLaughlin have done through their Greek mythological retellings through the female perspective is an excellent example of how stories of the past can continue to be told without infringing on the future. These retellings take the heart of Greek myths—the figures, the magic, the violence—and convert them into stories that resonate with a modern audience, whether that is by the use of modern language and tone, updated settings, or additional plot altogether. The timelessness of Greek mythology lies in its malleability, and the craft of turning stories which traditionally feature the objectification and violation of women into ones that instead give those women the proper space and attention to address their experiences with violence as well as being given a background and life of their own is an incredibly moving and uplifting wave of literature and feminism.

I was initially inspired to take on the topic of Greek myth retellings because of a class that introduced me to an avenue of literature that featured the fantastical world of myth and
magic alongside storylines that prompt relevant, real world discussions. What I realized while conducting this study was that the topic was even more relevant to my personal life than I had initially thought, with the #MeToo movement, the publications of *Circe* and *Wake, Siren*, and my college career all happening in the same handful of years. The modern discussions of feminism and the effects of sexual violence have been making headlines throughout my time at Ole Miss, and the knowledge I gained through this study directly corresponds with my experience as a young woman becoming independent and learning how to handle the world (and its many dangers) on my own. I consider myself lucky to have gone through this transformative time in my life right as the world around me started to gain a greater understanding of the realities of womanhood and how deeply misogyny is rooted within our culture. Because of these developments, and because of the stories that have been shared, whether they come from real women on Twitter, fictional goddesses, or class discussions on both, I have always known that my experiences are valid and that my voice deserves to be heard, an understanding that will hopefully continue to grow as more stories are told and rewritten.

Essentially, in a society obsessed with everything shiny and new, I wanted to make an argument for the value of the ancient, and by incorporating an important social and political element like feminism, I was able to identify and explore a connection that stretches from the days of Greek heroes (who I now imagine as witches and weavers) to my own reality.
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