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Feminist Retellings of Homer's The Odyssey, 2005-2022

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Feminist Retellings of Homer's *The Odyssey*, 2005-2022

A Capstone Submitted to the

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of feminist retellings of Greek mythology. These retellings serve to give voice to the marginalized female characters from ancient stories whose characterizations were deprioritized over their male counterparts. Furthermore, these stories connect the plights of ancient women with modern feminists to champion issues that women continue facing today. This study focuses on retellings of Homer's *The Odyssey*, but these ideas and arguments are still largely applicable to other retellings of Greek mythology. Along with discussing *The Odyssey*, this project also analyzes three feminist retellings: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), and Claire North's *Ithaca* (2022). Most of this project focuses on analyzing each novel's text in relation to secondary sources about them and about feminist ideals more broadly; however, especially for *Ithaca*—on which no scholarly research exists because of its recent publication date—papers on the evolution of feminist theory and interviews with the authors themselves have also been included. Atwood's novel contains somewhat outdated feminist theory that offers generalized scathing reviews about patriarchy without embodying its own criticisms or engaging in nuanced ideas of intersectionality. *Circe* and *Ithaca* apply these more recent aspects of the feminist movement but offer opposing ideas on motherhood and on the reality of gaining justice in sexual assault cases. Each novel grapples with evolving ideas of feminism to explore feminine identity and advocate for issues that women continue to face thousands of years later.

Introduction

Feminist retellings of Greek mythology started as a niche subcategory of the historical fiction genre in the mid-2000s with stories like *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood, *Lavinia* by Ursula K. Le Guin, and *The Memoirs of Helen of Troy* by Amanda Elyot. With the rise of gender studies and feminist theory, readers engage with and interpret ancient Greek stories through these new lenses (Felson and Slatkin 114), resulting in a fundamental change due to “female knowledge of female experience, so that [old stories] can no longer stand” as originally interpreted (Ostriker 73). Rewriting Greek mythology from the perspective of female characters offers these women a chance to reclaim agency in their stories, giving voice to the silenced and suppressed. As evidenced by the growing popularity of this genre, readers want and need these stories because they comment on the struggles that women continue to face in the twenty-first century; essentially, “the sufferings and plights of Greek culture’s women are the same as the women of today’s society” (Sarwar and Fatima 339). Forming these intimate bonds with traditionally marginalized female characters ensures that women’s place in history holds as much importance as men’s and connects modern feminism with the struggles of women from ages long past.

This study will focus on Homer’s *The Odyssey*—chosen both for the abundance of its retellings and to keep the discussion focused on one story—and three feminist retellings: *The Penelopiad* (2005) by Margaret Atwood, *Circe* (2018) by Madeline Miller, and *Ithaca* (2022) by Claire North. *The Penelopiad* marks the inception of this trend for feminist Greek mythology, yet its publication preceded the fourth wave of feminism that started around 2017 (Alexander, “Feminism: The Fourth Wave”). Thus, this retelling of *The Odyssey* through Penelope’s perspective serves as a great reference for the rhetoric in the earliest versions of feminist

retellings. Madeline Miller's *Circe*, on the other hand, serves as a good middle point; though published a year after the start of the latest feminist wave, Miller told PBS that she spent six years writing her fictional autobiography about the minor goddess Circe ("For Madeline Miller"). Finally, Claire North's *Ithaca* tells the story of Penelope and the other women of Ithaca during Odysseus' long absence. Her novel rests squarely after the revitalization of the #MeToo movement in 2017 and after the establishment of feminist retellings of Greek mythology as a popular genre. Atwood, Miller, and North encapsulate the genre of feminist retellings of *The Odyssey* and epitomize the importance of feminist retellings: to create "a reference point for understanding [women's] own experiences, acknowledging their own identities, and finally declaring their own freedom as women" (Uçar-Özbirinci 1). In short, retellings serve a vital role in the modern feminist movement by discussing and propelling forth issues that women faced thousands of years ago and continue to face in modern times.

Atwood's *The Penelopiad* helped popularize the genre of feminist retellings; while her novel certainly puts Penelope's perspective in the limelight more so than in *The Odyssey* and offers generalized scathing remarks about patriarchy and sexism, her novel struggles to handle more recent, nuanced issues within the feminist movement such as intersectionality, sexual assault, and universal sisterhood. Miller's *Circe* not only improves upon Atwood's callous depiction of sexual assault and develops close friendships between female characters, but she also criticizes the erasure of women in stories by creating morally complex female characters that draw strength from their status as mothers. Finally, North's *Ithaca*—while still rejecting the sexist ideals like Miller and Atwood—paints a feminist tale in more grim tones by punishing female characters who overtly assume leadership and take justice into their own hands

concerning sexual assault. Overall, each novel reflects an evolution of the feminist movement as ideas progressed and changed in the twenty-first century.

Homer's *The Odyssey*

Before examining the three feminist retellings, it is important to first discuss the original source material: *The Odyssey*. In Homer's epic, when female characters appear, their characterization relies on stereotypical feminine qualities that define women almost exclusively by their beauty. Despite the underdeveloped personalities of these women, they still play a major role in Odysseus' journey. One minor character, Circe, offers insight into a woman existing outside this patriarchal structure yet beholden to those very values when Odysseus and his men impose their expectations upon arrival to Aiaia. Obviously, the most well-known female character in *The Odyssey* is none other than Penelope, Odysseus' wife. Though Penelope remains "the paradigm of the virtuous wife" (Foley "Penelope as Moral Agent" 101) through her deference to Telemachus and Odysseus, Penelope leverages her intelligence to trick the suitors and even Odysseus himself. Nevertheless, her much-praised loyalty to Odysseus earns her only a small degree of freedom and trust. As such, *The Odyssey* subjects female characters to harsh criticism from men while still expecting them to dutifully serve their male authority figures at the expense of their own characterization.

Within the world of *The Odyssey*, men belittle women through sexist language directed at their beauty to undermine their trustworthiness. Helen tells Telemachus that her face was "the cause that hounded" the Greeks and pushed them to Troy (4.148); Hephaestus describes Aphrodite's eyes as "star[ing] at [him] like a dog" when he discovered her affair with Ares (8.320); and Melantho, a female slave in Odysseus' household, is called a "little dog" by Odysseus (18.338) and a "brazen, shameless dog" by Penelope (19.91). While Emily Wilson

emphasizes that this recurring imagery implies women “are like dogs, because they are put low on the social hierarchy” (44), the repetition also strips women of their beauty and questions their purity, virtues that society instills into women as the most essential to their personage. Moreover, the degradation of these transgressing women naturally fosters mistrust for *all* women. Despite assuring Odysseus that Penelope will not betray him as Clytemnestra did to her husband because “the wise / Penelope is much too sensible / to do such things” (11.444-46), Agamemnon still warns Odysseus to “never treat [his] wife too well” (11.441). Based on her epithets, Penelope garners a small exception on account of her intelligence; however, most women—defined exclusively by physical looks that men easily debase—possess no courage, cunning, or even cruelty that men judge themselves by. Hence, men’s focus on beauty for both praise and contempt deteriorates the one quality that women rely upon for constructing a reputable status.

Although men distrust women, Odysseus still relies upon their help to reach Ithaca. When Odysseus reaches the island of the Phaeacians, he flatters Nausicaa by asking if she is “divine or human” (6.149) since she “look[s] like Zeus’ daughter Artemis” (6.151). Odysseus heightens his praise—notably, once again, focused on her attractiveness—because he needs Nausicaa to guide him through this unfamiliar territory. Rather than encourage Odysseus to seek King Alcinous’ goodwill, she recommends Odysseus “pass him by” and instead “embrace [her] mother’s knees / to supplicate” (6.309-10). Although Felson and Slatkin postulate that “this singling out of Queen Arete raises the question of whether Odysseus will bestow a comparable honour on Penelope” (105), Odysseus does not indicate that he even admires Arete. In fact, after the initial supplication, Odysseus converses only with Alcinous; Arete never responds to Odysseus’ request for help or even speaks in the remainder of Book 7. To reach Ithaca, Odysseus relies upon the help of female characters, but he also quickly threatens to harm them should their actions

jeopardize his schemes. For example, when Eurycleia discovers the scar on his leg that alerts her to the beggar's identity, Odysseus "grabbed her throat with his right hand" (19.481) and told her he "will not spare [her] when [he] kill[s] the rest, / the other slave women, although [she was] / [his] nurse" (19.490-92). Even though Eurycleia raised Odysseus, he promises to kill her if she tells anyone he has returned home. Regardless of whether Odysseus would have actually gone through with this threat, he demonstrates a willingness to harm the female characters that offer him help should they outlive what he views as their usefulness.

Even Circe, a woman existing in exile outside the patriarchal structure of ancient Greece, remains beholden to Odysseus' whims. In his initial depiction of Circe, Odysseus describes her as "the beautiful, dreadful goddess" of Aiaia (10.136). By placing an adjective about her physical looks before alluding to her strength as an immortal witch, "Odysseus places Circe's great power as secondary to her enticing beauty" (O'Hara 2). Just as Nausicaa, Arete, and Athena prove invaluable to guiding Odysseus home, so too does Circe provide such intricate instructions about sailing to the house of Hades that Odysseus "need not worry that [he has] no pilot / to steer [his] ship" (10.505-06). Regardless of her help, Odysseus and his crew sexualize her and portray her as a wicked woman tricking men. When Odysseus' crew first approaches Circe's home, they watch as Circe weaves "an intricate, enchanting piece of work" (10.222); Odysseus later also refers to her as "the enchantress Circe" (10.275). The very connotation of "enchantress" and "enchanting" implies that Circe manipulates men using her magic, and the men fear her for her power over them. After Odysseus obtains Moly from Hermes that prevents Circe's enchantments from transforming him into a pig, Circe immediately loses her powerful stature as she "screamed and ducked beneath the sword" (10.323) that Odysseus uses to threaten her, physically lowering herself to reflect her metaphorical submission. Strangely, Circe then sleeps with Odysseus,

because “through making love / [they] may begin to trust each other more” (10.335-36), and Odysseus agrees once she swears an oath to never harm him. He endeavors to take advantage of this immortal goddess’ seduction and her hospitality once she no longer poses a threat.

Much like the other female characters in *The Odyssey*, Penelope remains deferential to the male heads of her household: Telemachus and Odysseus. After Athena encourages Telemachus to assemble a meeting with the suitors, he assumes control over the household and publicly orders his mother to “stick to the loom and the distaff” (1.357), a belittlement that is reminiscent of today’s sexist jokes about women belonging in the kitchen. Her son’s words “startled her,” but “she went back to her room, / and took to heart her son’s deliberate scolding” (1.360-51). Presumably, Penelope ran the household in the years when Telemachus was an infant and before the suitors appeared, but she accepts Telemachus’ orders without question. Once Telemachus rises into his position as prince of Ithaca, Penelope loses any shred of power. When Penelope requires additional assistance to protect her son from the suitors’ assassination plot, she commands an old gardener Dolius “to hurry off and sit beside Laertes, / and tell him everything; he may decide / to go in tears to plead with those who want / to kill godlike Odysseus’ son” (4.737-40). As Erika Weiberg notes, “if she wishes to influence people or events beyond the home, she must appeal to a male relative to make the case for her” (39), so she calls upon Laertes to plead to the suitors on behalf of her son. Though Penelope could reassert her leadership, she recognizes that—even if she successfully convinced Telemachus to obey her orders—her limited authority applies only to her home, so she defers to her father-in-law and son. Furthermore, Helene Foley argues that Penelope’s obedience even extends to her decision to remarry. Before departing for the Trojan War, Odysseus instructs Penelope that “when [their] son’s beard has grown, [she] must get married / to any man [she] choose” (18.270-71). Though critics have

portrayed Penelope's archery contest for her hand in marriage as an irrational and ignorant betrayal of Odysseus (Willcock 250-52), Foley contends that "it is precisely by proposing to establish the contest for her hand with such evident regret that Penelope passes the test of the faithful wife" ("Penelope as Moral Agent" 103), thereby serving as the ultimate form of obedience to her husband.

Despite her acquiescence to her male family members, Penelope exemplifies and mirrors Odysseus' own cunning and courage. Odysseus himself shares with Nausicaa his desire for a like-minded marriage, "for nothing could be better than when two / live in one house, their minds in harmony" (6.182-83). Odysseus idealizes a marriage between two like-minded individuals, so he values Penelope for her cunning and cleverness, traits that mimic his own personality. Homer's epic constantly invites comparison between the married couple, as exemplified in their reunion:

He held his love,
his faithful wife, and wept. As welcome as
the land to swimmers, when Poseidon wrecks
their ship at sea and breaks it with great waves
and driving winds; a few escape the sea
and reach the shore, their skin all caked with brine.
Grateful to be alive, they crawl to land.

So glad was she to see her own dear husband (23.233-40).

Based on the syntax and the association with the sea, readers expect the simile to describe the sea-faring warrior; however, this reverse simile ends with "she," indicating that the above depiction of the woes of sailors applies to Penelope. By subverting the stereotypical gender roles,

the epic “emphasize[s] the *homophrosyne* (like-mindedness) of Penelope and Odysseus” (Weiberg 61). Another comparison comes when Penelope reacts to Telemachus fleeing Ithaca in search of news for his father. Homer describes Penelope as pacing her rooms, “her mind . . . like a lion caught by humans, / terrified, as they throng and circle round him” (4.791-92). While Penelope repeatedly refers to Odysseus as “lionhearted” (4.724), Irene de Jong points out that this lion simile is the only instance in Homer’s epic where a woman and a lion are compared (787-790). Consequently, the rarity of comparing Penelope to a lion—invoking images of strength and courage in facing the suitors—serves to portray Penelope as an equal in marriage to Odysseus.

Although the poem likens Penelope to Odysseus, Homer undermines Penelope’s own intelligence. Undoubtedly, Penelope is clever. “For three long years her trick” with postponing remarriage until finishing the burial shroud for Laertes “beguiled the Greeks” (2.108); the men suspected nothing until a female slave informed them of her deceit. Similarly, Penelope tricks Odysseus himself—a man renowned for his cunning—with the marriage bed ruse that she initiated “to test him” (23.181). Nevertheless, Homer discredits Penelope’s stratagems for fooling the suitors and Odysseus. When Antinous reveals the suitors’ knowledge of her trick with the loom, he claims that “Athena blessed her with intelligence” (2.116). Antinous places the onus for the ploy upon a goddess rather than Penelope. As Jasmine Richards infers, “Antinous assumes that Penelope could not have come up with such an elaborate ruse on her own,” thus he credits the source of Penelope’s intelligence to divinity (129). Additionally, the text leaves significant ambiguity surrounding Penelope’s recognition of Odysseus as the disguised beggar. Following her discussion with the beggar, Penelope orders Eurycleia to “wash [her] master’s / age-mate” (19.356-57). The enjambment of this line suggests that Penelope recognizes Odysseus

and accidentally starts to refer to the beggar as such; however, she catches herself and adds “age-mate” to her statement. Regardless of interpretation, the text never outright states that Penelope suspects her husband has returned. For a character described as “astute” (21.312), “shrewd” (21.322), and “intelligent” (24.200) by the suitors and Agamemnon—all men who have some reason to distrust her—the text contradicts one of Penelope’s defining character traits for the sake of giving Odysseus a dramatic reveal.

For all her intelligence and loyalty to Odysseus, Penelope wins only minor praise and continued subservience. Still disguised as a beggar, Odysseus praises Penelope as a “virtuous and godlike king” in an extended simile (19.111). Though meant to compliment her running of the household, Odysseus’ simile also minimizes her accomplishments by comparing her success to a king rather than a queen. Odysseus uses the gendered “he” (19.113) in his extended simile, implying that Penelope did well *for a woman*. Nevertheless, Odysseus does show a high level of trust between him and his wife. Before leaving for the Trojan War, he tells her that his “parents need / to be well cared for in [their] house” (18.267-68), entrusting her with the care of his parents’ well-being. Additionally, when he returns home and speaks with Penelope about his adventures, “he told it all” (23.309). The text’s emphasis on “all” implies that Odysseus not only tells his wife about Calypso and Circe—whom he mentions in his recounting of his tales—but he also does not hide these affairs to his wife who maintained her fidelity for twenty years despite pressures from the suitors and her own son. Ultimately, her praiseworthy devotion to Odysseus merits her no greater status than before he departed for Troy. After sleeping with Penelope, he orders her to “go with [her] slaves / upstairs, sit quietly, and do not talk / to anyone” (23.365-67). Penelope finds herself suddenly relegated back to a background status upon her husband’s return. Weiberg romanticizes Odysseus’ command by claiming that he “gives Penelope the role of

manager of affairs within the house” (66), but the keyword is *gives*; Odysseus controls the household and delegates Penelope to a passive role of waiting, once again, for his return. There is no equal divvying of authority or consulting with Penelope about his plan, and Penelope never speaks after Odysseus’ orders, the poem thus leaving readers to infer that she obeyed without complaint.

Trapped in a patriarchal society that reduces women to their attractiveness to men, women aid Odysseus throughout his adventures because they cannot deny his request. Very few women in *The Odyssey* amass more than a handful of lines about their beauty. Even Penelope, whom the poem mentions extensively, gains hardly anything from her compliance with Telemachus and Odysseus, as the poem characterizes her almost entirely by her fidelity while qualifying her intelligence. Though characters like Penelope and Circe inspired feminist retellings, their characterization remains stagnant and stereotypical in favor of developing male characters like Telemachus and Odysseus. Clearly, the portrayal of female characters in *The Odyssey* warrants reimagining under a modern feminist lens to reclaim the voices of these silenced women and elevate their stories to the same level of importance that history has always provided to men.

Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005)

In 2005, Margaret Atwood published *The Penelopiad* as a refutation of the misogyny inherent within *The Odyssey*. Its publication helped launch a new era of feminist retellings of Greek mythology that remains popular today. *The Penelopiad* tells the story of Penelope and the twelve maids whom Telemachus hangs after Odysseus orders them killed for sleeping with the suitors. Though he admits the suitors “raped / [his] slave girls” (22.36-37), a scenario which means the slaves had no power, he still brutally orders their execution. Atwood’s novella

certainly attacks this mistreatment of women as economic and political tools for power and extends that judgment to modern forms of sexism; furthermore, *The Penelopiad* condemns the violent trickster nature of Odysseus that *The Odyssey* applauds while highlighting Penelope's crafty deception. However, Atwood's novella is itself subject to feminist critique. Though Atwood disparages competition that pits women against one another, her characters engage in that very behavior. Penelope's lack of sympathy toward victims of sexual assault and those of the lower class extends toward her exploitative relationship with the underdeveloped and uncharacterized twelve maids. While Atwood advances a more nuanced yet flawed version of Penelope and Odysseus, she fails to meaningfully embody her criticisms of misogyny and ultimately neglects the twelve maids whose story she set out to tell.

Though Penelope bemoans the prejudices surrounding women, she concedes that she lacks the power to directly overthrow these biases. When King Icarius marries Penelope off, she is "handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat," a comparison that she describes as "perhaps . . . too crude a simile" but that effectively laments her dependence upon her father and husband (31). Icarius "handed" Penelope off like a piece of food to be consumed by Odysseus, so Odysseus' identity overshadows Penelope's own. Once married, her new worth stems from her ability to produce male heirs. Penelope explains that "if you had daughters instead of sons, you needed to get them bred as soon as possible so you could have grandsons" (20). Especially the use of the word "bred" reduces women to a function of livestock whose sole purpose exists to continue the male lineage. Daughters are inherently worth less than sons. To their fathers, they are useful as transactional bargaining tools for political alliances. To their husbands, they are useful for reproduction. Despite her rejection of these demeaning views on women's worth,

Penelope's disadvantaged position affords her little opportunity to effectively alter these situations. Before leaving for Ithaca, Penelope's Naiad mother reminds her,

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 (34).

Initially, Penelope finds her mother's words cryptic. It is not until dealing with the suitors that she discerns her mother's meaning: women cannot directly oppose men, so they must behave like water and flow around them. Ioana-Gianina Haneş states that "this is precisely what women do in a society where dodging is the only chance they have" to "cope with the male-dominated situations" (12). Through covert defiance, Penelope gains a limited ability to impose her will against the suitors and her wider world.

Besides questioning the ancient patriarchal society of *The Odyssey*, Atwood broadens her criticism to modern forms of sexism. Though Penelope chooses to remain in the Asphodel as a shade, she learns about "patches, and sunshades, and bustles, and high-heeled shoes, and girdles, and bikinis, and aerobic exercises, and body piercings, and liposuction" from Helen (146-47). Atwood's use of anaphora with the word "and" emphasizes the never-ending methods that society forces onto women to enhance their beauty. This emphasis and judgment of women's physical looks also affects Penelope in the afterlife. Magicians and conjurers call upon the spirits in the Asphodel, and Penelope exposes their fixation on conventionally attractive women. While "Helen was much in demand" (16) as a "woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust" (18), Penelope—who describes herself as "nothing special to look at" (18)—garners no attention from these modern men. Hence, Penelope suggests that men continue to evaluate women based exclusively on their appearance. Women that fail to conform to men's expectations encounter

suspicion and belittlement. In the chapter labeled “The Trial of Odysseus,” the twelve maids bring forth their unjust slaughter to a modern trial. To their dismay, the Judge dismisses their case because “it would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career” (142-43). Here, Atwood clearly mimics the language of modern sexual assault trials wherein the judicial system values young men’s potential future over justice for the victim (Head 72). As a result of these insights into the modern world, Atwood reveals that the diminishment of ancient Greece’s women continues today.

Along with her exposure of both ancient and modern misogyny, Atwood also deglamorizes Odysseus’ duplicitous and violent adventures that *The Odyssey* celebrates. Conflicting stories of Odysseus’ adventures reach Penelope on Ithaca. For example, minstrels claimed “Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle,” but “no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam” (65). Another story describes Odysseus as having “been to the Land of the Dead to consult the spirits,” but others argue “he’d merely spent the night in a gloomy old cave full of bats” (70). This less heroic and crass alternative to the events depicted in *The Odyssey* “characterizes Odysseus as both a wise epic hero and a buffoon” (Staels 108). Due to the inconsistent stories surrounding his time away from Ithaca, Atwood’s Penelope doubts her husband. At the end of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus informs Penelope that he must travel inland with an oar on his back until the people do not recognize the object to finally appease Poseidon’s wrath (23.267-284). In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope responds that “it was a likely story. But then, all of his stories were likely” (135). Her bitter tone implies that she suspects her husband of lying to her. Consequently, his trickster nature proves the very downfall of his marriage by breaking the trust between them. In

particular, Penelope resents her husband's impulsive brutality toward her maids. She "decided to make him wait" before greeting him after the defeat of the suitors, because she "need[ed] time in order to fully disguise [her] true feelings about the unfortunate hanging of [her] twelve young maids" (131). His rash bloodshed contrasts with her "strategy of patient reform" that "allowed Penelope to avoid fatalities in her unstable house for twenty years" (Lambert 674), an achievement that largely goes unacknowledged. Therefore, *The Penelopiad* humbles Odysseus by discrediting the heroics of his adventure and portraying him as a poor husband.

Although Atwood sullies Odysseus' reputation, she uplifts Penelope by featuring her intelligence more prominently than in *The Odyssey*. During their wedding night, Odysseus tells Penelope the story of a boar goring his leg on a hunt while visiting his grandfather Autolycus to receive gifts. Immediately, Penelope realizes,

There was something in the way Odysseus told the story that made me suspect there was more to it. Why had the boar savaged Odysseus, but not the others? Had they known where the boar was hiding out, had they led him into a trap? Was Odysseus meant to die so that Autolycus the cheat wouldn't have to hand over the gifts he owed? (37).

Even Odysseus seems not to suspect foul play, but Penelope keenly observes some of the political motivations that potentially led to the boar's attack. In other words, this passage "demonstrates anew the shrewdness and skepticism that are [Penelope's] defining features" (Suzuki 269). Throughout her story, Atwood corrects scenes from *The Odyssey* where Penelope's well-known intelligence seemed to disappear for the sake of allowing Odysseus a dramatic entrance. This version of Penelope immediately recognizes the beggar as her husband but "didn't let on [she] knew," because "it would have been dangerous for him" to prematurely reveal his identity to the suitors (106). Additionally, the archery contest for her hand in marriage

was all a ruse, because she “knew that only Odysseus would be able to perform this archery trick” (108). Certainly, this interpretation is not wholly original to *The Penelopiad*. John B. Vlahos argues that Penelope recognized the beggar in the original epic, because it is “inconsistent with the cunning and circumspection she displays throughout the poem” for her to fail to ascertain the beggar’s identity (2). *The Penelopiad* merely makes clear the ambiguities apparent in *The Odyssey* to align with Penelope’s astute and observant characterization more consistently.

Even amid *The Penelopiad*’s criticism of patriarchy and misogyny across the centuries, including its revamped portrayals of Penelope and Odysseus, Atwood’s book largely epitomizes the very ideals it seeks to undermine. For instance, Atwood initially condemns toxic comparisons between women. In the opening pages, Penelope claims that she only amounted to “a stick used to beat other women with” (2). That is, the world takes her faithfulness to Odysseus and manipulates it to question why other women failed to follow her so-called good example. Rather than serving as a moral agent, Penelope serves as a moral *object* (Kapusinski 7). One such direct comparison made by male characters throughout *The Penelopiad* is between Penelope and Helen. Antinous affirms Penelope’s suspicions that the suitors pursued her hand in marriage for wealth rather than beauty. “You weren’t exactly a Helen,” he tells her in the afterlife, “but we could have dealt with that. The darkness conceals much!” (79). Interestingly, Antinous adds “a” before Helen, suggesting that she represents the bar upon which to judge women’s attractiveness in the exact manner he does with Penelope. Right after the birth of Telemachus, Odysseus himself compares his wife to Helen, proudly remarking that “Helen hasn’t born a son yet . . . which ought to have made [Penelope] glad. And it did. But on the other hand, why was he still—and possibly always—thinking about Helen?” (50). On such a momentous day, Odysseus

deflates all Penelope's joy by turning Telemachus' birth into an inane competition between her and her cousin.

Although Atwood vilifies Antinous and Odysseus for their comparisons between Penelope and Helen, Penelope engages in this very competition. According to Penelope herself, her desire to spy on the suitors stems from wanting to please her husband and receive from him the greatest praise imaginable: "you're worth a thousand Helens" (69). Like Odysseus, she views Helen as a rival that pushes her to become a more dutiful wife. However, she does not internalize this competition solely due to Odysseus' comment on Telemachus' birthday. Long before meeting Odysseus or the suitors, Penelope describes Helen as "intolerably beautiful" (26), foreshadowing the beauty contest between these women that continues into the afterlife. Helen's role in starting the Trojan War only exacerbates the animosity between them as shown by Penelope calling her "Cousin Helen, Helen the lovely, Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes" (102). Very quickly, Penelope resorts to vulgar language to describe Helen and assigns the entirety of the blame for the Trojan War onto her. In *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood*, Laurie Maguire argues that it's impossible to ascertain whether Helen went willingly with Paris—as Atwood's Penelope resolutely believes—or whether Paris abducted her (96). Instead of building a rapport between Helen and Penelope, Atwood rejects any chance for reconciliation. Even after thousands of years in the afterlife, Penelope holds tightly to her hatred. Surprised by her jealousy, Helen declares that "surely [they] can be friends now" and abandon this harmful rivalry (147). Ultimately, Penelope spurns Helen's olive branch and maintains the feud between them because she fails to unlearn the sexist thoughts and beliefs that society panders (Rogers 15-16). She, too, is a victim of internalized misogyny.

Yet another controversial theme from *The Penelopiad* is Atwood's indifferent language used to describe the rape of lower-class or otherwise powerless women. King Icarius keeps a young Penelope very sheltered for the sake of protecting her purity. To learn palace gossip and information, Penelope relies upon the maids that constantly attend to her since they possess more freedom of movement; after all, "no one cared who might worm his way in between their legs" (24). Penelope observes the lack of sexual agency afforded to the female slaves, yet she continues taking advantage of that very dismissal. Perhaps due to growing up before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the phrase intersectionality to discuss how class, gender, race, and other identities interact (Alexander, "Feminism: The Third Wave"), Atwood paints Penelope's interactions with the maids as extremely classist and manipulative. Similarly, Penelope takes on a mocking tone when discussing how "there were a lot of stories" where "the gods couldn't seem to keep their hands or paws or beaks off mortal women, they were always raping someone or other" (17). Protected by her maids on account of her father's high status, Penelope borders on victim-blaming these women for their own sexual assault. Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah Roberts posit that "Atwood complicates the project of feminist revision" by not "assimilating her [characters] to feminist ideals of female autonomy or generosity" (202). This Penelope's unsympathetic stance on the rape of those beneath her social status clashes with the ideals of female solidarity that readers typically associate with feminist retellings.

These instances of classism foreshadow Penelope's treatment of the twelve maids she claims to love. From the beginning of her relationship with these girls, Penelope exploits the maids. One of Penelope's responsibilities as the head of the household in Odysseus' absence is to manage the slaves. Though "the male slaves were not supposed to sleep with the female ones . . . if a pretty child was born of these couplings, [Penelope] would often keep it and rear it [herself],

teaching it to be a refined and pleasant servant” (68). Not only does Penelope value the children of slaves only if they are physically attractive, but she also refers to these children as “it,” likening the maids to a tool that Penelope later uses to her advantage. With the suitors’ arrival, Penelope perceives the maids as useful by ordering them “to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent” (89-90). Though Penelope professes to view these maids almost like her own children, Timothy Wagoner points out that Penelope had to have known “that [the suitors] might rape them out of anger for waiting for Penelope so long” (90), yet she intentionally places them in harm’s way for the sake of gaining information. When the suitors rape the maids, Penelope casually states that “in retrospect [she] can see that [her] actions were ill-considered, and caused harm” (91). “Caused harm” severely downplays the injustice and trauma that the maids endured under Penelope’s instructions. Even after Odysseus executes the maids for their perceived disloyalty, Penelope does not seem drastically upset about their deaths, stating “dead is dead” (126). Penelope’s refusal to defend the maids even after their deaths reveals her true exploitative feelings toward the maids whom she saw as hers to command and control.

Unfortunately, Penelope’s manipulative actions toward the maids result in an unequal emphasis on Penelope’s characterization. The story of the maids is sprinkled throughout *The Penelopiad*, ranging from poems on their birth to an anthropology lecture to a modern-day trial for Odysseus. Starting from their childhood, the maids argue that they “could not refuse” to sleep with high-class men because their “bodies had little value” (12) in comparison to Penelope. Gradually, their tone shifts from defeated acceptance of their powerlessness to indignation toward Odysseus and Penelope. They remind the audience that “we’re here too, the ones without names . . . The ones with the shame stuck onto us by others” (151). While Atwood created this

story because she has “always been haunted by the hanged maids” (xiv) and the senseless violence Odysseus brings upon them, “the maids speak mostly as one collective voice” with only Melantho being named (Jung 43). They possess no individual defining features or characteristics; they are still as easily dismissed as they were in *The Odyssey*. Furthermore, the focus in *The Penelopiad* remains exclusively on their trauma. In death, “their still-twitching feet don’t touch the ground” as their spiritual forms embody their deaths (149). “Readers are blocked from knowing who the Maids are outside of their abuse and murder” (Head 67), because they do not discuss anything other than their trauma; hence, they remain static characters despite Atwood’s attempt to give them voices and a stage upon which to share their stories.

Ultimately, the maids never achieve their two goals: getting justice for their death and sharing their stories. First, in “The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture,” the male audience members listening to the maids’ lecture discredit and undermine their theories to elevate the importance of their deaths. One of the participants challenges them that “this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap” (129). After failing to wrestle back the men’s attention, the maids finally accept defeat and tell the men they “don’t have to think of [them] as real girls, real flesh and blood,” because “that might be too upsetting” (130). Obviously, their statement is ironic because *The Odyssey* is full of gore and violence, yet “topics like rape and gendered violence are considered undesirable and unpleasant” (Rogers 18). Surprisingly, the maids fail to win sympathy from the one person who knows the truth: Penelope. After failing to punish Odysseus through the judicial system, the maids hound after Odysseus in the afterlife. In response to their pursuit, Penelope and the maids have the following exchange:

“Why can’t you leave him alone?” I yell at the maids. I have to yell because they won’t let me get near them. “Surely it’s enough! He did penance, he said the prayers, he got himself purified!”

“It’s not enough for *us*,” they call.

“What more do you want from him?” I ask them. By this time I’m crying. “Just tell me!”

But they only run away (149).

Though Penelope knows the maids died largely because of her orders and refusal to defend them to Odysseus, she seems baffled that the maids *still* seek retribution, even though Penelope remains jealous of Helen. Instead, Penelope excuses her husband’s actions and denies the maids a chance for justice, causing them to indefinitely tie their identities to their abusers.

Along with not gaining justice, the maids also lose their ability to advocate for themselves. The final lines of *The Penelopiad* describe the maids turning into owls, and their final lines are nonsense meant to mimic owl cries: “too wit too woo too wit too woo too woo” (156). Hilde Staels argues that the transformation of the maids into owls is a liberating and empowering one because “the owl is a symbol of Athen[a] . . . who possesses the power of wisdom” (110), thereby associating the maids with a powerful goddess to heighten their importance within the narrative. Nevertheless, this transformation parallels an earlier claim by Penelope that instead suggests their transformation symbolizes the effective silencing of their voice. At the beginning of the novella, Penelope explains that she “want[s] to scream in your ears—yes, yours!” in a meta warning to the readers about following her example, “but when [she tries] to scream, [she] sound[s] like an owl” (2). Mentioning this specific bird at the beginning and end of *The Penelopiad* proposes that—rather than liberating the maids through their transformation—the maids lost their ability to communicate and share their story. As Rachel

Head suggests, “with a closer look, [the maids] remain voiceless and trapped within their own tragic story” (73), as they are unable to achieve their second goal of making their voices heard. Overall, the maids mimic Penelope’s character in *The Odyssey*, serving only to highlight the main character and abandoning their own characterization and motivations.

Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* reflects early works of feminist rhetoric. There are certainly plenty of scathing remarks about the general patriarchy that Penelope and modern women live within, and Penelope’s character gains more attention and insight than in *The Odyssey*. However, this early version of feminist retellings of Greek mythology neglects to accurately cover the more nuanced issues of feminism such as classism and rape. Atwood’s failure to tackle these issues manifests in her portrayal of the maids and Penelope’s manipulative relationship with them. The very premise of the book was to explore Penelope’s life before, during, and after the events of *The Odyssey* and champion the maids who suffered unjustly from Odysseus’ unfounded cruelty. Atwood seemingly neglected the latter goal in favor of developing Penelope. *The Penelopiad* builds a foundation for future feminist retellings while also displaying the need for more complex feminist discussions about *The Odyssey*. Just as the rhetoric evolves within the feminist movement, so too should feminist retellings reflect intersectionality and sophisticated analysis of *all* female characters.

Madeline Miller’s *Circe* (2018)

Madeline Miller’s *Circe* “was absolutely a feminist project from the start” (Miller, “A Q&A”). Miller’s novel continues and improves upon some of the feminist themes started by Atwood in 2005 with *The Penelopiad*. This fictional autobiography follows the eponymous minor goddess from *The Odyssey* as she navigates her own immortality, confronts powerful gods who oppose her power as a witch, and strives to care for her son in the face of divine

intervention. Just as *The Penelopiad* offers scathing remarks about the patriarchy of ancient Greece, so too does *Circe* expose men's tendency to control female characterization and silence women's voices that oppose their rule. While Circe at first internalizes this misogyny in the same way that Atwood's Penelope does, her exile to Aiaia ultimately affords her the opportunity to refute these prejudices, taking on positions typically afforded only to male authority figures. Furthermore, Miller's *Circe* depicts *all* women as three-dimensional, giving even minor female characters and antagonists a sympathetic and sophisticated backstory. Finally, *Circe* also lauds the strength and tenacity of mothers through Penelope and Circe, a topic that Atwood largely leaves unexplored. Ultimately, while *Circe* and *The Penelopiad* share some general feminist rhetoric about the dangers of sexism and patriarchy, Miller exemplifies the movement's desire for more nuanced female characters; strengthens the bonds between female characters rather than developing toxic rivalries; and portrays Circe as a strong yet evolving character that is characterized by, but not solely defined by, her status as a mother.

Much like *The Penelopiad*, Miller's *Circe* reveals the lack of agency women possess in the narrative of their own lives. After telling Circe about Scylla killing sailors that pass by her rock, Hermes watches her reaction to see if she would "be skimmed milk for crying, or a harpy with a heart of stone" (98). Years later, when she meets Odysseus, Circe remembers those words and wishes that "those could not still be the only choices" available to women (208). With little power to affect her own narrative, Circe laments that "her femininity is defined by the men surrounding her," reducing her to one of two archetypes: an overly emotional woman or a wicked villain (Govers 23). Similarly, after hearing a song about her meeting Odysseus, Circe remarks that she was not surprised by the description of herself as meek and submissive because "humbling women seems to [her] a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless

[women] crawl and weep” (206). As an immortal goddess, Circe reflects on her life thousands of years after the events take place, much like Atwood’s Penelope speaking from the afterlife; consequently, Circe sees her portrayal evolve as men assert their prejudices onto her own narrative. Storytellers minimize Circe’s importance and make her a minor character in her own life. For example, Hermes tells Circe that he heard a prophecy about her that a man named Odysseus would come to her island, to which Circe responds, “that’s the worst prophecy I’ve ever heard” (99). While this scene is meant to be humorous, it shows “how women in these myths are only mentioned in relation to how they served the male characters” (Rogers 30). Just like Atwood’s Penelope, Miller’s Circe finds herself defined and overshadowed by Odysseus.

While Atwood and Miller both expose men devaluing women based on their looks, Miller also uncovers men’s deep-seated mistrust toward women. Circe’s brother, Aeëtes, takes on a flippant tone when assuring Circe that transforming Scylla into a monster benefits her because “even the most beautiful nymph is largely useless” (71). As Atwood’s Penelope experiences in her rivalry with Helen, Miller’s Circe realizes that men only value a woman’s physical appearance, yet “even the small glimpse of purpose that women could acquire in these stories amounts to almost nothing,” because men easily debase and strip away the one source of a woman’s legacy: her beauty (Rogers 28). By making attractiveness the sole gauge with which to judge women, the men in *Circe* naturally extend their sexist views into dismissing women’s words. Leading up to her rape, Circe convinces herself to ignore the instincts that warn her of the danger the strangers pose. She fears that Hermes will tell everyone that “she always was a hysteric” (187) if the men turn out harmless. Interestingly, Miller chooses the word “hysteric,” whose origins stem from a now-debunked theory that attributed mental illness in women to a disease emanating from the womb or uterus (Trimble and Reynolds 4). Therefore, the word

“hysteric” discredits Circe’s concern for her own well-being as an unfounded feminine worry, placing more trust in a man’s version of the story than her own. Outside of sexual assault, men’s words still rank higher than a woman’s own. Although Circe confesses to transforming both Glaucos and Scylla using the forbidden *pharmaka*, her father doubts her claim because “if the world contained the power you allege, do you think it would fall to such as you to discover it?” (63). Nevertheless, once her brother demonstrates their shared powers, her father readily believes him, suggesting that “Circe’s power could not even be acknowledged until it was confirmed by a male figure” (Rogers 27). Circe’s words only hold value for her father if they mimic or support the thoughts of her male authority figures.

Circe initially internalizes these patriarchal beliefs in her value like Atwood’s Penelope, demonstrating the effect of internalized misogyny. Early in the novel, Circe subscribes to the ideals that limit women’s potential to their ability to marry and have children. Her siblings and parents mock Circe’s appearance, saying that “her eyes are yellow as piss” (9) and “her hair is streaked like a lynx” (6). Due to her unconventional looks by immortal standards, Circe insults her own appearance like Atwood’s Penelope, and she consequently sees herself as unfit for marriage until she meets and transforms Glaucos into a god. Circe starts “to say to [herself] new words: *marriage, husband,*” seeing Glaucos’ newly founded immortality as a path to marriage (50). As such, Rizwana Sarwar and Saadia Fatima argue that Circe’s “character ideally reinforces stereotypical notions at the beginning of the novel” (347) by seeing her future solely through the lens of marriage. Moreover, Circe falls victim to the stereotype of the silent woman when faced with exile. Rather than defend herself, Circe turns to her brother and assumes “Aeëtes will speak for [her],” but “he only looked back with all the rest” (74). Throughout her father’s sentencing, she remains speechless, never once speaking on her own behalf. Even with

her father determining the rest of her life, Circe still follows the misogynistic lectures that order her to defer to her male authority figures. Once removed from the patriarchal society of ancient Greece through her exile, Circe still struggles to dismantle these sexist beliefs. Though she suspects the strangers that arrive on her island to mean her harm, she does not say a spell-word to protect herself because “even after all the year that had passed, there was a piece of [her] that still only spoke what [she] was bid” (187). Mairead O’Hara elaborates, saying that “enforced gender norms also compel her to obey the inquiries of men” even when “anticipating gender-based sexual violence” (4). In other words, Circe prioritizes men’s needs over her own safety.

Unlike Atwood’s Penelope, though, Miller’s Circe eventually unlearns these damaging beliefs. Whereas Penelope remains bitter and jealous of Helen’s beauty in the afterlife, Circe’s exile presents danger but also affords her the freedom and opportunity to express herself. On a literal level, Circe uses her voice for singing, “which had never been allowed before, since [her] mother said [she] had the voice of a drowning gull” (82). Whenever she felt lonely, Circe “sang often . . . for it was the best company [she] had” (183). Instead of obeying her family’s orders to stay quiet, she learns to sing solely for her own pleasure. This literal reclaiming of her own voice through song leads to a metaphorical voicing of her opinions as her exile progresses. Long after Aeëtes abandons her to her punishment, Circe confronts him by denying his request to hand over his daughter, Medea. She responds to his order with a resolute “No . . . In Colchis you may work your will. But this is Aiaia” (175). Noticeably, Circe speaks almost exclusively in monosyllabic words, emphasizing her authority and refusal to acquiesce to Aeëtes anymore. Morgan Thomas points out that “for the first time Circe resists Aeëtes, rather than caving to his will” because she feels confident in her own power and prevents him from silencing her (17). The brother whom she once relied upon to speak in her own defense now becomes the power-hungry and cruel

brother that she readily opposes. Her desire to defy the toxic beliefs imposed upon her by her family even extends to her father. At the end of the novel, Circe confronts Helios and orders him to lift her exile from Aiaia. When he reminds her not to dishonor his reputation through her actions, Circe retorts, “I have a better idea. I will do as I please, and when you count your children, leave me out” (361). Unable to contend with this newly confident and powerful Circe, Helios is speechless; the positions between father and daughter have switched, with Helios now subservient to Circe’s will.

Throughout *Circe*, Miller continues this reversal of the stereotypical positions of men and women. In her descriptions of Odysseus, Circe often focuses exclusively on his body parts rather than his whole being. Some of those descriptions include: “his dark, loose hair was crowned with a wreath” (228-29), “his hands were wide and calloused (201), and “his legs were short but stiff with muscles” (202). Sara Mills explains that authors typically depict women’s bodies as “depersonalized, objectified, [and] reduced to its parts” (133) in a method known as fragmentation, where “there is a great deal of concern with the legs, skin, breasts, and hair” to sexualize their bodies into the parts that men find attractive (125). By alternating the traditional fragmentation of women, Miller empowers Circe by asserting her as the stronger figure in her relationship with Odysseus. Furthermore, Circe seeks out sexual relationships with Hermes, Odysseus, Daedalus, and other unnamed visitors to Aiaia “to prove [her] skin was still [her] own” (193). While typically “women are situated in the position of sexual objects for male voyeurism,” Miller switches the conventional structure by letting Circe initiate physical relationships (Sarwar and Fatima 351). In her final romance, Circe abandons the stereotype of the damsel in distress by serving as Telemachus’ protector. Before facing down the monster of her own creation, Scylla, Circe “whispered a charm” of illusion so it appeared as if “he was

gone” and only “bare deck, empty air” remained (367). Whereas tradition casts the man as the defender in the relationship, Circe instead assumes this position to achieve closure and resolve her own problem rather than letting Telemachus swoop in and save her.

Another instance in which *Circe* improves upon *The Penelopiad* is the depiction of sexual assault against women. While Atwood’s Penelope describes rape in an almost clinical and callous tone, Miller’s Circe never excuses this horrendous act. When gods begin sending nymphs to Aiaia as punishment, thereby disturbing Circe’s independence, she complains to Hermes, who suggests she make the most of the situation by taking the nymphs to bed. Circe protests that they would run away screaming, and Hermes jokes,

“Nymphs always do,” he said. “But I’ll tell you a secret: they are terrible at getting away.”

At a feast on Olympus such a jest would have been followed by a roar of laughter.

Hermes waited now, grinning like a goat. But all I felt was a white, cold rage.

“I am finished with you,” I said. “I have been finished a long time. Let me not see you again” (181).

Circe stands in solidarity with her fellow female nymphs. She holds Hermes accountable for his sexist joke, banishing him from her side immediately with no chance for reconciliation or apology. Unfortunately, Hermes’ joke serves to reveal the commonality of sexual violence committed against nymphs, which proves all too true when Circe herself is raped. Her first thought is: “I am only a nymph after all, for nothing is more common among us than this” (188). Kylie Rogers remarks that “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” (31). In response to their violence, Circe turns the men into pigs, referencing *The Odyssey* when Odysseus’ men

“were turned to pigs in body / and voice and hair” (10.240-41). Miller herself remarks that the prior explanations for Circe turning men into pigs “oftentimes has been answered in this sort of shrugging way—‘well, you know women.’ Aside from being sexist, this is a truly boring answer. People do things for reasons, and I wanted to understand how she would come to something so extreme” (Miller, “Interview”). Miller contextualizes Circe’s actions in *The Odyssey* as a woman acting in self-defense against the very real threat of sexual violence. While Atwood’s Penelope speaks disparagingly against the lower-class maids that are raped by the suitors, Circe protects and defends the less powerful nymphs even before she, too, becomes a victim of sexual assault. Circe’s rape occurs less than ten pages after she defends the nymphs from Hermes, thereby emphasizing that regardless of social status or importance within the narrative, female characters do not deserve to be abused and scorned.

Although the maids in *The Penelopiad* focus exclusively on their sexual trauma, Circe’s characterization remains more nuanced. One defining characteristic of Circe other than her rape is her empathy. At the beginning of the novel, Circe offers her uncle Prometheus aid after he is whipped by the Fury even as she “imagined [the Fury’s] infernal voice, howling out [her] name” and “manacles rattling on [her] wrists and the whip striking from the air” (20). Despite the risk of severe punishment, “Circe’s strong empathy drives her to help Prometheus,” displaying her commitment to kindness “as a unique and crucial facet of Circe’s character, rather than a quality instilled in her by men” (O’Hara 6). Her caring nature extends to helping Medea and Jason, Penelope and Telemachus, and even her sister Pasiphaë. However, her empathy does not make her weak. After her rape, Circe takes on a vigilante role by refusing to make Aiaia invisible to outsiders, thereby coaxing men who would take advantage of women to land on her island. She decides to “let them learn the world is not as they think” (192), and she gains satisfaction in

“seeing them frown and try to understand why [she] wasn’t afraid” (194). Her strong sense of justice urges her to punish these men without regret, but she still reflects on her past behaviors and rights the transgressions she does find shameful. Arguably, Circe’s biggest regret in her immortal life is turning Scylla into a monster “for pride and vain delusion” in the hopes of winning Glaucos back (117). Though it takes until the end of the novel, she finally slays Scylla to prevent her from killing any more sailors and orders Telemachus to “not try to take [her] regret” (374) over the lives lost due to her jealousy. By not excusing her own behavior, Circe allows her own character to be multifaceted, conflicting, and complex, because “a woman who does not acknowledge her own inclinations toward evil, unsavory behavior, flaws, failings, and downright nastiness may find herself as objectified as any other silenced heroine” (Aguiar 6). She is not merely a two-dimensional villain, but she is not without her flaws.

Circe portrays even antagonistic female characters as more complex than just reducing them to being vain and vapid as Penelope does to Helen in *The Penelopiad*. After delivering the Minotaur, Circe confronts Pasiphaë about treating her poorly while they were children and compares her sister to their brother Perses. To Circe’s surprise, Pasiphaë grows agitated and says, “You know nothing of Perses. Do you know how I had to keep him happy? The things I had to do?” (147), hinting at trauma inflicted onto her by their brother. Though “Miller could have easily left Pasiphaë with an evil stepsister style role,” she instead elected to make her “much more real by giving her a background involving her own trauma” without excusing her cruelty in the past and present (Rogers 33-34). Additionally, Circe empathizes with Scylla immediately after transforming her. Though she “would have said that Scylla was [her family’s] darling” (58), she was surprised to hear everyone gleefully exclaim,

You know she’s lain with half the halls.

I'm glad I never let her have me. And one of the river-gods' voices, rising over all: Of course she barks. She always was a bitch! (59).

The gods' shallow views of women mean they see even beautiful nymphs as replaceable, and they use degrading language about Scylla's sexual promiscuity while laughing at her horrible transformation. Despite despising Scylla for stealing Glaucos, Circe quickly just feels sorry for her. Finally, Circe's friendship with Penelope defies typical expectations that would pit these two women—both partners of Odysseus and mothers to his children—against each other out of jealousy. Certainly, their relationship starts tenuous as Penelope's arrival to Aiaia brings Athena's attention to Telegonus, but they both admire each other. Circe remarks that “it is a common saying that women are delicate creatures . . . If I had ever believed it, I no longer did” upon seeing Penelope in her doorway (315), while Penelope says, “If I had to trust that a thing would be done, I would trust it to you” (381). They respect and admire each other for their strength and tenacity, becoming friends and allies against all expectations.

Regarding Penelope's characterization, both Atwood and Miller extend and build upon the foundation laid in *The Odyssey*. Both *The Penelopiad* and *Circe* describe Penelope as insightful and clever. Miller's Penelope realizes that she needs to supplicate herself to Circe as they argue about Athena, promising to “give [Circe] blood every year, if [she] will hear [her]” (325); however, since Circe abhors being placed on a pedestal for worship, she orders Penelope to stand. Later, Circe asks Penelope,

“When we fought over Athena, how did you know to kneel to me? That it would shame me?”

“Ah. It was a guess. Something Odysseus said about you once.”

“Which was?”

“That he had never met a god who enjoyed their divinity less” (380).

Penelope cleverly employs her husband’s descriptions of Circe, and she manipulates Circe’s hatred of her own immortality to protect herself and her son, much like how Atwood’s Penelope devises the archery contest to get a weapon into Odysseus’ hands. Overall, the friendship between Circe and Penelope serves to make them mirror characters of each other; “both appear to be condemned to a life of waiting, weaving and domesticity, both are single mothers attempting to bring up a son of Odysseus in his absence, both are forced to use their wits to keep unwanted suitors at bay” (Macmillan 33). Their similarities even extend to their penchant for witchcraft. As Circe seeks to become mortal, Penelope takes over the title of the witch of Aiaia after Circe tells her that she has “come to believe it is mostly will” rather than divinity or blood that makes a witch (338). Miller merely elaborates upon Penelope’s famous patience by applying it to a skill that requires a strong will.

Penelope and Circe’s bond as mothers highlights the common theme throughout *Circe* that *The Penelopiad* largely does not dwell upon. Atwood’s Penelope does not focus on Penelope as a mother—in fact, Penelope never mentions her son in the afterlife after he hangs the maids—whereas Circe’s motherhood is a core aspect of her identity. Miller refrains from glamorizing motherhood, but she celebrates it all the same. Following Telegonus’ birth, 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” (242). Miller’s simile draws comparisons between the battlefield where men gain glory and the struggles women, especially single mothers, face to practice and cultivate their maternal skills. Likewise, Miller crafts another metaphor for motherhood when Circe weaves the spell around Aiaia to shield Telegonus from Athena. “The spells would grind down upon [Circe’s] shoulders,” but “none of that mattered. [She] had said [she] would do

anything for him, and now [she] would prove it and hold up the sky” (255). Circe carries this invisible, heavy weight with her constantly while Telegonus protests against her, not always appreciating everything Circe sacrifices for the sake of her son’s well-being. Clearly, this spell mimics the burden mothers bear when caring for their children. Cynthia Wolff applauds Miller’s depiction of Circe’s motherhood by pointing out that “the genuine happiness and difficulty of mothering doesn’t exist in traditional literature” as mothering is usually shown “from the viewpoint of the child (male) who either resents it or idealizes it” (206). Hence, Miller’s *Circe* gives voice to all mothers struggling to provide for their children while keeping Circe as the main character and driving force of the narration. Her strength as a mother is exemplified when she meets Trygon in the hopes of gaining the lethal venom in his tail to protect Telegonus from Athena as he journeys to Ithaca in search of his father. Just knowing that she “*would have touched the poison . . . is enough*” for Trygon to hand over the venom (281). Her love for her son and willingness to put herself in danger for his sake allows her to complete a task that no other person, including her brother Aeëtes, has accomplished. The strength and selflessness of motherhood are the qualities that allow Circe to succeed.

Miller’s *Circe* embodies the very purpose of feminist retellings of Greek mythology: to allow ancient women to achieve the same scope and importance naturally afforded to male heroes. As the successor to Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, Miller still lambastes ancient Greece’s tendency to control women’s narrative and value the opinions of men over women. Where Miller deviates from Atwood is her astute handling of more complicated aspects of the feminist movement. Miller covers some of the same topics as Atwood, but she ultimately improves upon the mistakes and shortcomings of *The Penelopiad*, including the unlearning of internalized misogyny, the impact of sexual assault and achieving justice against rapists, and the portrayal of

all female characters as complex and defined by something other than their trauma. Moreover, Miller discusses ideals of motherhood that Atwood largely neglects, and she grants power to her female characters to successfully challenge gender norms. Ultimately, *Circe* will become a feminist classic due to the sheer range of feminist ideals that Miller tackles. Miller raised the standards for feminist retellings of Greek mythology with her novel, and she helped popularize and inspire more authors to rewrite epics from the perspectives of these marginalized women.

Claire North's *Ithaca* (2022)

As one of the more recent additions to the feminist retellings of Greek mythology genre, Claire North's *Ithaca* reflects the most recent rhetoric and ideals of the feminist movement. As North herself states, "I'm speaking to a story about womanhood and power and politics for a modern audience in a modern way" (North, "Maximum Shelf"). In preparing to write *Ithaca*, North avoided much of the classical mythology to keep her story appealing to modern audiences unfamiliar with these stories. As such, her novel strongly resonates with modern ideals of feminism. Like Atwood and Miller, North criticizes the representation, or lack thereof, for female characters which affords women few options for overt forms of leadership; however, female characters can manipulate these stereotypes to their advantage through covert defiance. North deviates from the other authors in her bleak depiction of the unappreciated burdens of motherhood and justice for survivors of domestic abuse, as well as developing rare platonic relationships that involve men in the feminist movement.

Similar to Atwood's Penelope warning the readers and Circe's comments about poets humbling women, *Ithaca* offers meta-commentary—mostly from Hera, who serves as the limited omniscient narrator—criticizing sexist storytelling. Homer never explicitly states the motivations behind Odysseus denying immortality from Calypso, but Hera implies he does so to avoid

emasculation. After all, “what kind of god would he be if a woman made him one?” (292). For North’s *Odysseus*, accepting a woman’s help tarnishes the quality of his achievements by tying *Odysseus*’ success to Calypso. Moreover, North heightens the framing of Homer’s Penelope as only a tool to further *Odysseus*’ character. While talking to Hera about defending the women of Ithaca, *Odysseus*’ benefactor, Athena, claims that no one “cares whether [Penelope] survives to the end of his story” (240). Athena’s phrase “his story” emphasizes that Penelope’s character follows the trope known as women in refrigerators where “female characters are little more than plot devices designed to provide emotional drama and backstory for their male counterparts” (Nelson 73). In other words, Athena proposes that Penelope’s survival means very little to the story of *The Odyssey*; she merely serves to make readers empathize with *Odysseus*’ desire to return home without fully acknowledging the traumas that Penelope faced in *Odysseus*’ absence. North goes so far as to suggest that traditional male narrators, “the poets,” fully *erase* female characters. Hera addresses the readers themselves during a political meeting at the beginning of the novel by asking, “Oh—did you forget the women were there too, at this learned assemblage? So too will the poets, when this song is sung” (19). Women are either diminished to supporting characters for male heroes, or they are removed from history completely by male narrators who only value men’s stories.

While condemning the belittlement of female characters, *Ithaca* also characterizes marriage as inherently political and unromantic like *The Penelopiad*. Although *The Odyssey* defines Penelope largely through her devotion to *Odysseus*, North contextualizes how little Penelope knew her husband. As *Ithaca*’s narrator, Hera, recounts the three short weeks leading up to the marriage to *Odysseus*, Penelope repeats to herself six times—three times in the memory itself and three more times in the present—“I will love” (131). Using the future tense “will”

implies that, even in the present moment, Penelope grieves Odysseus not because she genuinely loves him but because she is expected to as his wife. Likewise, Elektra notes that her father needed to raise her as a princess so she was “suitable for marriage to a man whose lands might be incorporated into [her] father’s own” (323). Hence, Elektra represents an opportunity for Agamemnon to build alliances, just like King Icarius saw Atwood’s Penelope as a chance to increase his economic power. Because society limits their importance to marriage and rearing children, Hera bitterly admits that stories remember women as “merely a vessel for another’s seed” (35). As Cynthia Patterson elaborates, ancient Greece only viewed women as contributing “to the common good of the city since [they] produce men” (121). Favoring men naturally extends from Greek society into their mythology as female characters’ purpose often stems exclusively from their marriage to current male heroes or their birthing of future male heroes. Consequently, Elektra and Penelope hold little hope for romance in their marriages due to the emphasis on political and economic advantages rather than compatibility or love.

With no control in even whom they marry, female leaders in North’s *Ithaca* realize the same lesson as Atwood’s Penelope: covert defiance is the only path toward gaining power. Throughout *Ithaca*, Penelope handles the running of Ithaca—including trading to feed the suitors and training an army of women to protect the island from monthly raids—from the shadows because, as she tells Autonoe self-consciously, “the greatest power we women can own is that we take in secret” (173). Penelope cannot openly oppose the suitors and directly assume control of Odysseus’ throne. So, as with modern women in heavily patriarchal societies, her “resistance is likely to take covert, non-confrontational, and momentary forms” that allow her to indirectly influence the politics of Ithaca without offending the suitors and risking bodily harm (El-Kholy 49). Elektra also mirrors Penelope’s subtle political power by leading on her brother’s behalf.

Once visitors leave Elektra alone, “she stops and talks earnestly with that man of hers, Pylades, and sends out orders and receives reports” (159). With Orestes too preoccupied with his father’s murder and the plan to kill his mother, Elektra wrestles control of Mycenae by allowing her brother to act as the face of the kingdom while she handles the actual logistics of running the monarchy. Even Hera finds herself beholden to secretly watching over Ithaca to avoid her husband’s wrath. Her narration amid tense dialogue with Athena admits, “though I would surely be punished for having dared to act as a goddess should, having dabbled in the affairs of men—of *men*, my husband would say, of actual *men* instead of mere mothers!—Athena’s state would hardly be better” (145). Italicizing *men* twice separates the realms of men and women, pushing men into leadership roles and relegating women to a private sphere concerned only with motherhood. According to Hera, “to act as a goddess should” means intervening in the affairs of male gods and humans, just as male gods do. Yet, if women desire to lead, they must do so covertly. Even Hera, as a powerful immortal goddess, finds herself subjected to the same patriarchal limitations that bound her to covertly interfering in the mortal realm.

Unlike *Circe*—where Circe eventually defies her brother and father openly with minor consequences—the female characters in *Ithaca* face further restrictions and even death for overt assertions of leadership. During a political assembly discussing the potential of building a militia, Penelope answers a question posed by Telemachus. Although unconventional for her to voice her opinions on a political council, “this is acceptable—she is speaking not as queen, which would be uncouth—but as a mother” (21). So long as Penelope speaks from her perspective as Telemachus’ mother she remains “all-powerful,” but entering politics means that “he moves into a sphere of male power” (Foley, “Sex and State” 35). For North’s female characters that engage in overt defiance, the consequences prove more lethal than in *Circe*.

Custom dictates that Orestes must kill his mother, Clytemnestra, not only for murdering Agamemnon but also for “dar[ing] to sit on her husband’s throne” while he fought in the Trojan War (192). Her boldness means that “when she dies, there will be no more queens in Greece” (329). Men will restrict what little political power women possess in punishment for Clytemnestra’s supposed transgressions. Therefore, even if one woman opposes the patriarchal boundaries—as Clytemnestra does when she successfully leads Mycenae in Agamemnon’s absence—all women suffer the consequences. Hera, too, empathizes with female mortals in this regard, because she “was a queen of women once, before her husband bound [her] with chains and made [her] a queen of wives” when he felt threatened by her authority (62). Regardless of the specifics of the punishment, both mortal and immortal women suffer drastically for pursuing power while male characters cement their legacy with no objections based on their gender.

However, North explores the manipulation of these limitations and stereotypes as helping women avoid suspicion in their subtle resistances. *The Odyssey* describes Penelope’s rooms as physically removed from the suitors, and North’s *Ithaca* indicates that this separation affords Penelope the opportunity to work away from the prying eyes of men. While discussing Elektra and Orestes’ arrival to Ithaca, Penelope informs her advisor, Medon, that she will be retiring to her rooms, and Medon sarcastically states she does so to “contemplate [her] womanly woes” and “quietly lie in the pain of [her] mournful suffering” (213). His teasing satirizes all the crying and mourning in *The Odyssey*, and shows that Penelope manipulates people’s expectations to quietly carry out her plans without interruption. In addition, Penelope feigns lightheadedness, so “her “profoundly pious scene of feminine weakness . . . hides what Eos does next from all onlookers” as she investigates the body of the merchant Hyllas (57). Barbara Goff explains that death rites and ritual mourning fell onto ancient Greek women as one of their few public responsibilities

(31). Knowing that men will not interrupt her for carrying out her grieving duties, Penelope pretends to be overcome with emotion to shield Eos. Furthermore, she applies the same logic to sheltering the all-women army that she helps develop to protect Ithaca from raider attacks. When Medon questions how they will hide an army, Penelope retorts, “You hide them in precisely the same way you hide your success as a merchant, your skill with agriculture, your wisdom at politics and your innate cunning wit. You hide them as women” (280). Men’s dismissal of women and their low expectations regarding their intelligence is precisely what allows Penelope to move her army around unseen.

All the feminist retellings in this essay discuss sexual assault, and North’s *Ithaca* refines the callousness of *The Penelopiad* but rejects the hope for justice that *Circe* champions. A major impetus for the events of *Ithaca* comes from Agamemnon’s abusive relationship with Clytemnestra. After Agamemnon kills her former husband and rapes her, Clytemnestra thrice repeats that “she did not breathe” until Agamemnon left her alone (39). North reiterates this phrase to magnify Clytemnestra’s fear; she prefers to feign death rather than stay in Agamemnon’s company for longer than necessary. The somber gravity given to this scene contradicts Atwood’s Penelope’s flippant dismissal of the maids’ rape. Just like *Circe*, Clytemnestra eventually takes on a vigilante role by killing her husband, but her victory against her abuser gets diminished. Hera remarks that the poets romanticize Agamemnon’s death to maintain his masculine image. For example,

If his drunkenness is mentioned, it is a thing that puts him into a meek stupor, since if we accept for even a moment that a woman—a *woman!*—could kill the conqueror of Troy, butcher of Priam and all his kin, then absolutely, but of course, Agamemnon had to be a

little drunk. A lamb-like intoxication, gentle and subdued, rather than the raging spittle he actually was (107).

The poets rationalize that Agamemnon must have been intoxicated for his wife to defeat him but not so drunk as to harm his reputation. North's caveats in the story with phrases such as "even a moment," "a woman—a *woman!*—," and "but of course" serve to discredit Clytemnestra's right for justice. Ultimately, Orestes kills his mother against his will because "it is . . . unmanly . . . unacceptable . . . an assault before the gods that [his] father's killer breathes" (114). Perhaps North portrays Clytemnestra's justice as short-lived to critique vigilante feminism which "may allow [women] temporarily to beat [men] at his own game, but [it] will never enable [women] to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 2). Thus, North demonstrates a more grim and bleak reality for survivors of domestic abuse than Miller's *Circe*.

North also deviates from Miller in the portrayal of motherhood. Whereas Miller paints Circe's motherhood as a strength, North focuses on the burden placed upon mothers. Against her desires, Hera reluctantly approaches Athena in the hopes that Athena's care for Odysseus will encompass his wife and the mothers of Ithaca under Hera's protection. Athena responds harshly: "Who gives a shit about the mothers?" (143). War, not childbirth, gets praised and glorified; therefore, Athena's cruel point highlights that society takes for granted the invisible labor—or the "disproportionately high burden of responsibilities such as coordinating the household and managing children" (Ciciolla and Suniya 480)—that goes unappreciated. Telemachus, too, fails to fully comprehend the sacrifices that Penelope makes. Following his first foray into battle, Telemachus struggles to maintain his composure after witnessing the deaths of his fellow warriors. When Penelope offers to tend to him, he screams, "*I do not need my mother!*" (263). His dismissal causes Penelope to flee the room while hiding her tears, understandably upset that

her son rejected her assistance publicly. Motherhood remains one of Penelope's few public responsibilities, but Telemachus cruelly denies his mother's desire to help to preserve his independence and masculinity. Similarly, Orestes and Clytemnestra's relationship strains under the expectations society places upon Orestes as king. Before assuming control of Mycenae's throne, Orestes must kill his mother to avenge his father. Nevertheless, Orestes' thoughts stray only to one thought: mercy. "Mercy, cry his eyes," "mercy, the tip of his tongue presses against his teeth," and "mercy, beats his heart" (345). Although his entire being begs to spare his mother, the gods and his family watch Orestes with an air of inevitability; there is no other outcome. Despite loving her son, Clytemnestra will not be spared.

Ithaca stands out from *The Penelopiad* and *Circe* by depicting positive platonic relationships between men and women. Atwood's and Miller's female characters solely pursue sexual or romantic relationships with men, but *Ithaca* makes Kenamon and Medon friends of Penelope. Of course, Kenamon at first arrives on Ithaca with the intention of joining Penelope's cohort of suitors. Upon meeting Penelope, he immediately asks if she even seeks a husband. "None of the women can remember this question ever having been asked in all the dozens—hundreds—of men who have come through this door" (44). After Penelope admits that she remains loyal to Odysseus, Kenamon makes no more advances for courtship and instead serves as a faux paternal figure for Telemachus. Additionally, Medon—a character within the original *Odyssey*—plays the role of advisor and friend to Penelope. Hera states that "it is almost as if sees her as a friend more than a woman" (32). Medon befriends Penelope not because of her relationship with Odysseus but because he values Penelope's cleverness and tenacity against her many hardships. As Benjamin Drury and Cheryl Kaiser argue, it's important to involve men in the feminist movement because "men who act as allies are evaluated more positively, while their

confrontations are taken as more serious and legitimate efforts to combat sexism” (637). Hence, North’s portrayal of Kenamon and Medon epitomizes the need for men to support feminism and combat sexism from fellow men. Though the core of feminism remains and should remain upon women, involving men is a crucial aspect of making change on a cultural, social, and legal level.

North’s *Ithaca* represents the evolution of the feminist retellings genre as she builds upon the ideals from her predecessors and departs from the more outdated themes. She explores common concepts present in all the feminist novels such as the erasing of women from narratives and the struggles faced by women in positions of authority. However, she expands upon these ideas by suggesting that women can manipulate expectations and stereotypes to aid their efforts of covert defiance. Furthermore, her portrayals of sexual assault improve upon the clinical language and unsympathetic stance toward the lower-class that Atwood’s Penelope takes, but Clytemnestra’s vigilante feminism ends much more somberly than that of the protagonist in Miller’s *Circe*. Likewise, North emphasizes the burdens of motherhood and strained mother-son relationships more than Miller, who portrays motherhood as a testament to women’s strength. Finally, she tackles the issue of platonic relationships between men and women, which neither Miller nor Atwood consider. Overall, North’s novel furthers the empowerment of female characters using fourth-wave feminist ideals, and her continuation of this series will hopefully seek to examine more issues of intersectionality while maintaining her appeal to modern audiences.

Conclusion

By the end of April 2023, even more feminist retellings of Greek mythology will have been published including Jennifer Saint’s *Atalanta*, Natalie Haynes’ *Stone Blind*, and Claire Heywood’s *The Shadow of Perseus*. The publishing industry pushes these stories because they

resonate with the modern-day feminist movement. As Christian Moraru says, “critical rewriting is a form of asserting, changing, and reasserting—renarrating—identity,” meaning that old mythologies are rewritten to give voices to previously underrepresented identities (173). While it’s important to create new stories with three-dimensional female characters tackling issues of the modern-day patriarchy, it’s just as important to ensure that these ancient stories evolve. To understand and appreciate the victories of the twenty-first century, feminists must champion those marginalized women and secure their importance within the narrative, even if the original did not.

Homer’s *The Odyssey* favors the characterization of Telemachus and Odysseus over Penelope, trapping her and other female characters into a society that values their beauty and marriageability. Even for clever women like Penelope, deferring to their male authority figures grants them no better privilege or status. These misogynistic prejudices encourage readers to criticize the epic through a feminist lens, and feminist writers take this even further by shifting the focus from the immortalized Odysseus to his less-celebrated wife, Penelope. Growing up in the second wave of feminism, Atwood retains some of *The Odyssey*’s outdated ideas about feminism, as evidenced by her characterization of Penelope and the treatment of the twelve maids. However, her novel solidifies some of the aspects of Penelope’s personality that Homer’s poem avoids or downplays for the sake of lauding Odysseus. Miller’s *Circe* continues building upon the criticism of the ancient stories to narrate exclusively from the male perspective, but she improves upon Atwood’s novel by offering a more sympathetic stance toward victims of sexual assault and a more successful battle against the men who threaten her independence. Circe stands as a feminist icon not in spite of her flaws but because of them. Claire North, reflecting the most recent ideas of the fourth wave of feminism, wrote *Ithaca* to appeal to modern audiences through

realistic portrayals about the necessity of covert defiance in politics, the unappreciated burdens placed upon mothers, and the unfortunate consequences faced by women seeking justice for abuse.

The popularization of feminist retellings of Greek mythology in the past two decades is an important step toward honoring the struggles faced by ancient women. This essay focuses just on retellings of *The Odyssey*, but the variety of stories—from Perseus and Medusa, Ariadne and the Minotaur, Helen and Paris—represents a growing literary field for analysis. *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood, *Circe* by Madeline Miller, and *Ithaca* by Claire North are just a fraction of those retellings that exemplify the purpose of feminist retellings to bridge the gap between the women of the past and the women of the present. As the feminist movement progresses and new retellings are created, this once-niche genre will influence how we approach the feminist movement, how we connect with one another, and how we learn about ourselves.

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