

Classical Reception and the Rewriting Turn in Contemporary Women's Fiction



Rosario Moreno Soldevila
Daniel Nisa Cáceres
(eds.)



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©2025 Philologia, vol. 2

Publicaciones Enredars, Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Sevilla

Roma Tre Press

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<https://www.upo.es/investiga/enredars/>

<https://romatrepress.uniroma3.it/>

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La edición de este volumen ha sido posible gracias a la financiación del VI Plan Propio de Investigación y Transferencia (2023-2026) de la Universidad Pablo de Olavide, de Sevilla

Imagen de cubierta: Julia Margaret Cameron, *Circe* (1865), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (dominio público)

ISBN: 978-84-09-78187-4

ISBN EBOOK: 979-12-5977-530-6



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I. Women, the Classics and the Rewriting Turn in the Twenty-First Century

Daniel Nisa Cáceres

Universidad Pablo de Olavide

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0914-5527>

dniscac@upo.es

Rosario Moreno Soldevila

Universidad Pablo de Olavide

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7686-978X>

rmorsol@upo.es

Abstract

These introductory pages contextualise the chapters of the collective volume *Classical Reception and the Rewriting Turn in Contemporary Women's Fiction* within the broader phenomenon of twenty-first-century, female-authored engagements with the classics. The phrase *the rewriting turn* is introduced here to capture this critical juncture in contemporary thought, as well as in cultural, literary and publishing trends. Writers such as Margaret Atwood, Pat Barker, Emily Hauser, Natalie Haynes and Madeline Miller, among others, approach classical texts not only as sources of creative inspiration but also as sites of critique and social intervention. By engaging with wider societal debates about women's voices in literature, politics and culture, these works ultimately interrogate entrenched power structures in ways that resonate with ongoing feminist discourse and address the pressing concerns of our times.

Key words

Women writers; feminism; classical reception; contemporary fiction; myth rewriting

Classical Reception and the Rewriting Turn in Contemporary Women's Fiction brings together diverse scholarly contributions to the field of classical reception studies, particularly focusing on the revitalisation and reimagining of mythological narratives in contemporary fiction by Anglophone women writers, including Margaret Atwood, Pat Barker, Victoria Grossack, Alice Underwood, Natalie Haynes, Emily Hauser, Rosie Hewlett and Madeline Miller. These authors engage with classical texts not only as sources of creative inspiration but also as sites of critique, questioning or reshaping longstanding gender norms, power structures and environmental concerns. As Plate notes,

Rich's call for re-vision, in the sense of retelling the stories that make up our common cultural heritage from the perspective of postcolonialism, feminism, and gender and queer studies, has transformed not only our understanding of the past but also our understanding of how we come to such an understanding (2008, 389).

Building upon the revisionist approach propounded by Adrienne Rich (1972), each work included in this collection showcases how modern women writers, whether consciously or unconsciously, have re(con)figured these ancient stories and, whether directly or indirectly, have intervened in modern-day issues, which is both a critical act of literary revision and a powerful political statement.

This intervention reflects broader societal discussions about women's voices in literature, politics and culture, offering an alternative model of female agency that is not constrained by the passivity traditionally ascribed to women in classical narratives. In point of fact, they actively challenge contemporary far-right appropriations of classical discourse, which often invoke nostalgia for a patriarchal past to reinforce exclusionary and regressive gender roles. Instead, these and other authors—Jennifer Saint, Claire North and Maya Deane, among others—have created dynamic and empowered models of femininity that resist being reduced to commodities or mere symbols of obedience or purity. This counters reactionary, ultra-nationalist idealisations of the past by reclaiming classical myths as enclaves of resistance and transformation, subverting their use as tools for ideological control and opening them to pluralistic, progressive interpretations that embrace inclusivity, LGBTQ+, trans and intersectional feminist perspectives.

Considering the magnitude and variety of this resurgence (in poetry, drama and fiction), there has also been an enthusiastic market reception of essays that engage with wide lay audiences. Works such as Natalie Haynes' *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (2020) and *Divine Might: Goddesses in Greek Myth* (2023), and Emily Hauser's *Penelope's Bones: A New History of Homer's World*,

Through the Women Written Out of It (2025a) are not just part of this trend but exemplify it. In light of the foregoing, the phrase *the rewriting turn*, coined in this study, not only serves as a critical shorthand but captures the essence of a transformative moment, in which women are reclaiming and reinterpreting the classics from fresh contemporary perspectives. This designation also seems to encapsulate the act of rewriting, a juncture in contemporary thought and a shift in cultural, literary and publishing trends. Besides, we have consciously chosen *rewriting* over the term *retelling*: whereas retellings often seek to preserve the narrative skeleton of a source text, albeit in a different voice or context, rewritings involve more radical revisions, often interrogating the ideological underpinnings of the original. Retellings may revive familiar narratives for new audiences, whereas rewritings tend to function as acts of resistance or vindication, giving centre stage to the margins.

Regarding the relationship between the rewriting turn and other literary movements, this wave indeed differs from other literary responses to the classics. This shift calls for a closer examination of how male authors such as Barry Unsworth, Dan Simmons, Colm Tóibín, David Malouf, Daniel Mendelsohn and Don Winslow (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023b) approach similar themes and myths from a distinct, sometimes contrasting, perspective. In Britain, 75 per cent of fiction authors are women (Thomas-Corr 2021), which may explain why, in 2023, “nine out of the top ten books in the field of myth retellings were authored by women” (Hauser 2025b, 13). The contextual grounds of this reality certainly have a temporal significance. Framed as a twenty-first century phenomenon, scholars have logically been posing the question of the contemporary circumstances that are fostering it.

Indeed, there is a significant overlap on many levels with feminist retellings from the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. It goes without saying that those earlier waves laid the groundwork for vindicating women's voices and contesting patriarchal narratives in both mythology and the Anglophone canon developed over the last five centuries. Yet, the fourth wave—which for most critics emerged in 2012—is characterised by notable differences and evolutions. In “Rewriting Greek Myth as a Woman”, Emily Hauser—in her tripartite status as a writer, scholar and critic—explores “both the challenges and the opportunities presented to a feminist rewriting the Greek myths in the twenty-first century” (2025b, 13). These writers undeniably reimagine and reframe traditional myths and androcentric texts, using their rewritings not just as critiques but as powerful tools for challenging the very foundations of the canon itself. In their approaches, however, they do not merely take a

stand on the battlefields of the civil rights struggles of their foremothers, no longer necessarily looking for a “literature of their own” (Showalter 1977) or decrying the historical constraints that forced women writers to state their “self-definitions in code form” (Ostriker 1982, 69). Instead, their ideas are based on a heightened awareness, a *teichoscopia* of sorts—a profound, far-sighted and sometimes unsettling certainty that the hard-won freedoms (reproductive and racial justice, gender identity, democratic participation, workers’ rights, etc.) run a great risk of being lost or erased. This sense of precariousness infuses their work with urgency, grounding their creative acts in a deeply personal and collective reckoning with both history and its ongoing transformation. In a *Guardian* article entitled “Epic Win! Why Women Are Lining up to Reboot the Classics”, Charlotte Higgins arrived at the same conclusion, “especially when the classics are also being invoked, perniciously, to underpin an insurgent, misogynist ‘alt-right’” (2019). Women writers approach the classics creatively by addressing a wide array of post-9/11, post-Brexit, post-pandemic and post-#MeToo concerns: social, political and cultural anxieties, especially regarding gender, violence and war, sexual abuse and rape culture, trauma and healing, a universal healthcare system (or the lack of it), technology and science, ecological justice and environmental crisis.

A key thematic focus is the reclamation of female agency and a shift in narrative perspective. Most of these writers focus on giving voice to female characters who are either marginalised, disempowered or presented one-dimensionally in the hypotexts and their post-classical reception. As a result, stories are retold from the perspectives of secondary or disenfranchised characters, allowing them to explore different angles of the original texts, often highlighting the suppressed voices of women, slaves or lesser-known figures: Haynes’ *The Children of Jocasta* (2017) and *A Thousand Ships* (2019) foreground the nuanced perspectives of women from the Theban tragedies and the Trojan War, respectively, whose stories were largely ignored or overlooked, while in *Lavinia* (2008) Ursula K. Le Guin vindicates both the voice and silences of its homonymous protagonist and narrator. Rewritings also re-examine those traditionally received as archetypes: Madeline Miller’s *Circe* (2018) reimagines the sorceress as an empowered figure rather than a villainous temptress, while Medusa in Haynes’ *Stone Blind* (2022) and Rosie Hewlett’s *Medusa* (2021; 2025) is no longer a monster, let alone a symbol of Freudian castration anxiety, but rather a beneficiary of her sisters’ care and affection.

On a methodological level, there is greater diversity. Whereas earlier feminist retellings often focused primarily on gender, reclaiming women’s

experiences and voices in male-dominated myths or literature, authors of the rewriting turn continue to do this but place a stronger emphasis on intersectionality, incorporating race, class, sexuality and other main identity-related topics into their rewritings. In Emily Hauser's *For the Immortal*, Admete—a mixed-race woman of Amazon and Greek parentage—brings her complex narrative arc of displacement, migration and estrangement to an end by scribing, alongside a Trojan bard who sang it, “the tale of the Trojan War and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons” (2018, 300). The range of voices and perspectives is also more extensive, reflecting more nuanced understandings of oppression and identity. Additionally, twenty-first-century rewritings often address queer identities, plus non-binary and trans experiences, such as Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011), Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and Maya Deane's *Wrath Goddess Sing* (2022), expanding the scope beyond the cisgender, heterosexual frameworks that to some extent prevailed in earlier feminist literature. This allows us to see how the struggles and triumphs of mythic women mirror those of not only women in the modern world.

While earlier feminist retellings certainly experimented with narrative voice and perspective, the current wave tends to push these formal experiments further. In so doing, they experiment with nonlinear timelines, unreliable narrators and genre blending, weaving together elements of fantasy and fairy-tale motifs, neo-Victorian literature, sci-fi, psychological thrillers, crime, gothic or dystopian fiction, as well as metafictional techniques (e.g., Le Guin's *Lavinia* and Irene Vallejo's 2015 novel *El silbido del arquero*) or the fictional turn in translation, as exemplified by Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* (2001). This blending powerfully demonstrates the enduring resonance of ancient themes, which continue to shape and inform current storytelling. Reworkings of Graeco-Latin literature have always found their way into post-classical, modern or conspicuously contemporary narrative spaces. For instance, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is a radical example in its condensation of the *Odyssey* in a single day of action, whereas Don Winslow's *Danny Ryan* trilogy (2022–2024) offers an imaginative tour-de-force transposition of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Oresteia* and the *Aeneid*. Women writers also weave the works of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Virgil or Ovid into overtly current settings, as illustrated by Margaret Drabble's *The Seven Sisters* (2002), Angela Green's *Cassandra's Disk* (2002), A. S. Byatt's “The Pink Ribbon” (2003), Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *Autumn* (2016) and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017).

These novelists also render these stories in a modern-day idiom to reinterpret and recontextualise their receptions, thus helping to bridge the

gap between ancient themes and contemporary social issues and showing how those age-old stories still resonate today. They are aware that they are reworking epic poetry and Greek tragedies, namely, strictly literary works or remediated fictionalisations of pseudo-historical events. Even though they are archaeologically accurate, a fidelity usually validated in paratextual form, these works cannot be classified as historical novels, in contrast to, for example, Helen Dunmore's *Counting the Stars* (2008) or, to a lesser degree, Erica Jong's *Sappho's Leap* (2003). In fact, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Hewlett's *Medusa*, Haynes' *Stone Blind* and Madeline Miller's *Circe* not only occur in—or are narrated from—non-places (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023a, 66), worlds that feel static and timeless. They are also presented through a distinctly modern prism and written in an intelligible, articulate and sometimes sarcastic tone that resonates with modern sensibilities about gender and power. This premise also applies to dystopian and sci-fi transpositions in line with Sheri S. Tepper's distinctive blend of feminism, post-apocalyptic fiction and myth (Iphigenia) in *A Gate to Women's Country* (1988), such as Kate Atkinson's *Not the End of the World* (2002), Jane Rogers' *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011) and Veronica Roth's *Arch-Conspirator* (2023). Instead of simply retelling the stories as they have been passed down over the centuries, they choose to reinvent or deconstruct the mythic structure itself. Reinventing the narrative template is usually easier the farther they distance themselves from the source setting or genre. Nevertheless, even narratives that preserve the spatiotemporal setting play with form, chronology and even genre to create a new experience for readers. In *Black Ships* (2008), Jo Graham's rewriting of the *Aeneid*, Egypt takes the place of Carthage in Aeneas' journey, which is narrated through the voice of Gull, a Trojan priestess. Similarly, Emily Hauser's *For the Most Beautiful* (2016) reimagines the story of the *Iliad* through the eyes of Briseis and Krisayis (Chryseis), while also shifting the narrative's structure. Instead of merely following the events of the epic poem, Hauser invents two arcs that fill in the gaps, silences and lacunae of the sources, while the three volumes of her *Golden Apple* trilogy (2016–2018) are linked by a subplot involving the Olympians.

In fourth-wave feminist rewritings there is also a markedly more profound engagement with digital and popular culture. Earlier feminist retellings were primarily literary in both their form and underlying intentions, as epitomised by Byatt's "Medusa's Ankles" (1993) or Cook's *Achilles* (2001), the novel that arguably best captures a moment of transition. Yet the rewriting turn occurs in a completely different media environment, shaped by digital culture, inter-mediality, social media and fandom. More often than not, rewritings engage

with a broad popular audience and target specific age groups, for instance, by being classified as young adult fiction, romantasy, coming-of-age or dark romance. In Spain, for example, according to official statistics, significantly more women read novels than men, with historical, crime and romantic fiction being the most popular genres (Ministerio de Cultura 2024, 249). Moreover, younger readers clearly surpass older age groups in their reading-for-leisure habits (Conecta 2025, 125), making them a lucrative niche for publishers.

Contemporary rewritings also enjoy wider circulation and some of them maximise their commercial success by exploiting multi-volume formats such as trilogies or sagas with varying degrees of interconnectedness. Another crucial factor is the distribution and reception of these works in the form of e-books, podcasts, fanfiction culture or even merchandising, not to mention the ever-greater accessibility to self-publishing platforms that bypass traditional or mainstream publishers. This affects the authors' tonal and stylistic choices (register, mood and form), as the prose generally becomes more accessible. As Hauser recognises in her interview at the end of this book, with "outreach" being "a really important side of the project", accessibility is also enhanced through contemporary and culturally inclusive language, popular genre hybridities, humour and wit, the paratextual inclusion of maps, charts or character glossaries and the consideration of emotional impact on readers.

One of the consequences of this popularisation is a sharper focus on emotional and psychological nuances, as earlier feminist rewritings were often more overtly political and controversial—e.g., Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969) and Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* (1983), using language as a form of resistance—a strategy that aligns with the tenets of Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), as well as prioritising the critique of traditional patriarchal narratives to envision a new, female-centred world over sheer psychological realism. In line with these same aims, contemporary women writers address this imbalance through deeper emotional layers and intricacies of the self, portraying female, male and non-binary characters with complexities, contradictions and vulnerabilities that feel relatable to a wider spectrum of modern readers. As a case in point, Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, her short story "Galatea" (2013) and *Circe* epitomise this tendency by melding an exploration of new masculinities and feminist empowerment with psychological depth and a perceptive literary sensibility.

Another key characteristic is that while earlier feminist rewritings certainly criticised patriarchy, they often did so within a primarily Western framework. However, contemporary works are more global, postcolonial

and decolonial in their explicit critiques of canon and power structures. The rewriting turn often incorporates a meta-awareness of the literary canon and its history of exclusion and marginalisation, with authors sometimes directly addressing the legacy of colonialism, imperialism, epistemicide and historical silencing. There is more explicit reflection on how myths and the classics were shaped by specific power dynamics and how they have been used to reinforce dominant ideologies, both gendered and otherwise. This reinterpretation is reflected in the way Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Emily Hauser's *Golden Apple* trilogy, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021) and *Atalanta* (2023) explore women's struggles to navigate and subvert the power structures embedded in myth and history, ultimately transforming them into *herstories*. Emily Hauser looks at the ways in which myth can be rewritten not only to provide alternative perspectives but also to make room for what Haynes—through the Muse Calliope—calls the stories that matter, those from “the women in the shadows”, “the forgotten, the ignored, the untold” (2019, 339). Together, they acknowledge the untapped female narratives that were once ignored and take a more meta-critical approach. Thus, they question the role of myth itself in shaping cultural and political identity, examining how these stories served to reinforce certain ideologies over time and, consequently, revisiting and reshaping them.

In highlighting women's personal or collective stories, therefore, these novels criticise how power is unfairly distributed in the often uncontested legacies of male-centric narratives and metanarratives, such as religion, nationalism or progress. In doing so, they invite readers to question the ways in which gender, violence, trauma, vulnerability, care, resistance and justice have been constructed historically. They also compel them to imagine new possibilities for women's voices, identities and agency in an uncertain future, shadowed—in Judith Butler's words—by frenzied authoritarianism, “a nostalgic fury” and “a restoration of patriarchy and racism” (Fanjul 2025, our translation). Precisely, in “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”, Butler contends that vulnerability can serve as a mobilising force for political resistance, “for political expression itself” (2016, 13).

By exploring the expressive variety of these counternarrative reworkings, this volume sheds light on how myths are adapted, retold, rewritten, reappropriated, reclaimed, remediated, re(con)figured, repositioned or transpositioned. It has come at a pivotal moment in classical reception scholarship, engaging with and expanding upon the work of numerous scholars. Their studies have been crucial in foregrounding questions of

gender and power in the reception of classical texts, revealing how female figures have historically been marginalised or instrumentalised in patriarchal societies. Lorna Hardwick's research (2003; Hardwick and Stray 2007) has shed light on the complex dynamics of classical reception, especially through her emphasis on translation as a cultural and ideological act that reshapes classical texts and mediates their contemporary meanings. Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard's edited volume, *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (2006), approaches this conceptual confluence between feminism and classical reception from an enriching interdisciplinary perspective. Similarly, in *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting* (2011), Liedeke Plate explores how female writers reinterpret and challenge patriarchal myths and cultural narratives by reshaping collective memory. Plate's scholarship highlights the creative and political power of these retellings, emphasising their role in resisting dominant traditions and redefining gender, identity and history.

Likewise, Edwin Gentzler's studies of the politics of translation and the role of translators as cultural agents have provided essential frameworks for understanding how female-authored rewritings of classical myths circulate globally and serve as sites of social intervention (2016; 2019). Luis Unceta Gómez (2019; 2022; 2024) has recently co-edited several volumes (with Anastasia Bakogianni, Helena González Vaquerizo and Cristina Salcedo González, respectively) which focus on how myths are re(con)figured in contemporary popular culture and how classical reception reshapes and reframes modern identity. Fiona Cox (2011; 2012) and Elena Theodorakopoulos (2012) have made significant contributions, both individually and collaboratively (2012; 2019), to understanding how modern women writers engage with and rewrite classical texts as a way of exploring issues pertaining to gender, power, identity and social structures. This book's editors have closely read particular rewritings (Nisa Cáceres 2023; 2024a; 2026; Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023b), while also following comparative approaches (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2020; Nisa Cáceres 2024b) and contextualising the rewriting turn (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023a). Besides Emily Hauser's considerable previous research, her *Golden Apple* trilogy and her outreach publications, her two books co-edited with Helena Taylor in 2025 (*Women Creating Classics: A Retrospective* and *Women Re-Creating Classics: Contemporary Voices*) contain an inspirational combination of creative works (poems, fiction and interviews) and scholarly essays, thus placing the spotlight on both practitioners and critics engaging with classical reception in fruitful dialogue.

While these scholars have proposed robust theories and critical methodologies, *Classical Reception and the Rewriting Turn in Contemporary Women's Fiction* is a necessary correlate by focusing on contemporary women writers' revisionist mythmaking through new conceptual frameworks such as Sánchez Gayoso's "eco-refiguration", which integrates ecological justice and feminist critique. In recent years, ecocriticism and the rise of more-than-human approaches have broadened the field of classical reception by drawing attention to the entanglement of Antiquity with ecological thought, environmental imagination and material culture. These perspectives should prompt us to look beyond purely human-centric narratives and to consider how ancient texts and myths articulate relationships between people, landscapes, animals and natural forces. From pastoral poetry that frames the land as both a resource and dwelling place, to epic journeys shaped by seas, storms and nonhuman agents, the Graeco-Latin tradition provides women writers with a rich archive for exploring environmental concerns. In her novels, poetry and essays, Atwood has often explored the fragility of human-nature relationships, while Miller unmistakably highlights the vital role of natural forces and creatures in *Circe*. Ultimately, more-than-human perspectives enable a critical reappraisal of Antiquity that recognises the ongoing dialogue between humanity and the natural world. By revisiting these narratives from ecocritical approaches, scholars also elucidate continuities between ancient imaginaries of exploitation and contemporary cultural forms that grapple with climate crisis, resource scarcity and environmental justice.

Classical mythology frequently encodes narratives of resource extraction, offering ancient frameworks for imagining the human relationship with the natural world. The Golden Age myth, for instance, encapsulates the uneasy relationship between the Graeco-Roman mindset and the idea of progress. Contrarily, myths of mining, metallurgy and agricultural conquest often depict the earth as a storehouse of wealth to be unlocked or plundered, legitimising practices of environmental exploitation. Hephaestus and the Cyclopes obtain power from a subterranean forge and Prometheus seizes fire as a technological resource, exemplifying how Antiquity linked human progress to the transformation of natural materials. Agricultural myths such as that of Demeter and Persephone foreground cycles of fertility and harvest (Salcedo González 2025), while heroic quests—Jason's pursuit of the Golden Fleece as remediated in Emily Hauser's *For the Winner* (2017) and Natalie Haynes' *No Friend to This House* (2025)—can be read as allegories of imperial extraction of valuable resources from foreign lands. *Stricto sensu*, the Trojan War was not just a mythic tale of gods and heroes, but a significant geopolitical and

economic conflict, reflecting the complex power struggles and territorial ambitions of ancient civilisations. The war was essentially driven by a mixture of animosities, strategic alliances and struggles over the control of vital trade routes and resources. It exemplified the way in which military force was used to assert dominance and secure access to wealth. Contemporary ecocritical readings therefore provide enduring templates for cultural narratives that naturalise exploitation, conquest and environmental risk. Their echoes can still be heard in modern mass culture: science fiction worlds rife with mining allegories, dystopian landscapes where the earth's bounty is depleted or fantasy quests built around the pursuit of rare materials, magic objects or weapons. Approached in this way, classical reception offers critical insights into today's ecological imagination and its deep mythic roots.

It should be observed that reception studies become a site for linking Antiquity not only to modern aesthetics and urgent debates about planetary futures, ecofeminism, sustainability and the ethical reconfiguration of human and nonhuman relations, but also to other current trends, disciplines and idioms in critical theory. In these recurrent and necessary convergences (González Gil and Ori 2024, 5), posthumanism and new materialism can show, for example, how Drabble's *The Seven Sisters*, Rogers' *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* and Miller's *Circe* destabilise and move beyond human-centric perspectives, emphasising instead the agency of bodies, objects and environments. Trauma theory examines how traumatic experiences (personal, collective or historical) shape narrative form and memory. Many feminist rewritings engage with trauma, particularly relating to patriarchal violence, rape culture (Nisa Cáceres 2024b) or historical erasure, which also encompasses non-normative, non-binary or trans gender identities, as explored by Maya Deane in *Wrath Goddess Sing*. The concept of embodiment can be used to analyse how bodies and physical experiences are represented, informing, for example, recent debates on how museums hide sexual violence (Riaño 2021). Medusa's body is reclaimed in Haynes' *Stone Blind*, as are the bodies of those who have also survived the sexual assault of gods (e.g., Arethusa in Saint's *Atalanta*) and mortals (e.g., Helen of Troy and Thetis in Cook's *Achilles*), contesting objectification and asserting bodily autonomy worldwide in the #MeToo and post-#MeToo years.

Along the same lines, affect theory, with its focus on emotions, bodily responses and non-rational experiences in literature, can provide a framework for showing how these texts evoke empathy, anger or resistance beyond intellectual arguments. Ultimately, assemblage theory, which focuses on

the interconnectedness of diverse elements within a system, can also be a valuable critical lens. By viewing these works as assemblages, it is possible to explore how they bring together various cultural, historical and social forces—such as gender, identity and literary tradition—to create new meanings and perspectives. Women-authored rewritings challenge traditional narratives and reshape existing structures, assembling fragmented voices and experiences. This approach can therefore highlight the fluid, palimpsest-like, rhizomatic nature of these texts, in which different elements (myths, personal experiences and varied cultural influences) interact to offer more complex, inclusive reworkings of canonical works.

Following this introductory section, Chapter 2 examines Victoria Grossack and Alice Underwood's *The Mother's Blade* (2017), proposing a groundbreaking approach, called "eco-refiguration", to analyse the authors' revision of the myth of Clytemnestra. Traditional renderings of Clytemnestra's vengeance, rooted in patriarchal interpretations of female rage and justice, are reworked here as an ecofeminist imperative. Grossack and Underwood frame Clytemnestra in a tripartite context of archetypal womanhood—maiden, mother and queen—each of them resonating with the powerful symbolism of the Great Goddess of the Late Bronze Age Aegean. Agamemnon's murder, traditionally seen as the culmination of a domestic tragedy driven by personal vendetta, is reimagined by these authors as a multifaceted act of justice that addresses ecological destruction, maternal grief and the erosion of feminine sovereignty. Helena Sánchez Gayoso's ecofeminist reading emphasises the interconnections between women's historical struggles, the environment and the persistence of patriarchal systems, while offering a highly productive critical stance that prompts reconciliation with the classics.

Following this, Andromache's relative marginalisation in both the classical tradition and contemporary rewritings is scrutinised in Chapter 3. Traditionally celebrated alongside Penelope as an exemplar of feminine *areté*, Andromache's portrayal has often been sidelined in favour of her more prominent counterpart. This chapter evaluates modern feminist retellings of the Trojan War myth, specifically focusing on Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* and *The Women of Troy* (2021), and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*. By engaging in a critical dialogue between Greek tragedy, its reception and these Trojan-themed novels, Gema Domínguez-González explores the evolving treatment of Andromache, revealing how her story reflects themes of trauma, agency and identity in transition. This analysis highlights how Barker and Haynes portray Andromache in a space of negotiation between

victimhood and agency, illustrating her adaptability and relevance in today's feminist discourse.

Chapter 4 focuses on the figure of Medusa, a well-known symbol of female monstrosity and rage. In Rosie Hewlett's *Medusa*, the myth is reimagined through a feminist YA prism that foregrounds themes of sexual violence, narrative agency and resistance. María Burguillos Capel examines Hewlett's nuanced portrayal of Medusa, freeing her from the male-dominated Freudian interpretations that have depicted her as a figure of terror and male fear. Instead, she becomes a symbol of empowerment through self-narration, in line with Hélène Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*. Here, the novel not only critiques the symbolic violence Medusa endures but also presents her transformation as a potent form of resistance against patriarchal oppression. The rewriting's feminist ethos is also reflected in its refiguration of Perseus, traditionally the hero who defeats Medusa. In this version, Perseus is shaped by inherited trauma and empathy, subverting the traditional heroic paradigm. This revision therefore speaks to broader feminist mythmaking initiatives, challenging traditional gender roles and exploring the possibilities for healing and transformation.

Chapter 5 examines the figure of Penelope, a character long regarded as the epitome of the patient, faithful wife in Homer's *Odyssey*. However, in recent feminist rewritings, such as Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Miller's *Circe* and Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*, Penelope emerges as a more complex and self-reflective figure. Her voice is amplified and reinterpreted, allowing her to reflect critically on her own story and explore her relationships with other characters. Marta Cuevas Caballero and Carmen Velasco-Montiel emphasise how these rewritings highlight Penelope's agency, both through her recollection of events and her interactions with the figures around her. Autodiegesis (self-narration) and relationality constitute core aspects of these novels, providing new avenues for challenging the established narrative of Penelope as a passive woman, and for understanding how her reimaginings reflect and reframe contemporary debates revolving around gender, identity, self-determination and agency.

Chapter 6 scrutinises the reception of female-authored rewritings of classical myths in Spain, analysing their place in the Spanish literary system. By bridging Anglophone and Spanish-speaking literary spheres, "Women-Authored Retellings of the Classical Tradition: A Critical Survey of Scholarship and the Literary Polysystem in Spain" responds to emerging calls for greater interdisciplinarity and transnational dialogue in classical reception studies,

adopting a more inclusive approach to this phenomenon that extends beyond the Anglosphere. This consequently enriches the existing corpus by expanding the critical vocabulary and widening the cultural scope, underscoring how classical myths are still stimulating tools for negotiating identity, agency and justice in today's complex sociopolitical landscape. Grounded in the recent call for an "outward turn" in Translation Studies, Miguel Cisneros Perales examines how these works have been classified and received in the Spanish publishing industry. By drawing on Even-Zohar's polysystem theory and Genette's concept of palimpsests, he evaluates the critical and publishing trends in the Spanish-speaking world and offers a comparative framework for understanding the circulation and reception of these texts across different literary and cultural contexts, since academic discourse and the realities of the publishing world do not always go hand in hand. This wider examination underscores the international and interdisciplinary relevance of these feminist reimaginings, illustrating the ways in which they transcend national and linguistic boundaries and inviting scholars and readers to participate in a global dialogue about the role of women writers in mythmaking.

The book ends with an interview with writer and classicist Emily Hauser conducted by Gema Domínguez-González. In a time when the Humanities—particularly Classical Studies—are facing growing marginalisation, female-authored rewritings have been remarkably successful. Hauser reflects on why this trend suggests a deep contemporary interest in reclaiming and re-examining classical narratives. In response to the question of why characters such as Penelope, Helen and Clytemnestra resonate with the reading public more than others, Hauser believes that rewriting stories of famous heroines often involves dismantling male fantasies, whereas giving voice to overlooked women is about affirming their existence and asserting that their lives mattered too. There is also a broader conversation about gendered authorship: do women approach classical texts or fiction differently than men? And how important is it for women to narrate their own historical and mythic heritage? Some critics may see this as rewriting history, but such a reinterpretation is often essential to questioning long-standing biases in both fiction and academia. Regarding the concentration of rewritings in the Anglo-American literary sphere, Hauser observes that scholars also have a responsibility to engage with and study those produced in other languages and cultures. As one of the early voices in the resurgence of myth rewritings, she also reflects on cultural shifts over the past decade and the lingering absence (so far) of major screen adaptations of these powerful, female-driven stories.

Together, the chapters in this book highlight the transformative—even regenerative—power of classical reception in contemporary women's writing. Emily Hauser, Pat Barker, Madeline Miller, Rosie Hewlett, Victoria Grossack, Alice Underwood, Margaret Atwood and Natalie Haynes engage with ancient myths not as fixed narratives but as dynamic texts that reflect and shape the evolving concerns of modern feminist thought. By reimagining figures such as Clytemnestra, Andromache, Medusa and Penelope, these writers craft new spaces for female subjectivity, relational dynamics, sorority, agency and resistance, contributing to an ongoing reconfiguration of gendered identities and societal values. The works explored in this book are not mere literary revisions; they are acts of reclamation, offering nuanced readings of myths that correspond to the pressing issues of our time: gender inequality, sexual violence and war, ecological justice and, perhaps, the power of storytelling itself, as we are (in Irene Vallejo's words)

the only animals who imagine fables, who scatter the darkness with stories, who learn to live with chaos thanks to the tales we tell, who stoke the embers of fires with the air of their words, who travel great distances to carry their chronicles to strangers. And when we share the same stories, we are no longer strangers anymore (2023, 383).

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2. Eco-Refiguration, Vengeance and Feminine Sovereignty: Victoria Grossack and Alice Underwood's *Clytemnestra*: *The Mother's Blade*

Helena Sánchez Gayoso

Universitat de les Illes Balears

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4821-3581>

helena.sanchez@uib.cat

Abstract

This chapter contributes to classical reception in contemporary women's writing by examining the revisionist approach of Victoria Grossack and Alice Underwood towards the classical hypotexts that shape the myth of Clytemnestra in *The Mother's Blade* (2017). The authors refigure Clytemnestra's vengeance as an ecofeminist imperative, setting her actions within a tripartite framework of archetypal womanhood—maiden, mother and queen, each element being associated with a distinct aspect of the Great Goddess (Potnia) of the Late Bronze Age Aegean. In this context, Agamemnon's death is reimagined as a multifaceted act of justice addressing ecological harm, maternal grief and the erosion of feminine sovereignty. To analyse this process, I introduce the term *eco-refiguration*, which I coin here to designate a critical framework that captures the authors' revisionist mode—one that sustains a reconciliatory engagement with the classical sources while also reconfiguring them through interwoven systems of care, resistance and ecological justice.

Key words

Clytemnestra; classical reception; eco-refiguration; ecofeminism; Victoria Grossack and Alice Underwood

I. Introduction: Ecofeminist Refiguration in *Clytemnestra: The Mother's Blade*

Clytemnestra, long depicted in Graeco-Roman sources and their reception as a complex and commanding figure,¹ has recently re-emerged at the centre of a wave of contemporary retellings² that foreground her perspective. This flourishing corpus provides a rich and prolific terrain for classical reception in contemporary women's writing³—and more specifically, for the reception of the classical Clytemnestra in modern fiction. This resurgence builds on a shift that began in the 1970s, when feminist critiques first started to challenge the authority of the classical tradition. Adrienne Rich's pivotal essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972) captured this early impulse toward revision and recovery. More than fifty years later, as Cox and Theodorakopoulos observe, women poets, novelists and playwrights "dominate the practice of classical reception with unprecedented momentum" (2013b).

Amid the vivid and prolific resurgence of Clytemnestra in contemporary literature, this study analyses *Clytemnestra: The Mother's Blade* (2017) by Victoria Grossack and Alice Underwood as a distinctive contribution to the reception⁴ of this classical figure. Part of the larger *Tapestry of Bronze* series⁵—a sequence of novels that brings to the fore the voices of prominent women from Greek mythology and intertwines their stories into a cohesive mytho-historical timeline, the sixth instalment turns specifically to the myth of Clytemnestra and reimagines it through a feminist lens. The novel's reception of the queen of Mycenae is read through refiguration, defined by Hardwick as

1 See Anderson 1929; 1932; Winnington-Ingram 1948; Millett 1970, 112-15; Zeitlin 1978; and Hall 1989, 201-09.

2 Novels such as Victoria Grossack and Alice Underwood's *The Mother's Blade* (2017), Montana Katz's *Clytemnestra's Last Day* (2017), Colm Tóibín's *House of Names* (2017), Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019), Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta* (2021), Hannah Lynn's *A Spartan's Sorrow* (2022), Jennifer Saint's *Elektra* (2022), Costanza Casati's *Clytemnestra* (2023) and Susan C. Wilson's *Clytemnestra's Bind* (2023) put her at the heart of their narratives. Her presence also reverberates—if more obliquely—in Emily Hauser's *Golden Apple* trilogy—*For the Most Beautiful* (2016), *For the Winner* (2017a) and *For the Immortal* (2018); Luna McNamara's *Psyche and Eros* (2023); Claire North's *Ithaca* (2022), *House of Odysseus* (2023) and *The Last Song of Penelope* (2024); Pat Barker's *The Voyage Home* (2024); and J. Susanne Wilson's *The Death and Life of Iphigenia* (2025).

3 See Cox 2011; 2018; Theodorakopoulos 2012; Cox and Theodorakopoulos 2013a; 2013b; 2019; Wilson 2019; Hauser 2017b; 2025; Hurst 2019; 2020; Haynes 2020; 2023; and Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023.

4 For a discussion of feminist reconfigurations of the character, see Komar 2003.

5 The series includes *Niobe and Pelops: Children of Tantalus* (2010c), *Niobe and Amphion: The Road to Thebes* (2010a), *Niobe and Chloris: Arrows of Artemis* (2010b), *Antigone and Creon: Guardians of Thebes* (2013) and *Jocasta: The Mother-Wife of Oedipus* (2014).

"selecting and reworking material from a previous or contrasting tradition" (2003, 10). The focus here is Clytemnestra's act of vengeance as articulated in the classical hypotexts⁶ the authors primarily draw on: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458 BCE) and Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (408–406 BCE). Importantly, as Hardwick further observes, refiguration often involves "the adaptation of a legend or myth by the addition of new features" (2003, 14), a process that Grossack and Underwood mobilise to recast Clytemnestra's revenge through the lens of ecofeminism. Her vengeance on Agamemnon—who, as will be shown, embodies ecological threat—is structured around the three central aspects of her characterisation: maiden, mother and wife. The analysis leads to the formulation of the concept of *eco-refiguration*, which describes how the novel entwines ecological ethics with mythic revision, offering a compelling framework for re-reading the classical canon through the prism of systems of care, resistance and justice. In this context, Clytemnestra reframes her act of vengeance as a restorative response to ecological harm, maternal loss and the erosion of female sovereignty. To support this analysis, the following pages outline the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, with particular attention to how it informs the novel's ethical and political reimagining of mythic violence.

Emerging in the 1970s, ecofeminist theories addressed the structural links between the domination of women and the exploitation of the natural world, viewing both as parallel outcomes of patriarchal logic. Françoise d'Eaubonne, who coined the term in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), argued that ecological destruction and the oppression of women stem from the same systemic roots and called for women to lead the movement of ecological resistance. Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) further grounded ecofeminism in historical analysis, showing how Enlightenment rationalism framed nature as inert and women as subordinate, justifying both environmental degradation and gendered oppression.

Subsequent ecofeminist thinkers such as Val Plumwood and Stacy Alaimo have expanded and deepened the field. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood develops a "critical ecological feminism", one that is "thoroughly compatible with and can be strongly based in feminist theory" (1993, 1). This framework rejects the reductive association of women with nature and challenges the "set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing dualisms

6 Genette explains that "[a]ny text is a hypertext, grafting itself onto a hypotext, an earlier text that it imitates or transforms; any writing is rewriting; and literature is always in the second degree" (Prince 1997, ix).

that permeate Western cultural forms”, dualisms that uphold systems of domination including patriarchy, colonialism and anthropocentrism. She argues that both women and men are embedded in both nature and culture, and that dismantling these “mutually reinforcing dualisms” (1993, 42) is essential to rethinking human identity in ecological, ethical and political terms. Alaimo, meanwhile, introduces transcorporeality—a materialist concept that underscores the permeability and entanglement of bodies and environments—initially articulated as part of her ecofeminist framework (2008) and later expanded into a comprehensive theoretical model in *Bodily Natures* (2010, 2–10). This conceptualisation of dynamic interrelation finds a striking echo in contemporary ecological research: Dittmar and Schemske (2023) demonstrate that patterns of local adaptation in plant populations fluctuate through time with shifting environmental conditions, revealing a living world that is active, responsive and relational rather than inert or mechanistic. Intersectional and materialist developments within ecofeminism—represented by theorists such as Lois Ann Lorentzen, Diane Eaton and Ariel Salleh—emphasise how women, particularly those in marginalised or agrarian communities, disproportionately suffer environmental harm. Salleh (2017) situates these inequalities within global capitalism, arguing that the system depends on the undervaluation and exploitation of reproductive and ecological labour, forms of work that women and nonhuman nature largely perform.

Only in more recent years have ecofeminists begun to explicitly embrace an intersectional approach. Notable contributors to this development include Sherilyn MacGregor (2006), Richard Twine (2010), Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen (2014) and Greta Gaard (2015). In *Beyond Mothering Earth* (2006), Sherilyn MacGregor, for instance, reframes ecological crisis as a crisis of care under patriarchal capitalism, while Bronwyn James (1996) cautions against universalising ecofeminist perspectives without accounting for postcolonial and local histories. Ecofeminist literary criticism, particularly in the works of Greta Gaard, extends ecofeminist theory into the domain of cultural and narrative representation. Beginning with the edited collection *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993), which brought ecological and feminist concerns into productive dialogue, Gaard has continued to explore these intersections in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* (1998) and *Critical Ecofeminism* (2017). Across these works, she identifies storytelling as a vital source of feminist-ecological resistance. She advocates an intersectional ecocriticism that is attentive to race, gender, class, species and sexuality, arguing that such an approach is crucial to uncovering and challenging the structures of domination embedded in cultural texts. As Gaard states, “like feminisms

developed by women of colour, ecological feminism is neither a second—nor a third-wave feminism; it has been present in various forms from the start of feminism in the nineteenth century” (2017, 4). She also criticises the lack of feminist perspectives in climate fiction, noting that “the feminist fiction about climate change has yet to be written”, and that many of these texts are “non-feminist at best” and “anti-feminist and sexist at worst” (2017, 144–45).

This criticism is in line with broader feminist revisionist arguments, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s concept of the “single story” (2009), which warns against narrative homogeneity, and Claire Colebrook (2014) and Susan Watkins (2020), who emphasise how mainstream post-apocalyptic fiction often reinforces patriarchal, racialised and heteronormative ideologies. The common thread of these interventions highlights the need for climate storytelling that resists nostalgia—particularly the nostalgic longing for past forms of patriarchal and colonial control—and embraces feminist, anti-racist and multispecies futures.

This call for narrative resistance finds unexpected affinities in classical mythology. In some versions of the myth of the Trojan War,⁷ it is Gaia’s suffering—rather than Helen’s beauty—that triggers the conflict. Natalie Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships* (2019) recovers this dimension. The novel opens with Zeus consulting Themis, who laments Gaia’s distress under the weight of too many mortals. Weighing up other apocalyptic options—plague, flood, volcano, earthquake—they finally choose war as a form of ecological purge. This reinterpretation casts the Trojan War as an ecological reckoning, revealing myth’s capacity to critique human excess and environmental imbalance. It suggests that classical narratives already contain the seeds of ecological awareness, long before the emergence of modern ecofeminist discourse.

The Mother’s Blade draws on ecofeminist theory by reworking classical myth as ecological allegory, positioning the suffering of “the great Goddess, the source of all life” (Grossack and Underwood 2017, 109) as the narrative’s driving force. In doing so, it challenges the binary logic underpinning Clytemnestra’s portrayal in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. As Froma Zeitlin observes in her seminal essay “The Dynamics of Misogyny in the *Oresteia*”, the tragedy rests on a “whole series of antitheses” that “form about the polarization of male and female roles” (1978, 171): father/mother, law/ritual, culture/nature, order/chaos. What makes Clytemnestra so threatening is precisely her capacity to disrupt these

⁷ See Reeves 1966.

binaries through the murder of Agamemnon. Read alongside ecofeminist critiques by theorists such as Plumwood, Zeitlin's analysis highlights how the challenge lies not in reversing patriarchal dualisms but in dismantling them altogether.

Grossack and Underwood reimagine Clytemnestra not as a force of chaos but as a politically astute, morally complex figure whose identity as maiden, mother and queen resists reduction. This tripartite subjectivity reflects an ecofeminist perspective grounded in interdependence, memory and ecological justice, and it is through these intersecting roles that her vengeance takes shape. Clytemnestra's body becomes a site of grief and justice, echoing Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality, which understands the body as materially enmeshed with the environment. Through this ecological embodiment, the novel situates her in a matrix of corporeal, emotional and ecological interconnection. This framework is reinforced by the text's critique of sacrificial systems, which exposes how patriarchal order perpetuates itself through cycles of dispossession: the exploitation of Clytemnestra, the loss of daughters, environmental degradation and the erasure of futurity.

Together, these elements create more than a retelling: they enact a resistance to the "single story" of Clytemnestra as mere vengeance and rupture. Such resistance is enabled by reception,⁸ which Hopkins and Martindale define as "a dynamic activity in which meaning is constantly generated and regenerated" (2012, x). As Martindale reminds us, "meaning is always realised at the point of reception" (1993, 3), while Hardwick underscores that reinterpretations can become "significant indicator[s] of cultural change" (2003, 5). In this light, the novel's reception of myth responds not only to literary tradition but also to urgent contemporary concerns: environmental collapse, gendered violence and the pursuit of justice.

2. The Refiguration of Vengeance as Ecological Justice

To understand Clytemnestra's refiguration as an ecofeminist subject, it is necessary to examine the ideological structures she resists—embodied in Agamemnon as a symbol of patriarchal, imperial and ecological violence.

8 For key theoretical and foundational works on classical reception, see Martindale 1993; Hardwick 2003; Martindale and Thomas 2006; Hardwick and Stray 2007.

Classical texts portray him as a destabilising, autocratic leader whose ambition and *hubris*—from the seizure of Briseis in the *Iliad* (I 180–92) to his condemnation of female agency in the *Odyssey*—serve to reinforce systemic domination. In the latter, Agamemnon in Hades denounces Clytemnestra:

There is no more disgusting act
than when a wife betrays a man like that.
That woman formed a plot to murder me!
Her husband! When I got back home, I thought
I would be welcomed, at least by my slaves
and children. She has such an evil mind
that she has poured down shame on her own head
and on all other women, even good ones
(Homer, *Odyssey* XI 428–35, transl. Wilson).

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* deepens this critique through his sacrifice of Iphigenia and the spectacle of imperial excess (184–263). *The Mother's Blade* refigures Agamemnon through three interwoven strands: Clytemnestra's voice, which emerges as a counternarrative to his legacy; the ancestral violence of the Tantalid line; and a historical setting rooted in Late Bronze Age Mycenaean society. In this context, Agamemnon appears as a *wanax*,⁹ a militaristic ruler whose imperial campaigns, particularly the Trojan War, are linked not only to personal and familial destruction but also to environmental degradation. The novel associates this war with the broader collapse of Mycenaean palace economies around 1200 BCE, a period marked by deforestation, resource depletion and climatic instability.¹⁰ Within this framework, the Trojan War emerges as the apex of Agamemnon's imperial ambition and the most ecologically and personally catastrophic moment of his legacy—the point at which Clytemnestra most acutely suffers the consequences of his conquest. Her resistance, therefore, constitutes a radical disruption of the interlocking systems of domination he embodies.

Having established Agamemnon as the embodiment of patriarchal, imperial and ecological domination, it is necessary to consider how Clytemnestra is positioned in relation to that legacy. A critical understanding of her refiguration in *The Mother's Blade* must begin with an examination of the constraints and ambiguities that define her portrayal in the classical tradition. Even in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where she commands the stage

9 On the role and significance of the *wanax* in Mycenaean society, see Palaima 2008.

10 See Cline 2014.

and governs Argos in her husband's absence, her authority is marked as illegitimate. She presides over the *oikos* and intervenes in the polis, orchestrating Agamemnon's murder through *mêtis* and *dolos*, forms of cunning and deception traditionally coded as female craft. Yet her rhetoric, however forceful, is public rather than introspective, and her voice is ultimately absorbed into the narratives of Agamemnon, and then of Orestes and Elektra, who restore the patriarchal order she only briefly unsettles. As Collard notes, "Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia* is the principal antagonist", reduced to the roles of "adulterous wife and vengeful mother and victim of her own vengeful son" and serving merely as "an instrument of the retributive family-demon". Aeschylus may grant her a compelling rationale for vengeance, but as Collard cautions, he is not "mounting an early and deliberate 'feminist' platform with this Clytemnestra" (2002, xxvii).

Yet, as Hardwick explains, Aeschylus' revision of the myth "intensifies the revenge cycle in the trilogy, sharpens the debate about the matricide (when Orestes avenges his father), and brings Clytemnestra to the fore as an active quasi-heroic figure in her own right". By granting her powerful motivation for revenge—most notably Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia to ensure the fleet's passage to Troy—Aeschylus reframes her actions as morally charged and emotionally complex. This refiguration, Hardwick notes, "shifts [Clytemnestra's vengeance] as a paradigm for subsequent receptions" (2003, 14). Contemporary retellings such as *The Mother's Blade* take Aeschylus' version as a crucial hypotext. They do not merely reproduce Clytemnestra's vengeance but reshape it, foregrounding her interiority, moral agency and emotional depth in ways that both respond to and evolve from the framework Aeschylus provides.

Furthermore, *The Mother's Blade* places Clytemnestra at the centre of the narrative. Her identity is reconstructed through the tripartite lens of maiden, mother and queen—a framework that not only humanises her but also anchors the novel's subversive strategy of re-narration. The first archetype through which *The Mother's Blade* refigures Clytemnestra is that of the maiden, traditionally associated with youth, vulnerability and liminality. Here, however, the role is expanded: her early life, set before the events of *Iphigenia in Aulis* (the myth's earliest chronological episode), is portrayed as a period marked by trauma, loss and forced transition. Across the opening eight chapters, Clytemnestra's maidenhood is defined not by innocence but by domestic violence and imperial domination.

Agamemnon's brutality extends beyond the battlefield: the narrative elaborates on Euripides' fleeting reference to his murder of Clytemnestra's first husband, Tantalus (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 1149–50), by inventing their infant son, Letreus, whom Agamemnon kills—"his head hit with a terrible wet sound, like a raw egg dropped on a stone floor". This act is followed by Clytemnestra's rape, foreshadowed by an intertextual invocation of the Furies: "[s]creaming like a Fury, I struck him with my other fist" (Grossack and Underwood 2017, 136). The crushing of her chest beneath Agamemnon's bronze corselet transforms the image of heroic armour into one of intimate domination over her body and womb. Her violation is then sealed by coerced marriage and relocation: "[m]ake yourself presentable, Clytemnestra... You're now queen of Mycenae" (137). As a Spartan princess descended from a matrilineal line, her subjugation signifies not only personal trauma but the violent erasure of a female-centred kinship structure. The rapid succession of these events refigures the maiden not as innocent but as already inscribed with loss, resistance and the origins of vengeance.

The ecofeminist logic that drives this rewriting reaches a turning point in chapter ten ("Priestesses and Prophecies"), where environmental collapse, divine presence and embodied female experience converge. In this chapter, Clytemnestra receives a delegation of three priestesses—Pasithea, Eireene and Loxo—each speaking on behalf of a goddess (Hera, Demeter and Artemis) and together forming a symbolic triad of wife, mother and maiden. Their voices gradually coalesce into a composite archetype that takes shape within Clytemnestra herself: Pasithea affirms the political authority of the wife, Eireene embodies the regenerative grief of the mother, and Loxo channels the rage and protective force of the wild maiden. Through this convergence, the novel aligns Clytemnestra with the Great Goddess, a theorised prehistoric Mother Earth figure believed to have been worshipped across Neolithic Europe as a singular, generative female deity. The relocation of events from Argos to Mycenae reinforces this framework, for Mycenae is associated with the survival of matrifocal religious traditions¹¹ even after the ascendancy of Olympian patriarchy.

The sequence opens with Eireene's modest offering of grain, which signals both the depletion of natural resources and the cost of male-driven expansion.

11 For theories and interpretations of pre-patriarchal or matriarchal prehistoric societies, see Stone 1976; Gimbutas 1989; and Baring and Cashford 1991. For a critique of these mythic reconstructions, see Eller 2000.

"I bring only a small amount of grain [...] because the harvests are dwindling". She elaborates: "The fields can't produce because men are chopping down the forest" (183). Her words situate ecological decline within a masculinist logic of conquest and extraction, particularly in the service of warfare and shipbuilding. In this framing, the feminised earth is not simply exhausted but violently stripped, rendered barren by the instruments of imperial ambition. Loxo's offering then extends this critique by binding ecological violence to sacrificial imagery. She scatters "small bones and teeth, ranging in colour from ashy grey to sun-bleached white, clattering across the marble floor"—the remains of small animals killed by deforestation. Whereas Eireene's grain gestures toward ecological exhaustion, these bones embody violence already inflicted on the natural world. Clytemnestra's horrified reaction—"[s]uch small bones—have the maidens sacrificed a child?" (181)—registers a moment of tragic misrecognition. Although the remains are animal, her fear that they might be human collapses the distinction between environmental destruction and human suffering. The irony, of course, lies in the foreshadowing: her dread anticipates the sacrifice of Iphigenia, where the loss of children becomes literal. In this way, animal death evokes not only ecological devastation but also the shadow of tragic loss that haunts Clytemnestra's maternal subjectivity.

The forest, we are told, is being "slaughtered to make ships" (181). The cost of this destruction is not abstract: it awakens Clytemnestra's protective powers toward her children, resonates prophetically in its anticipation of Iphigenia's death (as explored below), and intensifies her sense of maternal vulnerability in the face of mounting violence. At this point in the novel, Clytemnestra is carrying Orestes and has already lost Letreus. Her body thus becomes a charged site—both a bearer of life and a locus of precarity—exposed to the same logic of destruction that threatens the land. In ecofeminist terms, womb and world emerge as coextensive sources of generation, each vulnerable to violation by extraction, war and domination. The novel's ethical vision hinges on this alignment between maternal suffering and ecological collapse.

When Clytemnestra asks "[a]re you threatening my daughters?", her response expresses not only fear but also a momentary failure to locate the true source of danger. Loxo's reply corrects this:

Your husband is the danger—he and the other shipbuilders. [...] Artemis is the protector of children—that's why she's so angry! If men keep wounding Mother Earth, so many children will die. You know [...] what it is to lose a child. Think of all the children who'll die needlessly in war, or of hunger, to satisfy the ambitions of men! (185).

The novel reframes divine wrath as ecological consequence: the true threat, Loxo insists, is not supernatural but human—specifically, male—violence.

After Loxo's offering, the novel makes explicit Clytemnestra's alignment with the divine: "Both forest and field belong to the Goddess. When one part of Mother Earth is injured, other parts sicken as well". This vision of sacred interconnection links her bodily experience to the fate of the land. As Iole teaches, Demeter, Artemis and Hera "are just different aspects of the same Goddess, who is also Mother Earth"—a figure Clytemnestra now comes to embody. No longer separate from the goddesses, she becomes their vessel. This transformation leads directly to action: "[y]ou have more power than any other woman in Hellas, and you must use it", Loxo pleads. "If you don't do everything you can to stop these men and their axes... we'll all suffer" (185).

The plea culminates in a ritual gesture: Loxo places a consecrated blade in Clytemnestra's hands—"[y]ou could kill anything, anyone, with it" (186). From this moment on, Clytemnestra's vengeance takes on the weight of mythic inevitability. It is no longer a personal or political act alone, but the wrath of the Great Goddess—embodied in all her forms. Yet Clytemnestra refuses to act, and the consequence is Iphigenia's murder at Agamemnon's hands. Her later admission makes the cost clear: "Loxo, the chief priestess among the Maidens of Artemis, had warned me how dangerous Agamemnon could be. And I had not listened" (295). By failing to wield the consecrated blade, Clytemnestra permits this convergence of violences to unfold.

In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Artemis sets the tragedy in motion as a divine force offended by a natural violation: two eagles devour a pregnant hare, an act she "loathes", for she is "kind to the ravening lion's tender, helpless cubs, / the suckling young of beasts that stalk the wilds" (141–42). To restore balance, she demands Iphigenia's death—a "brutal torment" (144) that compels Agamemnon to "stop the winds with a virgin's blood" (214–15, transl. Fagles). Though she never appears, Artemis becomes the unseen catalyst of the tragedy, embodying a justice that is both sacred and inescapable. The novel directly challenges this tragic ambiguity. In the novel, the seer Calchas reappears, but this time he identifies ecological harm—not divine offence—as the true cause of Artemis' wrath: "[w]e have felled her beloved forests, trees precious to the virgin goddess, to build the ships to carry us to Troy. [...] She demands that King Agamemnon sacrifice what is most dear to him before we can sail" (Grossack and Underwood 2017, 236). His words recall the sacrificial logic at the heart of *Agamemnon*, but the novel intensifies this critique through recurring imagery of violence. Clytemnestra's declaration that

“he slit our darling daughter’s throat” (2017, 226) connects the personal and ecological devastation, linking the mutilated body of a child to the destruction of the natural world, including slaughtered trees. By drawing this parallel, the text dissolves the distinction between ecological destruction and human sacrifice, revealing them not as separate tragedies but as manifestations of the same system—one in which domination is conflated with progress, and both the earth and the daughter are rendered equally expendable.

Whereas in Aeschylus Artemis remains absent yet decisive, in *The Mother’s Blade* her role is reinterpreted as ecological rather than divine, shifting the logic of sacrifice from divine offence to human-caused devastation. The novel reconfigures the logic of sacrifice by relocating its origin: Artemis does not demand Iphigenia’s death—Agamemnon invokes her name to justify war, transforming the divine into political rhetoric and recasting Artemis not as an executioner, but as a figure whose image he manipulates to legitimise patriarchal violence. As Clytemnestra observes, “the family of Pelops had long been abusing Lady Artemis’ good name” (246). Agamemnon’s true motives are exposed: “He may even have believed that Iphigenia was truly the price Artemis demanded... But without a doubt, surveying the fleet and the army down below, he saw a choice between the ignominy of failure and a chance at enduring glory” (237). Agamemnon thus appropriates the sacred, conscripting Artemis—guardian of girls, animals and wild spaces—into the service of empire, alongside the forests and daughters she is meant to protect.

Within this framework, Clytemnestra’s act of vengeance is not simply a reaction to personal trauma, but a form of restorative justice. It brings together the ecological destruction resulting from militarised expansion—destruction she is in a unique position to address in her role as queen, the maternal grief of a woman who has already lost two children, and the fierce protective impulse of the maiden archetype, directed toward her city, her people and her surviving children. The violated maiden becomes, by her own actions, avenging angel: no longer the victim of Agamemnon’s violence but the one who heeds Loxo’s warning and embodies its demand. The maternal—so often pathologised or vilified in Greek tragedy—here becomes a source of moral clarity. Clytemnestra’s vengeance is reimagined not as emotional excess, but as ritual inversion: a counter-sacrifice, not to appease a god, but to expose the fraudulent sanctity of war. In this reversal, the mother becomes priestess—not in service of divine will, but to restore a cosmic order violated by imperial ambition. In the convergence of queen, mother

and maiden, Clytemnestra reasserts a cosmology in which feminine power is not only legitimate but necessary.

Yet the narrative also insists on the limits of such reconfiguration, exposing the irreparable losses that no act of vengeance can reverse. In the closing chapters, justice yields no redemption: Letreus and Iphigenia remain dead, while Clytemnestra and Aegisthus remain marked by blood. Agamemnon's murder fulfils the priestess's warning and answers accumulated injustices, yet its aftermath exposes the limits of reparation. An ecofeminist lens, however, reframes her reception: not as a villain to be condemned, but as a figure whose critical reception must attend to ecological devastation, maternal loss and sovereign responsibility.

The novel ultimately moves beyond Clytemnestra's individual act of vengeance, projecting her story onto a cosmic register where justice itself is reimagined in ecofeminist terms. In her final exchange with Loxo, the divine appears not as an external force, but as an internal ethic—reactivated through grief, sustained by memory and realised through action. The restored balance, marked by the equinox, the Bear Dance and the shedding of blood, does not signal triumph so much as a return to a feminine order in which care and sovereignty are inseparable. Justice, in this reframing, is redefined: not retribution, but relational accountability, ecological consciousness and the urgent necessity of feminine political agency.

3. Conclusions: Eco-Refiguration as Key to Reconciliatory Revisionism

In their feminist reworking of classical myth, Grossack and Underwood adopt a distinctive technique I term *eco-refiguration*. This mode expands the traditional sources shaping Clytemnestra's story while confronting ecological devastation, gendered violence and the erosion of matrilineal power. It reframes the myth so that Clytemnestra's actions appear not as vengeance but as restorative justice grounded in ecological and feminist ethics. Her roles as mother, wife and maiden are reimagined, each contributing to a vision of transformative agency directed toward both personal and ecological reparation.

Eco-refiguration also underpins the novel's reconciliatory revisionism. Rather than rejecting the classical canon, Grossack and Underwood engage it dialogically—revisiting and reinterpreting the myth through Clytemnestra's

first-person voice. This perspective enriches the traditional sources without displacing them, creating a layered exchange between old and new that enhances our understanding of Clytemnestra's story while reshaping its meaning.

Finally, eco-refiguration reveals how mythic narratives can illuminate contemporary global crises. By reimagining Clytemnestra not merely as victim or villain but as a transformative agent of ecological and social justice, the novel demonstrates the enduring relevance of ancient myth. In this retelling, Clytemnestra's story resonates with urgent present concerns—ecological degradation, gendered violence and the need for reparative justice—while offering a model for how feminist reception can reframe the classical canon as a resource for ethical and political imagination.

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3. Female Survival in the Trojan Aftermath: Andromache in the Fiction of Pat Barker and Natalie Haynes

Gema Domínguez-González

Universidad de Alcalá

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3032-2006>

gema.dominguezg@uah.es

Abstract

In both the archaic epic tradition and classical tragedy, Andromache stood with Penelope as a prime exemplar of feminine *areté*. Though classical reception has long favoured Penelope, Andromache's marginalisation has been particularly persistent in contemporary women-authored rewritings of the classical tradition. This chapter examines Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Women of Troy* (2021), as well as Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019), to determine whether Andromache's portrayal in the tragedies resonates with modern readers. In this chapter, a dialogue is thus fostered between Greek tragedy and modern myth retellings to explore themes of identities in transition, trauma and agency, thereby unravelling Andromache's adaptation in modern literature.

Keywords

Andromache; myth retellings; Greek tragedy; Trojan women; Gender Studies

I. Introduction¹

Andromache first appeared in Homer's *Iliad* and later in Euripides' tragedies. For them, she was an admirable woman, as she embodied the Greek feminine ideal despite being a barbarian (Álvarez Espinoza 2017, 92). In Euripides' *Andromache* and *Trojan Women*, Andromache faces a series of challenging circumstances, which she endures while upholding her idealised behaviour. Consequently, her esteemed reputation in the *Iliad* is further enhanced in Euripides' works.

Andromache, unlike Penelope,² may be largely absent from contemporary fiction's reinterpretations of myths precisely because of this male-crafted idealisation. To shed light on this question, this chapter analyses how the tragic figure of Andromache is received in three contemporary myth retellings: Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Women of Troy* (2021), as well as Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019). A dialogue is simultaneously advanced with Euripides' *Trojan Women* to explore how the themes of identities in transition, trauma and agency render Andromache more appealing to modern readers.

In the *Iliad*, Andromache is the wife of Hector, prince and heir to Troy, with whom she had a son, Astyanax. Her parents and brothers die during the war of Troy against the Achaeans—commonly known as “the Greeks”, as referred to hereinafter—leaving Hector and Astyanax as her only family. Even though Andromache tries to stop Hector from fighting, he is eventually killed by Achilles, sealing Troy's doom. The *Iliad* ends with Hector's funeral. Centuries later, however, Euripides envisions Andromache's life in the aftermath of Troy's fall. In his *Trojan Women*, Andromache, like the other royal Trojan women, is presented as a war prize, and is held captive within the Greek camp as she awaits to be assigned a master, who happens to be Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. But before she departs with him, the Greeks resolve to kill her son by throwing him from the city walls, aiming to prevent future vengeance or the possible resurgence of Troy.

1 This book chapter was written under a Predoctoral Contract of the University of Alcalá (FPU-UAH 2022).

2 Andromache's limited agency may be less appealing, albeit subconsciously, to writers and readers than Penelope's because of their different statuses—the former a war prize, the latter a respected queen. As Judith Butler points out, “dominant norms” and their “unequal distribution of precarity” determine “whose life is grievable and worth protecting and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable and so, in that sense, already lost in part or in whole, and thus less worthy of protection” (2012, 148).

Euripides' *Andromache* focuses on the rest of Andromache's story—her life in Thessaly as the concubine of Achilles' son and so does chapter 42 of Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*. This study, nevertheless, examines how the death of Astyanax profoundly shapes Andromache's representation, specifically her behavioural traits in women-authored contemporary fiction.

2. Andromache's Life in the Greek Camp before Astyanax's Death

In contrast to Pat Barker's rendition of the figure in *The Silence of the Girls* and *The Women of Troy*, Natalie Haynes depicts Andromache's life in the Greek camp before Astyanax is executed. In doing so, Haynes establishes the foundation for a character who is further developed in chapter 42 of *A Thousand Ships*.

In the character's early scenes in the novel, Haynes' Andromache is portrayed as devoid of voice in the wake of Troy's violent destruction and her personal downfall:

She saw that Andromache [...] was listening to her conversation. Andromache did not speak, however. She had not spoken since the day before, when the Greek soldiers brought her out of the city, pushing her between themselves, grabbing at her breasts and laughing, before shoving her into the circle of Trojan women (2019, 44).

As she recovers from this traumatic shock, Andromache engages in a proactive role in life at the Greek camp. In fact, she gradually emerges as the most positive and hopeful of all the Trojan women. First, she takes the initiative to attend to the most basic human needs: "Andromache, having tied the baby to her chest, built the fire. The flames soon caught beneath her quick hands" (61). The author's decision to have her light the fire—and to do so skilfully—does not seem accidental. Nor does the fact that she recovers her voice to encourage the youngest Trojans to speak while Hecabe—their queen—ignores them. This occurs for the first time when Polyxena tries to argue that Troy's ultimate fall was not caused by the defeat of the Amazons:

"I don't think it was the Amazon," she said. Her mother³ bit back her irritable retort. She already had one daughter whose every utterance was meaningless, she had no need for another.

"You don't think it was the Amazon?" asked Andromache quietly. She had found her tongue again at last (Haynes 2019, 64).

The second instance corresponds to when Cassandra experiences one of her "extravagant fits of hysteria":

"What is it?" Andromache was the one who asked Cassandra what had provoked her howls. Her mother and sister had long since stopped expecting answers for Cassandra's sudden and extravagant fits of hysteria [...] Sensing her mother was about to slap her across the back of the head, she tried to quieten her voice [...] Andromache said nothing but placed her hand between Cassandra's shoulder-blades and patted her gently (163-64).

Haynes' decision to characterise Andromache through these actions seems to reflect the feminine *areté*—the traditional ideal of womanhood (Wilson 2023, xlvii)—embodied by Andromache and Penelope since the archaic epic tradition (Álvarez Espinoza 2017, 88). On one hand, the author's choice of symbols reinforces this interpretation because fire keeping was traditionally entrusted to women. Fire keeping indeed ensured both domestic and spiritual well-being because it was linked to Hestia—the goddess of the hearth, offering warmth and illumination (Haynes 2023, 186). On the other, the fact of encouraging other women to express themselves or to release emotional burdens reflects a profound sense of empathy, commonly associated with caregiving. Both actions align with the broader notion of "responsibility", which Judith Butler uses, in a modern context, to explain how responsibility is shifted onto individuals when the state withholds support (2010, 35). This dynamic is intimately tied to the condition of precarity mentioned earlier. It contributes to shaping the caregiving role historically assigned to—or expected from—women, which has long formed the core of feminine *areté*.

Although Haynes' Andromache does speak on occasion between these examples, she does not do so to express her own opinions, but rather to reaffirm her empathetic disposition. This is evident in the passage where the Greeks leave Helen in the Trojan women's hut, and Hecabe unleashes her fury against her. Andromache then interrupts their dispute over Helen's blame for the war of Troy to raise an important point: Helen may indeed be responsible

3 Apart from their queen, Hecabe is Polyxena and Cassandra's mother, and Andromache's mother-in-law.

for the war, but so is Paris. Hecabe scoffs in disbelief while Helen expresses gratitude for Andromache's consideration and recalls how both she and Hector were always kind to her:

"None of the Greeks seem to want you back," Hecabe said.

"Why would they?" Helen replied. "They blame me for the war just like you do."

"Of course they blame you." Andromache spoke [...] "Everyone blames you, and Paris."

"At least you don't make me the sole culprit," Helen said. Hector loathed Paris, but he and Andromache had always been kind to the unexpected sister-in-law (2019, 134).

Worthy of note, this extract stands in stark contrast to Euripides' *Trojan Women*, where the tragic Andromache adopts an entirely different attitude towards Helen: upon learning of her son's imminent murder, Andromache insults and curses Helen.⁴ This supportive dynamic among female characters seems to align with the feminist concept of "sorority"—that is, the pursuit of positive relationships and a political and existential alliance among women aimed at fighting collectively and transforming their conditions of oppression (Lagarde 1989, 43).

In line with this notion of sorority, Andromache is expected to treat Hecabe no differently than the other Trojan women, even though in Haynes' narrative, the queen functions as Andromache's antithesis. And indeed, Andromache's commitment is evident when she is the first to comfort the guilt-ridden queen of Troy upon learning that her last son, Polydorus, is dead. She also takes the initiative to ensure the religious duty of a proper burial:

"Polydorus would not reproach you." Andromache spoke quietly but still everyone turned to hear her. "He was a kind boy, open-hearted and sometimes foolish, but not reproachful or cruel [...] We shall throw dust over him now [...] He will enter the gates of Hades, and he will dwell on the island of the blessed. The formal burial will come later, or it will not. But by then he will already be where he belongs" (2019, 181).

This act also reflects a key trait of the feminine *areté*, as women were traditionally in charge of funeral rites (Salem 2024, 36–37). Barker mentions this duty and describes the process in *The Silence of the Girls* (2018, 85–37, 274) and *The Women of Troy* (2021, 30, 162, 305–06), an element also present in *A Thousand Ships* (Haynes 2019, 103, 181–82).

4 "Never, I am certain, was Zeus your father, you who were death to so many barbarians and Greeks. A curse on you!" (Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 770–72, transl. Kovacs).

Andromache's sense of sorority also extends beyond the royal family to other Trojan women, including Creusa or Theano and Crino. Haynes portrays the latter, daughter and granddaughter of Antenor, as traitors since he secured their freedom by opening the gates of Troy to the Greeks. While Hecabe curses the girls, Andromache rejoices in the salvation of some Trojan women because they represent a sign of hope: "Creusa, Theano, Crino: three Trojan women at least who were free, either in death or in life. Andromache marked each one with a silent joy" (2019, 44).

3. Andromache's Fight for Astyanax's Life

Key differences emerge between Haynes' and Euripides' episode where Talthibius arrives at the Trojan women's hut to take Astyanax. Ramírez-Castellanos argues that the tragic Andromache passively accepts her son's murder due to her submissive nature (2015, 559). This approach overlooks other factors that shape her resignation. The first is the coercion she is subjected to, since she must comply with the Greeks' decision if she wishes to fulfil the divine duty of proper burial. The second is her acceptance of an inescapable fate.⁵ Both factors are characteristic of archaic Greek thought and provide a more nuanced explanation of Andromache's behaviour, beyond her traditional depiction as an ideal submissive woman.

The modern reader's mindset often struggles with tragic Andromache's resignation, a sentiment clearly reflected in both Haynes' and Barker's modification of Euripides' scene—although Barker alters it only slightly. As soon as Talthibius announces the reason for his presence, Haynes' Andromache swiftly considers several alternatives to save her baby's life. Each imagined solution, however, requires her to sacrifice her identity—the only thing she believes she still owns. Her determination, however, is doomed to fail: on one hand, because the Greeks' decision is irrevocable, as in Euripides' tragedy—where Astyanax's murder prevents any future revenge from Hector's bloodline and eliminates the threat of Troy's resurgence (Rodríguez Cidre 2010, 65); and on the other, because Andromache is now a war prize and no longer controls her own identity. She thus lacks the power to renounce it and become a nameless slave in exchange for her child's life (Álvarez Espinoza 2017, 87).

5 The belief in being pursued by the phantom of the unburied dead dates back at least to the Homeric poems (Lecouteux 1999, 27), as does the belief that a man's fate is as intrinsic to him as his beauty or talent (Dodds 1985, 52).

Before relinquishing her identity, Andromache swears on her own life that Astyanax will grow up far from the world of war, ensuring the Greeks need not fear a future revenge: "He will never carry a sword or spear, I swear it on my life. He will become a priest or a farmhand. He will not learn to fight. The future you fear will not come to pass" (Haynes 2019, 264). Talthybius replies that Astyanax will still grow up under the shadow of his father and consequently, will inevitably seek to avenge him. Therefore, Andromache begins to abandon her identity by first sacrificing Hector's memory: "I will never mention his father [...] He will never know whose son he is. He will never remember Troy. We will never speak of it" (264). But Talthybius responds that such an oblivion is impossible, since both Hector and Andromache's names are already immortalised in the songs of poets. Andromache thereafter appeals to the disregard with which slaves are treated in order to renounce her name—her most basic identity: "I will change my name [...] Who cares what a slave is called?" (264–65). Yet, as noted previously, Andromache cannot truly renounce her name, as it determines her value as a war prize: she is, after all, the wife—or widow—of Troy's heir and greatest hero. The latter highlights how the experience of slavery is not uniform since the position of enslaved women in the *dómos* depends on their former social status (Rodríguez Cidre 2010, 54). These passages also reflect central arguments advanced by feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1981) or Angela Davis (1981): women's subjugation cannot be reduced to a single axis of oppression, as gender hierarchies are always refracted through other social markers such as status, age or race; this is what Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1989) later theorised as "intersectionality". As Talthybius says: "Your name makes you a trophy. Another name would carry less weight"; cornered, Andromache ends up betraying Hector's memory: "Then I will tell him that Hector deserved to die" (Haynes 2019, 265).

After one final refusal, Haynes' Andromache accepts Astyanax's fate with resignation and begs to die with him. But Talthybius reminds her that her life now belongs to her master, and she therefore has no authority over her life or death. Finally, he orders his soldiers to take the child from Andromache's arms. Desperate, she pleads for Talthybius to allow her to remain with her son in his final moments. This time, only a sense of decency restrains Talthybius from granting her request due to the brutality of the child's death. When he reveals that Astyanax will be thrown from the top of Troy's walls, Andromache, horrified, begs to be allowed to drown the child herself so that he may die in his mother's arms rather than suffer such a terrible death. But Talthybius simply replies that he will return with the boy's body so that she may bury him.

4. Andromache's Life in the Greek Camp after Astyanax's Death

Interestingly, Barker does not depict Astyanax's death in *The Silence of the Girls*, but merely alludes to it: "Odysseus had picked up her small son by one of his chubby legs and hurled him from the battlements of Troy" (2018, 319). However, what is most significant here regarding Astyanax is not how he dies, but how he is buried—an issue addressed in Euripides' *Trojan Women* and Barker's novel but notably absent in Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*.

In Euripides' drama, Talthylbius returns Astyanax's corpse to Hecabe along with Hector's shield. He explains that before sailing from the coast of Troy with her new master Neoptolemus, Andromache begged him to allow the Trojan women to bury her son with it. To persuade him, she argues that she could not fulfil her concubine duties if her dead husband's shield laid above their bed. Andromache's success in both Euripides' *Trojan Women* and Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* is especially significant, as Neoptolemus' relinquishment of the shield entails giving up the most valuable piece of his father's inheritance. Ultimately, it is only Andromache's reputation that enables her to persuade Neoptolemus to leave Hector's shield in Troy to be buried with Astyanax (Muich 2010, 188).

Both contemporary versions of Andromache feature a final moment of fortitude before emotional collapse, though at different points in the plot. Haynes' Andromache shows this grit before the Greeks take her baby away, while Barker's Andromache—closer to Euripides'—does so after her son's murder to ensure his care even in the afterlife by securing the most honourable burial possible under the circumstances: "Andromache had fallen to her knees and begged him not to leave her son's body to rot under the battlements of Troy, but to let him be buried beside Hector and cradled on his father's shield" (Barker 2018, 319). Despite this difference, both authors offer similar descriptions of grief and depression.

In *The Silence of the Girls*, Baker foreshadows this theme to develop it in her sequel, *The Women of Troy*, where she depicts an Andromache psychologically devastated by her son's murder. Yet, living in the Greek camp, she exhibits an apparent indifference to all external circumstances, not even reacting to becoming the concubine of the son of her husband's murderer or *authéntes*: "[Andromache] sat staring into space [...] [she] had just been allocated to Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, the boy who killed Priam. Looking at her face, you could see how little it mattered to her" (2018, 313). This apathy evolves

into a physical deterioration in the sequel: "Her face pale, disembodied [...] She was so thin, birdlike" (2021, 52–53). This suggests a passive suicidal attitude, confirmed by the narrator's concern: "It occurred to me [Andromache] might be one of those (rare) people who simply gave up eating, who make up their minds to die" (2021, 129). In *A Thousand Ships*, Andromache's behaviour mirrors this pattern, but in contrast to Barker, Haynes addresses it more openly from the moment she resumes Andromache's story after Astyanax's death in chapter 42: "She had spent the voyage from Troy like a dead woman. She could not rise from her pallet, she could not eat, she could barely drink [...] She watched with mild interest as the bones of her wrist grew more pronounced" (2019, 327).

In Barker's depiction, Andromache's rejection of enslavement fuels her apathy, echoing Euripides' *Trojan Women*:⁶ "Andromache hated it so much [...] a king's daughter forced to play the part of a common serving woman" (2021, 237). This contrasts with *A Thousand Ships*, where the reader must infer that Andromache's resignation stems from her efforts to reconcile with enslavement and servitude under Neoptolemus as a necessary condition for survival in chapter 42: "It was not possible to keep hating a man with whom she lived in such close proximity: the aversion had to die or she would die" (Haynes 2019, 332). This moment reveals how Andromache exerts a form of agency even within an oppressive and inescapable reality—not through resistance, but through endurance.

Regarding a possible pregnancy, both authors delve deeper into the Greek concept of *authéntes*, as approached in Euripides' dramas, and portray Andromache's rejection of raising the *authéntes*' offspring—specifically, the offspring of her family's murderers. The reference is explicit in *A Thousand Ships*:

Her blood would be mixed with the blood of the man who had killed her son. And Neoptolemus was son of Achilles, who had killed her husband. To be enslaved by this vicious clan of murderers was terrible enough, but to produce a new scion was worse (Haynes 2019, 330).

Nevertheless, Haynes' Andromache rejects pregnancy only temporarily, as manifested through her fear that Neoptolemus might repudiate their

6 When Andromache tells Hecabe that Polyxena, her daughter, has been sacrificed by the Greeks to honour Achilles, she notes the following: "She died as she died. But her death is a happier lot than mine, who am alive" (Euripides, *Trojan Women* 630–31, transl. Kovacs).

child: “She felt fear, firstly. Neoptolemus rarely spoke to her other than to bark orders. She had no idea if he wanted his slave to bear him a child [...] How could she trust that a man who would murder her first child would not murder her second?” (330). Ironically, in Haynes’ interpretation, the baby Andromache is expected ultimately restores her will to live: “She had nothing to love but her memories and those were too painful to think about. And now she had something. And in spite of the fear, the revulsion, the anger, and the guilt, the flame kept burning inside her” (2019, 331). In contrast, Barker’s Andromache adopts a markedly different stance, as her rejection extends beyond her *authéntes* to their shared offspring: “How are we supposed to love their children?” she reflects (2021, 64). Whether she eventually undergoes a similar evolution as Haynes’ Andromache remains unclear, as Barker does not depict her life with Neoptolemus in Thessaly.

With respect to their rootlessness and displacement, Haynes explores Andromache’s nostalgia through a detailed but sterile comparison between Troy and Thessaly (2019, 326–27). While seemingly more concise, Barker successfully conveys a deeper psychological and sociological reflection, examining the concept of “home” and addressing the experience of the Trojan women’s exile:

Where were we going? I looked at Andromache. There was nothing for her here now, everybody she’d ever loved was dead, and yet I knew she didn’t want to leave. She’d given birth here; her dead lay buried in this ground. That’s home. All the girls seemed subdued, facing up to the desolation of exile (2021, 300).

5. Conclusions

The recent popularity of women writers’ reworkings of Greek myth reveals a social demand “of speaking up against dominant narratives of oppression” (Hauser 2025, 16) by reclaiming the silenced voices of the woman characters within them. Andromache rarely features as a central figure in these retellings,⁷ yet when she does appear, the omissions and alterations in her story powerfully illustrate that very act of speaking out against the canon, as discussed throughout this chapter. These revisionist decisions not only reveal the authors’ strategies for adapting the traditional portrayals of well-known mythic women to contemporary cultural values, but they also highlight their feminist stance towards these figures.

⁷ Another novel featuring Andromache is *Companion of the Ash* (2018) by Kate Spitzmiller.

As Emily Hauser contends, the task that needs to be accomplished is precisely that of dismantling the well-known women shaped by “men’s imaginations and fantasies”⁸ and, in its place, represent women’s experiences free from patriarchal constraints. For example, the overt hatred expressed by both Barker’s and Haynes’ Andromache toward her husband’s murderer or *authéntes* and their offspring—as well as the gradual, conscious shift from rejection to reluctant tolerance in Haynes’ version—provides an insight into the character’s psychology and expands the conceptual framework of her traditional interpretation. Rather than merely embodying the ideal of female submissiveness, both authors portray Andromache as a character grappling with an inner conflict between memory and survival.

In both Barker’s and Haynes’ portrayals, Andromache’s need to suppress her hatred in order to survive and secure the best possible life as a concubine represents her ultimate survival strategy. The latter is the only similarity, however, as Barker introduces few significant innovations in her reworking of Andromache. In Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships*, Andromache’s sorority becomes an essential survival strategy: when the royal Trojan women are captured, Andromache not only tends to their basic needs but also strives to build supportive bonds among them, facilitating the processing of their shared trauma. Mutual care and affect—absent in Euripides’ *Trojan Women*—enable Andromache to survive physically and psychologically while, with quiet resignation, she reconciles with her relocation and new identity as a slave.

Such subdued acquiescence temporarily vanishes when her son’s life is threatened. Unlike her Euripidean counterpart, Haynes’ Andromache confronts Talthybius in an attempt to save Astyanax. Her strategy involves relinquishing not only her own identity and memory but also that of her son and husband. As the ideal wife Andromache embodies, no other option than absolute loyalty to the memory of her legitimate husband would be expected, yet principles cannot withstand the loss of Troy’s only hope (Sousa e Silva 2013, 370). And so the modern Andromache defies male authority and fights for her son’s life in a reworking of Euripides’ *agón* with Talthybius, heightening the dramatic tension: feminine loyalty must yield to pragmatism for life to continue. Thus, the resignation to the *authéntes*—both in accepting her son’s murder and in becoming his concubine—ultimately represents the limited form of agency Andromache is allowed to exercise.

8 See my interview with Emily Hauser at the end of this volume, p. 136.

Pat Barker and Natalie Haynes reimagine Andromache not merely as the grieving widow or passive captive in the aftermath of the Trojan War, but as a survivor whose identity is continually shaped and reshaped through trauma, memory and limited agency. As Haynes notes, “myths may be the home of the miraculous, but they are also mirrors of us” (2020, 3). Therefore, the decision to foreground Andromache reflects a contemporary need to challenge traditional discourses and reclaim long-silenced voices that illuminate as much about the present as they do about the past. Indeed, the “incompleteness” of the discourse and “the silent gaps” become “a locus for continuing interpretation and reception” (Hauser 2024, 203), so “the silencing, rape, subjugation, kidnapping, and enslavement of women” are no longer “essential instruments for the construction of male honor” (Wilson 2023, xlvii) but rather instruments for the re-construction of women’s history.

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4. The Monster's Gaze Disrupting the Male Gaze: Trauma, Gender and Feminist Mythmaking in Rosie Hewlett's *Medusa*

María Burguillos Capel

Universidad Pablo de Olavide

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8727-0673>

mburcap@upo.es

Abstract

This chapter examines Rosie Hewlett's novel *Medusa* (2021) as a contemporary feminist reimagining that reclaims the myth of Medusa through a survivor-centred lens. Hewlett's retelling, aimed at a younger and broader readership, aligns with the discourse of the current feminist wave by foregrounding themes of sexual violence, narrative agency and symbolic resistance. The novel reframes the youngest of the Gorgon sisters, once cast as a Freudian figure of male fear, as an emblem of what Hélène Cixous identified as *écriture féminine*: a voice reclaiming power through self-narration. Hewlett also reconceives Perseus as an embodiment of deconstructed masculinity, shaped by inherited trauma and empathy rather than heroic conquest. By analysing both the narrative's accessibility and its engagement with structural and symbolic violence, this study finally argues for Hewlett's contribution to the evolving project of feminist mythmaking and its genealogy of female mythmakers.

Keywords

Medusa; Rosie Hewlett; feminist mythmaking; symbolic violence; sexual violence

I. Introduction

Myths are powerful tools for shaping how people understand the world. They carry cultural values within them, project fears and desires, and reinforce the ideologies of the societies that created them. Although the ancient civilisations that birthed cosmogonies and foundational myths to explain the world are now long gone, their narratives continue to resonate across time. Far from being neutral, myths serve as symbolic frameworks through which cultural and social constructs are shaped and justified. As discursive tools, they often legitimise dominant ideologies, including, for example, power asymmetries and structural violence.

Within Western cultural traditions, many of these myths remain deeply rooted in the collective imaginary, subtly—or not so subtly—reinforcing patriarchal norms. In this context, reimagining myths that challenge these norms becomes an act of political resistance. Particularly in more recent decades, feminist retellings of classical myths have emerged as powerful interventions in both literary and cultural discourse, challenging the patriarchal structures embedded in ancient narratives and reclaiming marginalised perspectives. This latest resurgence of feminist revisionism also responds to the enduring need to question power imbalances in Western societies, but primarily reflects the specific social and cultural concerns of the 2010s and the early 2020s (Guest 2022, 2).

Among these, Medusa's myth has proved a particularly rich site for reinterpretation. Her image, as both an avenging monster and a silenced victim, is especially compelling for addressing questions of power, sexual violence and survival. In the English-speaking world, Rosie Hewlett's debut novel *Medusa* (2021) or Natalie Haynes' *Stone Blind* (2022) demonstrate this renewed fascination, drawing from classical sources but offering fresh perspectives on the character. Haynes' novel, more polyphonic, questions the very notion of monstrosity and disrupts the traditional hero/monster dichotomy, while weaving together the stories of Medusa and her Gorgon sisters, Perseus, Andromeda, the Olympian gods and others. Rosie Hewlett, however, offers a more direct approach to the main character, placing Medusa at the centre as the absolute protagonist, and allowing her to tell her own story. This chapter explores how Hewlett reimagines Medusa not as a monster or metaphor of male fear, but as a complex survivor whose voice and subjectivity drive the narrative, offering a personal exploration of her journey through trauma and empowerment. These notions are then contextualised as part of a much wider cultural resurgence of feminist rewritings of classical myths.

Targeted at a Young Adult / New Adult readership, Hewlett's *Medusa* plays a crucial role in making feminist ideas more accessible to younger generations, especially through its reflections on gender, trauma and agency. This provides a critical framework to analyse how the characters of Medusa and Perseus are reframed, interrogating the gendered dynamics of power and violence, and how this reimagining operates as a literary revision and as a cultural contribution to the genealogical corpus of feminist mythmakers.

2. Reclaiming Medusa: Patriarchal Myth and Feminist Mythmaking

While women have been reshaping myths for centuries, since the 1970s onwards, female writing has created a distinct literary genre based on retelling classical stories from the perspectives of historically marginalised characters, especially women (Plate 2011, 6). Different theoretical approaches, from multidisciplinary frameworks, converge together here in the broader feminist effort of reclaiming narrative, authorship and identity as both a political and creative act.

In this context, feminist mythmaking can be understood as an act of reclamation of women's own voice and identity from spaces where female subjectivity has long been silenced or ignored. Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision, as the act of looking back at the past with fresh, critical eyes, is, for her, an "act of survival" (Rich 1972, 18). The retrospective gaze she suggests enables a female "awakening" from a culturally imposed slumber, allowing women to explore and reclaim identities that have been historically suppressed or distorted.

Female myth revisionism also aligns with Hélène Cixous' notion of *écriture féminine*, in which women write themselves, from the body, to subvert the dominant phallogentric structures. Feminine bodily writing explores women's desire and identity and detaches itself from the self-reinforcing and rigid rationality inherent in male discourse:

Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogentrism (1976, 879).

Through this lens of *écriture féminine*, writing becomes a radical political act: a way to disrupt the sanctuaries of the Symbolic Order proposed by Lacan

(Cixous 1976, 884), and to inscribe a female subjectivity traditionally excluded from language and representation.

Like Rich, Cixous identifies language as a site of both oppression and liberation. Although their approaches are different—one from poetic activism; the other from psychoanalytic critique—both converge in their insistence of self-authored expression, where the woman is no longer the object of myth but its re-author, reclaiming not only the story, but herself. As Rich herself wrote, reflecting on the absence of women's lived realities in literature, when a woman reads she finds

a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salomé, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together (1972, 22).

The need for re-vision of women's cultural past becomes even more evident when analysing the role of femininity in Greek myths. Classical goddesses and heroines often embody fixed archetypes, confined to reductive roles that leave little room for complexity or alternative representation (Pomeroy 1975, 16). This archetypal constriction is unmistakable in Medusa, whose own subjectivity is constantly denied across patriarchal narratives. Interestingly, as Natalie Haynes observes in her essay *Pandora's Jar* (2020, 85), even in some male-authored retellings that attempt to strip away the myth's more fantastic elements and present a less monstrous Medusa, she is still subject to objectification and sexualisation, her monstrosity softened only to emphasise her beauty and desirability. Either feared as monster or claimed as a trophy or a sexual object, she still remains defined by the male gaze rather than her own agency.

The best-known classical sources for the myth of Medusa can be found in the works of Ovid, Apollodorus and Hesiod (Wilk 2000, 28–29). Most versions agree that Medusa is the only mortal of the three Gorgons, although the reasons behind are unclear. As such, she is not only less powerful and more vulnerable than her sisters, but also needs to sleep, a crucial detail that allows Perseus to approach her unnoticed. Natalie Haynes emphasises the importance of Medusa's mortality in both *Stone Blind* (2022) and *Pandora's Jar* (2020, 94), not only as the main reason Perseus targets her, but also as a way to expose that, beneath the label of monstrosity and the epic narratives, her death is ultimately a man beheading a defenceless woman.

Though the story of her metamorphosis varies over time and among authors, one of the most widespread versions is the one that Hewlett also tells in her novel. A priestess of Athena, Medusa's beauty attracted the unwanted attention of the god Poseidon, who raped her in the temple, but Athena, instead of avenging the victim, turned her into a hideous monster as punishment. Medusa became a symbol of terror until she was slain by the hero Perseus, with the help of the gods. Perseus later used Medusa's head as a weapon, until he gave it to Athena, who placed it in her shield (Hardwick 2017, 15). It is worth noting how the goddess is not an ally of women but an agent of male order, an embodiment of the asexual male-shaped *virago*. She appropriates Medusa's power not merely as a symbol of victory, but as a protective emblem that reinforces her aloofness and intimidating presence. This way, Athena channels Medusa's capacity to provoke male fear, weaponising female power while upholding patriarchal ideas of chastity and sexual control.

This motif of Medusa's beheading is not exclusive to classical tradition. The trope of a young male hero slaying an ancestral monster, usually female, can be found in other mythological narratives, as in Babylonian hero Marduk and his epic battle against the monster Tiamat, goddess of the primordial seas (Leeming 2013, 98). The recurrence of this mythic pattern reflects more than a narrative convention, symbolising the imposition of a patriarchal order over an older, chaotic and frequently feminised cosmos, traditionally linked to the *chthonic* aspect of divinity and the underworld. In such narratives, the act of violent conquest seems to be not only a demonstration of heroic strength but also a metaphor for the establishment of a new divine and social hierarchy, often aligned with male authority (Lerner 1986, 152–53).

In classical art, paintings and sculptures of Medusa's head have allegedly fulfilled an apotropaic function: used to ward off evil forces, her image is transformed into a protective talisman (Alban 2017, 22). Now fetishised as a bodiless head, with her mouth frozen in a silent scream, she becomes a recurrent trope in Western cultures, stripped of voice and reduced to spectacle. This fascination continues throughout the decades, particularly among late nineteenth century artists, for whom Medusa's head stands as a powerful manifestation of an aesthetic that blends beauty, terror and tragic allure (Baumbach 2010, 235).

Philosophical interpretations from the twentieth century deepen this transformation. In Sartre's view, Medusa emerges as the ultimate symbol of "the Other", with her petrifying gaze turning "the Self" into an inanimate object (Alban 2017, 21). This fear of Otherness and the unknown, also explored

by Jean Pierre Vernant (1992, 138), can be fundamentally translated as a primal terror of death itself, a confrontation with the obliteration of being. In this vein, Medusa can also be seen as the ultimate projection of the Greeks' anxieties about the unknown. As a liminal, fluid figure, she also embodies the fragile boundary between civilisation and barbarism (Ali 2024, 2).

In his essay "Medusa's Head" (originally written in 1922), Sigmund Freud used Medusa's image to explain the male fear of emasculation, as part of his theory of the "castration complex", a stage during a boy's psychosexual development where he fears castration—a symbolic loss of power and identity, upon seeing the female genitals. In this framework, Medusa symbolises this castration anxiety: her severed, snake-covered head suggests displaced genitalia, a "maleficent vulva" (Alban 2017, 22) that unconsciously seems to evoke the motif of the *vagina dentata*. Her power to turn men to stone represents the (male) spectator's paralysis in the face of sexual anxiety: a mix of fear and fascination that, through Freud's wordplay on the term "stiff", underlines the erotic tension embedded in this response.

The sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. Observe that we have here once again the same origin from the castration complex and the same transformation of affect! For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact (Freud 1955, 273).

Feminist authors have also connected this castration anxiety to the collective fear of emasculation and succession in Greek mythology, not only in the story of Oedipus, but in the cycles of male violence and castration of the parental authority represented by Uranus, Cronus and Zeus. In these cycles, the obsolete generation is eliminated, as well as the possibility of continuing their offspring (Bowlby 2006, 31). It has also been argued that this archetypal tension in father and son relations continues to be deeply embedded in the roots of traditional masculinity, still shaping present-day relationships that result in emotional distance and lack of connection (Blazina 1997, 287). Furthermore, in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) Cixous understands Medusa's death as a symbolic male attempt to silence the voice of women, challenging Freud's theory of the "castration complex" (Kapoor 2021, 91) with her image of a laughing Medusa who mocks at this and initiates her own exploration of female sexuality and identity.

Especially in recent decades, authors such as Margaret Atwood and Madeline Miller, who paved the way for the rest (Hauser 2025, 13), as well

as Natalie Haynes or Pat Barker, among others, have reimagined classical narratives from the perspective of a wide range of characters, mostly focusing on traditionally marginalised voices of women, but also depicting new models of masculinity (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023, 62). However, some of these authors have shown a particular—and more than understandable—sympathy for the most mistreated, feared or villainised women of myths, such as Medusa, Medea, Circe or Helen. The need to escape patriarchal boundaries, to give voice to those in the margins, sometimes is closely tied to characters defined for their liminality: female monsters and “antiheroines” who inhabit the ambiguous spaces between maternity and sexuality, or between life and murder (Gardner 2024, 15). Those figures who have always occupied marginal spaces and defied societal expectations now become the centre of the narrative for many of these writers who redefine antiheroines of classical stories as complex, multifaceted women that challenge gender ideologies and offer a counter-narrative to the misogynistic traditions they come from.

In this framework, Rosie Hewlett's *Medusa* follows the same path as other women writers' retellings, which attempt to “liberate the characters from the limitations of imposed identities” (Kapoor 2021, 96). Medusa's story, as she claims in her first-person narrator voice, “has always been told by men”, forcing her into an oversimplified cliché that does not correspond with her reality (Hewlett 2021, 5–6). Hewlett challenges traditional narratives by allowing her Medusa to look back to the past with those “fresh eyes” proposed by Adrienne Rich. Although her story remains set in a vaguely defined Antiquity, Medusa's spirit speaks unmistakably from the present. Within the deliberate timelessness of the underworld, she watches the ages pass until, inspired by contemporary movements and the women who dare to speak out against the abuses they have endured, she decides to do the same (Hewlett 2021, 5–6). Speaking from the underworld therefore becomes a narrative strategy that allows Hewlett to frame her novel within a modern mindset, and is almost certainly influenced by earlier contemporary retellings of Greek myths, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) or Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011), where the primary narrators, Penelope and Patroclus respectively, also tell their stories from the afterlife (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023, 66).

Hewlett also emphasises Medusa's divine origins; although uniquely born a mortal woman, she is the daughter of Titans Phorcys and Ceto, two primordial sea deities who predate the Olympians (Vernant 1992, 123). Drawing on the traditional Greek sources, Hewlett presents the other

two Gorgons, Medusa's sisters Stheno and Euryale, as immortal beings, in contrast to Medusa's mortality. This anomaly intensifies her outsider status within her own lineage—an unwanted child due to her condition, she is abandoned in a human temple and remains estranged from her own family for years, until her sisters finally decide to come back to her.

A relevant element about Medusa's monstrosity is articulated by herself early in the novel: "I find that most monsters are made, not born. Perhaps you should remember that next time you encounter one" (Hewlett 2021, 9). The narrative reminds the reader that, in Medusa's case, as in many others, monstrosity is not inherited but entirely constructed, imposed by a divine and patriarchal system. Before the violent events that lead to her transformation (55-56), she is portrayed as a completely normal young woman, with human emotions and values, and perfectly capable of compassion and love. It is only after the double physical and symbolic violence she endures—first the sexual assault, then the punishment for having been assaulted—that she, in her rage, embraces her role as a monster, albeit only temporarily. This idea presented here and subtly threaded throughout the novel (68, 71, 76) resonates with post-structuralist and feminist critique, arguing that monstrosity—or more precisely, abjection—is socially constructed through violence, oppression and erasure.

Trauma deeply marks Medusa's temperament, particularly in the immediate aftermath of her assault, but also much later, as she reveals that, for a long time, she has been unable—even afraid—to speak of what happened to her. This delay, beyond serving as a narrative justification, is a very common pattern in trauma responses. As Cathy Caruth notes, trauma entails an aspect of "latency"; it often resists immediate understanding and may appear only belatedly (1996, 17), which is reflected in *Medusa*. The scene in which she is raped by Poseidon in the floor of Athena's temple is bleak yet concise (Hewlett 2021, 51). A young, inexperienced priestess, Medusa is eager to please the gods but becomes overwhelmed by fear as she too late realises the god's violent intentions. She seeks Athena's help, but the goddess remains silent, and her subsequent rage over the desecration of her temple is not directed at the perpetrator, but at the victim. Medusa's transformation from a beautiful maiden into an abhorrent creature follows a common trope in Greek mythology, where female sexuality is often punished through monstrous metamorphosis. Echoing the feminist arguments that Medusa's transformation is in fact a metaphor for how society demonises

women who are victims of male violence (Ali 2024, 3), Hewlett does not shy away from highlighting the careless victim-blaming that Medusa suffers.

Another remarkable aspect in Hewlett's retelling, closely intertwined with the idea of agency, is Medusa's challenging of the divine order. It starts with her questioning fate, the unfathomable and unstoppable force shaping the natural course of life. The idea of her personal destiny being dictated by the *Moirai* haunts Medusa's thoughts and dreams during her early youth (Hewlett 2021, 25-26). Still naïve at this stage, she finally decides to blindly trust her own fate as she blindly trusts the gods. It is only over time, through her accumulated experiences, when she begins to look back to the past with greater clarity. Then she comes to realise how much the decisions made by the gods and the *Moirai* were not only arbitrary but also cruel, devoid of moral justification. In confronting this realisation, Medusa reclaims her narrative, refusing to be merely a pawn of divine will. Through this, Hewlett reframes Medusa as a symbol of resistance, who dares not only to question the structures that once governed her existence, but to ultimately reject them with a simple, defiant statement: "Fates, if you are listening—Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos—I just wanted to say: screw you" (26).

Hewlett also emphasises Medusa's facet as a "protector", not only through her narrative arc but also by suggesting a plausible etymology of her name (13). By choosing to highlight this aspect, she subtly reconnects with the apotropaic roots of the classical Medusa, while simultaneously adding her personal twist to the narrative. Despite her violent rampage after the transformation, this Medusa is also portrayed as fiercely loyal and protective. This is first evident in her efforts to preserve the temple and continue the work of her adoptive mother, Theia, and later in her struggle to hold onto what is left of her own humanity. She is not simply the monster, as in more traditional versions, or just an innocent victim, as for example in Natalie Haynes' *Stone Blind*, but much more than either of these extremes.

Especially in the aftermath of Medusa's metamorphosis, Hewlett's narrative choices mark a distinct departure from the original myth, as well as her own contribution as a revisionist mythmaker. Haunted by her own monstrosity—embodied in the snakes that whisper violent urges into her mind—Medusa's inner conflicts run throughout the novel. Her remorse after accidentally turning a child to stone, despite her efforts to spare children from her deadly gaze, still torments her even in the afterlife (Hewlett 2021, 80). Two pivotal moments allow her to reconnect with her human side and reject violence: learning about her pregnancy and befriending Perseus.

These moments reawaken her empathy and her capacity for love, culminating with her ultimate act of self-sacrifice. By letting Perseus kill her, Medusa ensures both the survival of the young hero and his mother, and the safety of her own newborn babies, who will be raised by her sisters, shielded from the horrors she has been through. In this final twist, the female-monster from patriarchal myths reemerges as a nuanced and complex character: still partially a monster, but also a victim, a survivor and a hero.

3. Deconstructing Perseus: Violence, Trauma and Healing

The traditional hero archetype is notably subverted in Hewlett's novel, demonstrating that, despite the traditional use of myths as "storehouses" of cultural constructs of outdated masculinity, its reinterpretation can also be an educational and transformational tool to provide new alternative models (Blazina 1997, 286). Hewlett's Perseus presents a stark contrast with other male heroes from feminist retellings, including other versions of the same character. For instance, in *Stone Blind*, Natalie Haynes defines her Perseus as "petty" and "whiny" (2022, 220, 225), presenting him as a self-centred, sometimes even cruel young man who relies heavily on divine guidance and chooses to kill Medusa—an innocent woman—only because she is the only mortal among the three Gorgons. This reimagining connects with a broader feminist attempt to rethink the traditional ideals of masculinity embodied by Greek heroes, either by challenging their patriarchal values—presenting them not as paragons of heroism but as deeply flawed, even destructive individuals—or rewriting them into more positive models of masculinity, as in Hewlett's novel. Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) vividly illustrates both sides of this spectrum: there is a striking difference between the gentle and emotionally mature masculinity embodied by Daedalus or Telemachus and the dominant and manipulative Odysseus. Yet, Telemachus is not so generously portrayed in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, which draws directly from Homer to recount how Odysseus' son himself, eager to please his father, ruthlessly hangs the twelve housemaids who had been raped by the suitors (Hardwick 2017, 13). Similarly, in Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021), Theseus, initially presented as the ideal of the classical hero, soon reveals himself to be an ungrateful, "self-absorbed" man (Judge 2023, 113), who exploits and discards women for his own benefit.

However, instead of the ideal of aggressive masculinity embodied by other heroes, Hewlett's Perseus is a soft-spoken and sympathetic boy,

shaped by his direct exposure to violence against women. A loving son, he maintains a close bond with his mother, one of the many victims of Zeus' predatory behaviour. While traditional myths often frame Zeus' extramarital affairs as little more than some divine, light-hearted shenanigans, justified by his role of king of the Olympian gods, and even by a secondary facet as a fertility deity, many of these so-called affairs are, more accurately, socially tolerated accounts of a "male god's exploitation of females" (Pomeroy 1975, 17) or more directly, depictions of various forms of sexual violence. Feminist classical scholars have discussed this extensive repertoire of myths that fetishise sexual abuse and rape, along with their numerous representations in art and literature—including examples such as Daphne, Persephone, Cassandra or Leda—as an omnipresent form of *ante-litteram* "rape culture" (Judge 2023, 110-11). The trivialisation of sexual violence in mythology and fiction has significantly contributed to its normalisation, as well as to the persistence of harmful misconceptions that continue to shape how present-day survivors are perceived and often silenced, highlighting the importance of contemporary women-authored rewritings in foregrounding key aspects such as consent, agency and ethical representation (Nisa Cáceres 2024, 70-71).

Perseus' mother, Danaë, is a very clear example of this physical and sexual exploitation of women in myth. Her father, king Acrisius, tries to prevent her from conceiving a child after being told by an oracle's prophecy that he would be killed by his own grandson. Out of fear, he imprisons Danaë, an act that connects with the recurring pattern of male fear over generational succession seen in the earlier examples of Cronus and Zeus, or in stories such as that of Oedipus and Laius (Blazina 1997, 287). After being locked up in a tower, Danaë is impregnated by Zeus in the form of a golden rain that falls upon her. Her awareness of what exactly happened, let alone her consent, is often disregarded in traditional versions of the myth, and has been also argued as a deliberate metaphor or fantasy to alleviate female anxiety surrounding the subject of sexual violence (Pomeroy 1975, 18). However, Hewlett's novel presents a rawer, more realistic portrayal. In addition to implying that Acrisius himself may have sexually abused his daughter, the novel directly challenges the myth's seemingly "innocent" and even "whimsical" version of Danaë's pregnancy, stating that Zeus "forced himself into Danaë" (2021, 105). Perseus is depicted as the product of that sexual assault, as also are Medusa's own children. After Acrisius' attempt to murder his daughter and grandson, they eventually find refuge in the island of Seriphos. Some years later, the island's tyrannical king, Polydectes, becomes obsessed with Danaë and begins to molest her. His desire to

dispose of Perseus leads him to send the boy away on a deadly mission to slay Medusa, hoping to claim Danaë for himself.

In the novel, Perseus is fully aware of the horrors his mother has endured. He respects her strength but has also vowed to protect her from ever living the same experiences again. His own understanding of trauma helps him quickly bond with Medusa, who has endured similar experiences. "You are a survivor", he tells her, "...like my mother" (127). His love for his mother is also exploited by others, like Polydectes, who manipulates him into his mission, or even Athena, who threatens Danaë's life to compel him to kill Medusa.

Unlike the traditional hero driven by glory or conquest, this Perseus is driven by compassion and kindness. Medusa, long isolated and treated like a monster, comes to recognise in Perseus a rare kind of gentleness she has not known before. Instead of following their assigned path of death, repetition and erasure (Caruth 1996), they choose peaceful dialogue, which allows them to see each other in a completely different light. Drawing on trauma studies, this episode is crucial to their character development and healing: resisting the isolation that follows a traumatic event through communication and language is a fundamental step toward healing (Still 2018, 314). By telling each other their stories, they enter what psychiatrist Judith Herman defines as "work of reconstruction" through trauma storytelling, which also connects to the wider concept of "working through" proposed by LaCapra (Schick 2010, 12-13). Their shared wounds create a space of mutual recognition, and in that space, Medusa begins to reclaim parts of her identity that had been buried beneath rage and pain.

Through their bond, the novel reframes the myth: the slayer and the monster are not enemies anymore, but two survivors seeking understanding. Although Medusa's killing ultimately occurs, she is not defeated by the hero in the traditional sense; rather, he bears witness to her humanity and is protected by her in turn. While in classical myths the natural patriarchal order is restored after the monster's death, reaffirming male victory and female silence, here, however, this order is disrupted by the characters' actions. In doing so, both Medusa and Perseus participate in a form of healing, affection and care that entirely subverts the violent logic of the patriarchal reception of the myth.

4. Mythmaking, YA Literature and Feminism

The role of young adult narratives in addressing delicate issues such as sexual violence has often sparked debate and hesitation. Yet, novels that engage with such topics offer a powerful and direct way of communicating with teenagers and early adults. By exploring stories of violence, trauma and injustice, these novels can help young readers recognise unconscious biases, such as victim-blaming or minimising violence, while also fostering empathy. For some, they may even offer language or perspectives to process personal experiences or those of others (Charles 2019, 99-100). That said, because of the emotional weight and potential impact of these narratives, it is true that not all young adult books addressing this issue might be necessarily beneficial in this sense. It is crucial that such stories are written—and read—with care, responsibility and sensitivity, as is the case in Rosie Hewlett's novel.

What makes this *Medusa* particularly compelling in this context is, precisely, its accessibility to a wider audience. Its direct feminist messaging and emotionally relatable characters create a space where younger readers can approach the classical world at the same time as they grapple with difficult themes, without feeling alienated. Rather than overwhelming its audience, Hewlett's *Medusa* builds bridges through empathy and clarity.

Especially in the wake of the #MeToo movement, *Medusa* has emerged as a potent feminist icon of survival and resistance, challenging the male-dominated lens that still frames her as a symbol of male control or uses her image to demonise powerful women in public life, such as politicians Angela Merkel or Hillary Clinton (Keel 2021, 31). From a feminist perspective that builds on the myth's origins, the myth of *Medusa* continues to resonate with the lived experiences of countless women who are disbelieved, blamed or silenced after being victims of sexual violence (Ali 2024, 7). Contemporary cultural reimaginings of the character, such as Luciano Garbati's sculpture *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* (2008) or Pat Barker's short story "Medusa" (2019)—in which the protagonist, Erin, is a survivor of sexual assault whose experience parallels that of the mythical *Medusa*—reflect feminist defiance within a context of systemic violence against women. In some cases, works such as Garbati's have sparked debate, since his *Medusa* depicts a conventionally beautiful nude woman, which some argue perpetuates the same male gaze it seeks to challenge (Sladky 2025, 3). Despite this, the collective contribution of these refigurations to *Medusa*'s resurgence as a feminist icon is undeniable. Now reclaimed by feminist protests, literature and visual culture, *Medusa*'s image confronts the same systems of power

that once tried to erase her voice. Hewlett's novel seems to draw from this cultural resurgence, bridging ancient myth and modern feminist activism for a wide readership, as well as contributing to the growing corpus of feminist mythmaking within more accessible—or even mainstream—spaces.

It is also worth mentioning that, in Hewlett's retelling, Medusa finds healing not only through her dialogue with Perseus but also through the solidarity of her sisters, who choose to share her exile and monstrosity rather than abandon her. Though Medusa's journey is still mostly solitary, these acts of loyalty, especially in the aftermath of her rape, offer a meaningful reflection on the value of solidarity and family/community support, even within narratives marked by isolation and trauma. Especially for younger generations, these displays of resilience, care and empathy reinforce the importance of collective effort in the ongoing fight against gender-based violence.

In essence, Hewlett's novel illustrates how accessible feminist mythmaking can reimagine classical myths while empowering younger generations to engage with their cultural and political present. In reclaiming Medusa's narrative, the novel not only challenges classical power structures but aligns with the broader cultural urgency to listen, believe and respect survivors of patriarchal violence—a message especially vital for younger generations navigating a post-#MeToo world, where political polarisation and the emergence of organised anti-feminist backlash continue to shape debates over women's rights. While questions surrounding consent, bodily autonomy, representation and identity are increasingly visible, the integration of feminism into popular culture, amplified by the role of social media, has also triggered a parallel reactionary movement of "popular misogyny" (Clark-Parsons 2022), bolstered by alt-right ideologies and the *manosphere* (Hermanson et al. 2020, 163). This movement promotes patriarchal counter-narratives and normalises rape culture, anti-feminist harassment and violent threats, often with little to no consequence (Clark-Parsons 2022, 12). The emergence of these reactionary discourses highlights the importance of keeping feminist awareness alive among younger and future generations, making these contemporary narratives such as *Medusa* even more necessary.

5. Conclusions

In the words of writer and classical scholar Emily Hauser, and as seen through the wide corpus of female-authored retellings of mythology especially in recent years, this movement is not a trend or a fad, but an urgency: "a shift in the axes of myths to understand the systems of oppression that have encoded women for millennia" (2025, 14). Rosie Hewlett's *Medusa* can be read as a relevant contribution to the vivid, growing tapestry of reimagined feminist myths, woven by Madeline Miller, Pat Barker, Jennifer Saint or Natalie Haynes, among others. By foregrounding Medusa's voice and trauma, Hewlett's novel reclaims a traditionally villainised character as a subject with depth, agency and emotional resonance. Instead of remaining a silent, passive victim as expected, she raises her voice from the dead to tell her story in her own terms.

Medusa's long journey, from a symbol of male fear and a cautionary tale to an emblem of feminist resistance, reflects how myths can be reinterpreted to articulate contemporary concerns, such as the exploration of trauma, sexual violence or gender expectations. Once used to justify dominant social structures, the discursive power of myth is now being reshaped to include silenced voices and dissident identities, as well as to provide a complex, multilayered and empowering space for self-exploration. Hewlett's narrative proves how such retellings can foster both dialogue and engagement with feminist ideas across generations. The myth of Medusa is no longer frozen in a grimace of stone. It is very much alive and continues to evolve over time as a crossroads of meaning, resistance and transformation.

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5. Autodiegesis and Relationality: Tracing Penelope in Margaret Atwood, Madeline Miller and Natalie Haynes

Marta C. Cuevas Caballero

Universidad Pablo de Olavide

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3988-6297>

mcuecab@upo.es

Carmen Velasco-Montiel

Universidad Pablo de Olavide

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0033-0731>

mcvelmon@upo.es

Abstract

First given literary form in Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope has long embodied the ideal of a prudent, cautious, patient and faithful woman: the perfect wife. However, the incorporation of gender perspectives into literature and classical reception studies has recently contested this characterisation, reinterpreting her story and granting her a more prominent voice—one that is even critical of her own narrative. Three central examples can be found in recent Anglophone fiction: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019). This chapter explores how these retellings present Penelope as a woman who reflects on her own story, both through her recollection and experience of the events of her life and through her relationships with other characters. In doing so, both autodiegesis and relationality emerge as central dimensions

of her fulfilment, underlining the possibilities of female agency. Together, these narratives construct a Penelope that challenges the contours of her personal myth and engages with contemporary gender debates.

Keywords

Penelope; myth rewriting; relationality; female agency; self-narration

I. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed what is probably the biggest revival of ancient mythology in novels written in English (Spacciante 2024, 405). This trend is particularly evident in recent retellings of classical myths related to the Trojan War, a focus of analysis in Gentzler (2019), King (2024) and in works by women writers discussed in Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila (2023). A distinctive, defining characteristic is their reimagining of myth through a gender lens, ensuring “that women have a voice and that the androcentric perspective of the Homeric poems does not go unquestioned” (Goff 2022, 1). At a moment where the notion of *woman* itself is under scrutiny, gender in classical Antiquity is studied as a social construct (Wohl 2005, 147). Through Sander’s definition of adaptation as a deconstruction of the original text using alternative points of view (2006, 18–19, 21), or as reinterpretation and intertextuality (Hutcheon 2013, 7–8), this contemporary resurgence also revisits how the classics have been transmitted through history (Linne 2022, 57) and have perpetuated patriarchal dynamics (Judge 2023, 108). These narrative choices align with Ostriker’s concept of “revisionist mythmaking” from a feminist approach, or “the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth” (1982, 73). Retelling myths by applying a feminist perspective thus helps subvert deeply embedded ideas about gender and its expression in literature.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Penelope as a character in contemporary rewritings and reinterpretations of the *Odyssey* is how she gains agency over both her narration of her own reality and feelings, and the way she goes beyond what is traditionally associated to her—fidelity, obedience, discretion—offering a more self-aware portrayal. Contemporary women writers reimagine different versions of Penelope as engaging in an active critique of her own and her husband’s circumstances. This is accomplished through a gender approach that puts her thoughts and perceptions at the heart of the narrative. Most importantly, her autodiegetic voice grants her, to some degree, control over both her life and the way her story is received.

This chapter explores Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005), Madeline Miller’s *Circe* (2018) and Natalie Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships* (2019). The three novels present remarkably different iterations of Penelope, who actively reflects on her life—while still alive and through letters to her husband in Haynes, or from the underworld in Atwood—or is viewed through Circe’s perspective in Miller. On the one hand, Penelope’s voices are analysed through two narrative dimensions: her autodiegesis, or self-narration, in Atwood and Haynes; and her heterodiegetic construction in Miller, mediated through

Circe's own sustained autodiegesis. On the other, relationality, as articulated in feminist relational theory, serves as a critical lens through which Penelope is portrayed as being determined and defined by her relationships with other characters: "Interpersonal relationships are nested in broader social, economic and political relationships, ones that shape personhood and possibilities for autonomy" (Koggel, Harbin and Llewellyn 2022, 4). Relationships can, therefore, challenge traditional societal structures. Penelope's interpersonal connections are essential to her story and agency, as she has traditionally been conceived as a secondary character, defined primarily in relation to Odysseus. Hence, these reimaginings of Penelope not only break the mould of her traditional attributions, enabling her to play a more nuanced role in the literary and cultural landscape of contemporary classical reception: their voices resonate today, highlighting the ongoing struggle for women's autonomy and the reclaiming of their narratives amid threats to their liberties.

2. "I'll spin a thread of my own": Subverting the *Odyssey*

Margaret Atwood published *The Penelopiad* in 2005 as part of the Canongate Myth Series—an initiative aimed at reinterpreting myths from a contemporary perspective. In this novella, Penelope narrates her own story from the underworld, addressing present-day readers. Having long observed humanity since her death, she reflects bitterly on her imposed role as the archetypal faithful wife. As she notes, she became "an edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, the singers, the yarn-spinners" (2005, 2). Her lament turns into a warning: she does not want to be remembered as an unattainable model of obedience but rather challenge the canonical narrative.

Indeed, *The Penelopiad* can be considered the "maternal ancestor of these novels" that rewrite myths from a feminist perspective in the twenty-first century. From the very beginning, Penelope declares her desire to "set the record straight and do a little story-making of her own"; yet Atwood presents a narrator who is no less a trickster than Odysseus himself (Goff 2022, 4). Both spouses share a talent for deception: "The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other" (Atwood 2005, 173). This self-reflexive irony destabilises the

reliability of Penelope's testimony and reminds readers that myth, memory and personal voice are always entangled in acts of reinvention.

Additionally, her narrative is disrupted and challenged by the chorus of the maids who claim that Penelope is involved in their murders to conceal her alleged affairs with the suitors, yet Penelope completely dismisses this accusation. This adds another layer of complexity, as the official version is subverted not only through Penelope but also through the maids, who assert their place within the narrative by voicing both their suffering and their reproach for the cruelty inflicted upon them by the so-called heroes of the poem: the maids are "the ones you failed, the ones you killed" (2005, 6). The girls emerge as powerless, ungrievable collateral victims of the system: "We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents" (13). A double narrative then develops between Penelope and the maids, in which, through autodiegesis, each party presents their version of the facts, sometimes contradicting or subtly qualifying each other. As Atwood emphasises, central to *The Penelopiad* is Penelope's story as well as the events leading to the murder of the maids:

What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself (2005, xxi).

The addition of the maids' voices, acting as a renewed Greek chorus, alters the binary reception of the story. Rather than a simple opposition between Penelope's and Odysseus' versions, the maids introduce a new discourse that questions the previous ones and adds another twist to the revision of Homer's text (Tolan 2021, 116-17). In doing so, they insert silenced and powerless perspectives into the epic narrative (Howells 2006, 8). This shift places class at the centre of gender analysis, as intersectional tension surfaces clearly in the trial for their murder where Penelope declares: "They were like the daughters I never had. (Starts to weep.) I felt so sorry for them! But most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life" (Atwood 2005, 181). Penelope, as queen, insists on affection yet simultaneously rationalises their suffering and, thus, exposes how class divided her from those she claims to mourn. This evidences the disruption of the relationality of mutual support they were developing while Odysseus was absent.

The maids' interventions, often written in verse, draw on oral genres such as ballads, songs and parodies, whose evolution—from playful jump-rope rhymes to mock lectures—mirrors their shift from sarcasm to

severity (Ingersoll 2008, 124). By expressing their lived experience through these popular forms, traditionally associated with marginalised voices (Howells 2006), they affirm the value of minor genres and assert narrative authority against the official tradition, thereby distancing themselves from Penelope. By contrast, Penelope's interjections increasingly resemble tabloid headlines and adopt a cynical tone (Ingersoll 2008, 124). Her use of contemporary language in her speech vilifies the heroic tone of the original work, yet the expression of her desires, fears and frustrations render her a relatable character, thereby fulfilling the myth's timeless and universal nature (Howells 2006; Tolan 2021). As Atwood stated, after all "Penelope is perhaps the first desperate housewife to appear in art. (Absent husband, teenage son giving lip and breaking curfew, louts gobbling up the foodstuffs, a servant problem—who wouldn't be desperate?)" (2007, vii). At the same time, the growing divergence of her voice from that of the maids underscores her despair as her authority is contested. Not only that, but in offering their own versions, both Penelope and the maids undermine Odysseus' heroism and representation of the patriarchy which has burdened and punished them: Penelope doubts her husband and his stories (2005, 83), and the maids accuse him of their cruel unjustifiable murder (191–93).

However, it must be noted that, as suggested by Rodríguez Salas, through "mimicry", which is "a strategy used by women to consciously reproduce the traditional role that patriarchal models have repeatedly imposed on them" (2015, 23), Penelope reinforces patriarchal structures in an attempt to save herself, ultimately falling prey to the myth, whereas the murdered maids, through their sisterhood, embody its true feminist alternative. Penelope's reenactment of patriarchy is also evidenced in her rivalry with other women, such as Helen or Anticleia and Eurycleia: isolating herself from them to save herself, she fails to build relationships on the margins of the oppressive system. Additionally, the maids' deaths raise a question of intersectionality. Those in lower social positions suffer disproportionately under patriarchy and broader systems of inequality, in their case subjected to sexual exploitation and, ultimately, execution. This emphasises how patriarchal oppression works differently within diverse groups of women, according to their other social variables like race, age or class. Unfortunately, Penelope's awareness of gender does not exceed her awareness of these categories. The maids question whether Penelope had concealed interest in their deaths (Atwood 2005, 147–52), casting doubt on her fidelity and undermining both the traditional narrative and Penelope's.

In aligning herself with patriarchal structures, Penelope does not build a trustful relationship with the maids, resulting in her own salvation but also in her isolation. Trapped within the confines of the patriarchal system, Penelope remains a victim of oppression, unable to build interpersonal relationships or engage in care ethics—features that feminist relational theory develops and encourages (Koggel, Harbin and Llewellyn 2022), ultimately undermining her own emancipation. Moreover, after all her alleged sacrifices, Odysseus fails to reward Penelope with the presence she has long and patiently awaited: “He wants to be with me. He weeps when he says it. But then some force tears us apart. It’s the maids” (Atwood 2005, 189). Odysseus is still avoiding her in the afterlife in search of new adventures, yet she does not recognise this and, once again, shifts the blame onto the maids, denying any responsibility for their murders and holding them accountable for her disgrace, incapable of accepting her husband’s indifference. Penelope remains utterly alone, with no one by her side in the underworld. Hence, when Penelope asks rhetorically “Why couldn’t [women] be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been?” (2), Atwood appears to suggest that such self-sacrifice yields no true reward, but only the fulfilment of patriarchal expectations.

Atwood’s Penelope challenges the perception historically attributed to the character, but she does not succumb to simplification. The appeal of her recount lies in the readers’ choice: one may take her good intentions at face value, or instead read between the lines, side with the maids’ disruptive version, and uncover a Penelope who, like Odysseus, deceives her audience. Autodiegesis here functions as a strategy not only to foreground marginalised voices but also to challenge traditional assumptions. As Atwood warns in her introduction to the novella, “there are too many inconsistencies” (2005, xxi) in *The Odyssey* and they persist in *The Penelopiad*.

3. “Loyal, songs called her later”: Penelope Seen through Circe’s Eyes

In Madeline Miller’s *Circe* (2018), the witch of Aiaia offers her own account of her life. Structured as a female *Bildungsroman*, the novel explores Circe’s moral and psychological growth (Macmillan 2019, 37; Díaz Morillo 2020, 17; Spacciante 2024). This rewriting highlights how Circe has traditionally been portrayed as evil because she is a strong woman who refuses to conform to the roles imposed by a male-dominated order (Etiz 2023), as Circe reveals in her metacommentary about her meeting with Odysseus:

Later, years later, I would hear a song made of our meeting. [...] I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep (Miller 2018, 181).

The narrative is presented through Circe's first-person voice, yet she cannot be considered a fully reliable narrator. Her immortality alters her perception of time, and her direct involvement leads her to reinterpret past events retrospectively changing her first account (Goff 2022, 6). Still, the first-person perspective fosters empathy with the narrator, prompting readers to "ignore every other instance that might contradict her perspective" (Spacciante 2024, 409). Relying solely on Circe's version may obscure certain events, but also offers an intimate experience of growing empowerment, female agency and sorority building.

In Miller's novel, Penelope plays a minor role, yet her relationship with Circe becomes a site through which both women negotiate resistance and transformation in the face of the patriarchal violence that structures their society. Given that Penelope is referred to in the third person, autodiegesis cannot be applied to this work in the same way as to *The Penelopiad* or *A Thousand Ships*. Nevertheless, Circe's perspective offers an alternative form of autodiegesis—one that still allows Penelope's story to be told, albeit through another woman's voice. In this light, the relational dynamic between both characters produces a compelling narrative symbiosis which this chapter analyses through its structural and discursive dimension.

Penelope is first mentioned in a conversation between Circe and Odysseus. He explains that her weaving allows her to eavesdrop (Miller 2018, 174–75), a trait that later keeps Circe vigilant when the queen arrives on her island after Odysseus' death. Eavesdropping provides female characters with a vantage position (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2020, 347; 2023, 66). In Miller's novel, it also functions as a narrative device that heightens Circe's sense of imminent danger and distrust while amplifying tension in the plot. Covert, surreptitious or uninvited overhearing highlights Penelope's wit and cunning and, consequently, her presence generates discomfort and elicits mistrust from those around her.

During their affair on the island, Penelope becomes a constant presence haunting the lovers. Circe's jealousy gradually intensifies (Miller 2018, 193–94), until she finally concludes that Penelope "was the scab that I must pick" and asks Odysseus directly about her, who starts telling the traditional attributes given to Penelope. Odysseus praises his wife against her cousin Helen (194).

By opposing Penelope's constancy and self-knowledge to Helen's celebrated but unstable beauty, the novel exposes how women are traditionally compared to each other. Later in the novel, Penelope will resist this patriarchal framing by recalling shared memories rather than rivalry (291). The implied female support distances Miller's Penelope from Atwood's and anticipates Penelope's willingness for cooperation and search for sorority.

After Odysseus' death, Penelope and Telemachus travel to Aiaia with Telegonus, Circe and Odysseus' son. Circe does not trust Penelope's good will and manners: "Odysseus' favourite pose had been to pretend that he was a man like other men [...]. There were none like him, yet there was one who had matched him and now she slept in my house. Telemachus was no danger, but what of her?" (271). Rivalry between the two women is anticipated through Circe's expressions of jealousy and also in the way she senses Penelope could prove treacherous in the near future. Yet, as Circe again unconsciously advances, she is no rival for Penelope, but just a "rehearsal" of domestic life for Odysseus (195), and Penelope knows it (273): "I had wondered why she was not more jealous of me. I understood now. I was not the goddess who had taken her husband" (285). Penelope's confession that she has come to Aiaia to protect Telemachus because Athena intends to take him away in the name of glory—just as she did with Odysseus—is a turning point in the plot which reinforces mutual understanding. Circe recognises herself in this mother threatened by the same goddess who had already sought to kill Telegonus, her own son. The parallel culminates in Circe's acknowledgment of her sacrifice in order to save her counterpart, exchanging their sons' place: "I had let Penelope stay on my island so she would not lose her son. I would lose mine instead" (306). Hence, what initially appears as rivalry, competition, or even the prospect of vengeance, gradually transforms into a relationship of friendship and mutual guidance, taking the form of a horizontal mentor/mentee dynamic. In the novel, "[m]otherhood is a catalyst for further maturation, further metamorphosis" (FitzGibbon 2021, 6). Not only that: through Circe's retelling of Odysseus' adventures to her son, she started "hesitating, omitting, altering. With my son's face before me, their brutalities shone through as they never had before" (Miller 2018, 229). Precisely these brutalities, rage and unnecessary violence are the stories Telemachus relays about his father upon his return: "This man of rage was all the father I had"; Penelope, in this case, patiently awaits an improvement and advises Telemachus to "be patient and not provoke him" (267), as if she could not accept the man that had returned.

As Penelope and Circe's relationship develops, it becomes evident that the factors uniting them—gendered experience, shared marginalisation and narrative agency—outweigh those that divide them, illustrating a relational dynamic rooted in empathy, mutual recognition and the co-construction of meaning: "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 2019, 33) to the point that they switch places in the end. Motherhood makes them see each other as equals; they help each other's sons and their relationships with them. Together, they mock Hermes and Athena (Miller 2018, 298, 300), an episode that underscores how their relationship strengthens both women. Through mutual support, they are able to confront the gods, who in the novel symbolise the inescapable structures of patriarchal oppression. This solidarity demonstrates that shared resistance, rather than solitary heroism, enables these women to challenge systemic power.

Eventually, Circe leaves Aiaia, her prison, and Penelope willingly takes her place (329), having been encouraged and trained by the witch (292–93). Aiaia, the island, constitutes a threshold chronotope in Bakhtinian terms which "represents a crisis or period of change for those who are permitted to land there" (Macmillan 2019, 34) and indeed it transforms and frees both Penelope and Circe. It is a non-place (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023, 66), protected by Circe's spells and draughts, which acts as a fortress against a world embedded in a patriarchal system, allowing both women to flourish and be themselves. As Díaz Morillo observes, "Miller's Penelope has here the chance to open up, to talk to someone who will, in effect, listen carefully to her side of the story, which is precisely what Atwood's Penelope seeks"; ultimately, Penelope finally finds someone who supports and understands her, a "true sisterhood" (2020, 24). Through these interactions, both women find ways to help each other achieve a sense of contentment later in life. It could be argued that Circe—alongside Penelope—leaves the "power imbalances unquestioned", since their resolution is achieved in a non-place, entirely at the margins of established power structures, suggesting that "isolation or assimilation[remain] the only possible paths for a woman's fulfilment" (Spacciante 2024, 405, 415). However, this re-reading of Circe (and Penelope) also underscores "the courage and compassion required to belong to oneself and to belong to where one lives" (FitzGibbon 2021, 7–8). The relationship between these two women—their relationality outside the dominant patriarchal logic—functions as a means of dismantling traditional expectations imposed upon women and creating alternative

structures of mutual support. Concurrently, Circe's autodiegesis presents a subjective account of the evolution of her relationship with Penelope. Albeit through Circe's eyes, it is possible to see Penelope acting assertively, freely expressing her will and taking decisions by herself. Relationality acts here as a catalyst for Penelope's agency, because Circe's relational dynamic with her—and her perception of Penelope—acknowledges and enables that agency.

4. “I was once warned that you were trouble”: Epistolary Autodiegesis

Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019) is a polyphonic novel that challenges traditional Homeric epic by “replacing the *Iliad*'s catalogue of ships and its male Greek warriors with the stories of the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters on both sides of the conflict” (Linne 2022, 67) and explores how gendered violence is shaped in post-war settings (Altın 2025, 110). Haynes' narrative combines first-person and third-person voices; the first person is used by both Calliope, Muse of epic poetry, and Penelope. Calliope inspires an unidentified individual, simply referred to as “the poet”, to also write “the story of all the women in the war” (Haynes 2019, 40) through different chapters in which Trojan and Greek women experience the war and its sufferings. Seven of those chapters belong to Penelope, who writes six letters to her husband and one to the goddess Athena. Penelope does not actually intend to send him the letters (279) or expect him to respond. This reimagining of Penelope can be linked to Ovid's *Heroides*, thus taking part in a tradition that has been deconstructing the character since classical Antiquity.

Similarly to Atwood's account, the long years awaiting her husband bring different stories and rumours to Penelope's palace. She often reacts with scepticism and exasperation at their fantastical nature yet still grants them some credit as her only news of her husband. Penelope is battling here her own frustration at the paradoxical fact that the more news she receives about Odysseus, the more she realises that she truly knows nothing about who he really is. The letters serve as a form of venting, even if she writes them solely for herself. The first notable aspect of these letters is the close connection between autodiegesis and relationality, as Penelope's perspective is shaped primarily through her relationship with her husband. Gradually, Penelope realises that Odysseus is more interested in the pursuit of adventure and glory than in finally returning home. Her resentment is evidenced in her account of Odysseus' encounter with Polyphemus and elsewhere: “You could not help

boasting of your victory. [...] You never have been able to resist gloating" (Haynes 2019, 161-62; cf. also 228, 258). Just as Atwood's Penelope meta-epically comments on whole passages of the *Odyssey* (Linne 2022, 76-77), Haynes' Penelope expresses her love and admiration for her husband's cunning, but also voices her frustration towards his boasting, which usually ends up further delaying his return: "You are wedded to fame, more than you were ever wedded to me" (Haynes 2019, 255). Through her demystification of his adventures, she begins to question how much she has truly known about her husband and, through actively noticing the most problematic aspects about Odysseus, she initiates a process of self-narration, her voice emerging autodiegetically. Her relational dynamic with Odysseus conditions her perception of her own world, but also makes it possible for her to finally reclaim her story.

Haynes' Penelope perceives Odysseus' apparent lack of interest in prioritising her. She berates him for leaving her until last when, in Hades, he asks his mother Anticleia about his family: "[a]nd then, when you had asked about everything else except the dog, you remembered to ask after your wife" (230); she comments on his disinterest two more times, at a later stage (253-54, 283). At the end of the novel, writing to Athena, Penelope believes that Odysseus "was more concerned with a successful revenge than with a successful reunion with his wife" (317). Remarkably, she is fighting for her place in the story, undermining the figure of Odysseus as the perfect husband, a trait largely criticised through his well-known affairs: "such behaviour would be beneath you. A long, long way beneath you" (192), which enrages her by the time she hears about Calypso. This prompts her to intimidate the bard who has told her about the nymph, assert her authority as queen and test the limits of her unswerving forbearance: "Her cave is surrounded by thick woodlands, apparently, which sounded so much like a euphemism [...] that I threatened to have him flogged" (281). The process of listening to the songs about her husband acts as a slow realisation that the negative things said about Odysseus are also true, thus deconstructing and reconfiguring her relationship to him, and affirming her perception of her right to freely express her disappointment and exasperation.

Within this dual process of intradiegetic and extradiegetic self-definition, and through self-narration that simultaneously reflects on her own experiences and remains oriented around her husband, Penelope reveals dimensions of her character that transcend the traditional roles of fidelity and submission. From a relational perspective, she undergoes a process of transformation and deconstruction of her own mindset. She had already

shown her ingenuity by weaving Laertes' shroud, pretending she believed Odysseus dead while giving him time to return. Another aspect highlighted is her astuteness, when she states that Odysseus should have cut his own feet with the plough to avoid going to war: "A man who cannot stand cannot fight" (60). In this case, she does not use that cleverness to survive in hostile circumstances during Odysseus' absence, but to outsmart him, even if not on purpose. She alludes to the "hero's disposition" needed to raise Telemachus by herself and the cruelty that waiting entails (185). By foregrounding her everyday-life domestic struggle, Penelope indirectly questions the traditional conception of the classical hero. Both the obstacles and silent battles of her daily life are actively seen in her self-narration as heroic to the detriment of traditional male superiority.

In a final exercise of her free will, Penelope confesses to having contemplated the idea of being unfaithful too: "The thought of their hard, youthful flesh is a tempting one. It's not as if you have been faithful, after all [...] You have humiliated me, and I am sorely tempted to return the favour" (283–84). It is only a hypothetical possibility, expressed in far less ambiguous terms than Atwood's, yet it undeniably demystifies her personality and marks a decisive moment in her autodiegesis, as it powerfully contradicts the traditional notion of fidelity associated with her. Haynes' Penelope emerges as a complex and self-aware figure, one who negotiates desire, resentment and autonomy in ways that destabilise her traditional image of passive fidelity. Furthermore, her correspondence shapes a Penelope who progressively distances herself from her husband: the long wait erodes their relationship, and the salutations evolve from "My dearest husband" (57) to simply "Odysseus" (279). The twenty years separated from him finally take a toll on her, tired of the waiting and the unanswerable questions.

Taking relationality as the circumstance by which human identities are influenced by their relationships with others (Koggel, Harbin and Llewellyn 2022, 3), this version of Penelope is thus perceived through the desires, fears and uncertainties confessed to her husband. Without intending to be read, she consciously chooses to write to him, and she sees her own life through what ties her to him. Paradoxically, it is Odysseus, in the double distance of being far away and not reading the letters, who becomes the centre of her autodiegesis, indirectly configuring her personality and how it is presented to readers.

5. Conclusions

In their rewritings, Atwood, Haynes and Miller confer full agency upon their female characters, who reclaim their voices while also resonating with contemporary women and challenging the patriarchal structures that have long sought to silence or marginalise them. In the more particular dimension of the characters, these three iterations of Penelope aim to present the full version of their story; however, in seeking to overcome their imposed roles, each deploys different strategies. They are confined by the very traits for which Penelope is so often celebrated, shaped as they are by male expectations. Weaving, patience and tricks operate less as virtues than as the limited weapons available to them in resisting oppression—isolated in Ithaca, left as single mothers, surrounded by unwanted suitors and awaiting the uncertain return of their husbands. For these Penelopes, the qualities that define them are not sources of empowerment but rather burdens they are forced to bear. In Circe's words, "I remember what Odysseus had said about her once. That she never went astray, never made an error. I had been jealous then. Now I thought: what a burden. What an ugly weight upon your back" (Miller 2018, 286).

The relationships they build are their tower of strength. Class becomes an unconquerable barrier for Atwood's Penelope, who uses the tools she has been given to survive regardless of the group. If anything, this Penelope is more disruptive than the subsequent ones because she completely subverts the honesty, integrity and uprightness historically (and anachronistically) attributed to her, while, at the same time, Atwood gives unprecedented protagonism to the maids to denounce the longstanding ignored injustice they suffered. However, Penelope's mimicry (Rodríguez Salas 2015) does not allow her to build strong relations outside the patriarchal logic and she remains a victim of this oppression, isolated from other women. Miller's Penelope rejects any kind of rivalry or jealousy against Circe and helps the sorceress overcome her fears; they both evolve through mutual support and understanding thanks to their relationship. Their shared life experiences help as a binding agent to overcome difficulties. Penelope finally finds a place of her own, empowers herself against the dominance of the gods and stops being isolated, as if Miller gave Atwood's Penelope her deserved fairy-tale ending (Díaz Morillo 2020, 24). Haynes' Penelope can somehow be regarded as consciously inspired by Atwood's work as well: she uses the first person to speak about herself and her life in her letters, and she deconstructs official versions in a somewhat similar, nonchalant way. Nevertheless, her reflections put Odysseus at the centre of her life, in a

frustrated, pleading way that contrasts with Atwood, but it is this ennui and disappointment at his attitude towards her that gives significant weight to her reaffirmation of her own experiences, desires and expectations.

A first-person voice results, inevitably, in accessing Penelope's own thoughts, fears, rivalries and desires. Penelope narrates her own reality and metacomments on the *Odyssey*, indirectly applying a gender perspective, criticising her own role and the position the poem has given her. She is able to tell her own story, challenging how it has been told in the past, thereby linking and contrasting classical myths not only with their contemporary rewritings, but also with their social and cultural significance. In *A Thousand Ships*, Penelope provides a meta-epic critique of her husband's journey from Troy, paralleling Atwood's portrayal; however, she likewise cannot be regarded as an entirely reliable narrator. Haynes' Penelope can be examined through a gendered lens, as she exhibits traits—such as jealousy, emotional pain and an inclination towards infidelity—that markedly diverge from the traditional attributes of prudence, patience, submission and faithfulness typically ascribed to her. Yet, she is still structured around a male figure: Odysseus. In Miller's novel, Penelope lacks her own autodiegesis and is instead portrayed through Circe's perspective, which is marked by contradictory inner thoughts and an emotional perception of reality; however, Circe's access to her own inner world also reveals her personal growth, particularly through her evolving relationship with Penelope.

In these narratives, it is not only Penelope's attributes that are contested and articulated with greater complexity than in more traditional iterations of her myth, showing the contradictions of human nature and demystifying the figure of Odysseus. The hero is no longer a "hero" but somebody that longs for adventure and fame regardless of his family (and fellow shipmen). His astuteness is contested by Penelope's (and Circe's). These Penelopes also express their resentment and disappointment at their husband's return—belated and transformed, no longer the same man who once set sail. It is not enough of a reward for their struggles to maintain Ithaca and raise Telemachus on their own. In doing so, these reimaginings of Penelope dismantle traditional conceptions of heroism and the epic stature of Odysseus, while foregrounding the resilience of those left behind—not to pursue glory, but to navigate the arduous though often unacknowledged heroism embedded in daily life.

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6. Women-Authored Retellings of the Classical Tradition: A Critical Survey of Scholarship and the Literary Polysystem in Spain

Miguel Cisneros Perales

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4358-7967>

miguelci@ucm.es

Abstract

Grounded in the new outward turn in Translation Studies, Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, and Genette's palimpsests and paratextual theory, this study examines the most recent Spanish critical reception of women-authored narrative rewritings of the classical tradition, with a focus on understanding how these works are classified or positioned in the Spanish literary system. Furthermore, Spanish translations of the novels under examination, as well as original Spanish-language texts, are traced to outline the current publishing landscape and examine how they are categorised. The ultimate aim is to present an overview of women-authored retellings of the classical tradition and their reception in twenty-first-century Spain, evaluating possible editorial and critical trends, as well as tools for their analysis. The results may also prove useful for the study of these texts within other polysystems, offering comparative insights into their adaptation, circulation and reception across different literary and cultural contexts.

Key words

Spanish publishing trends; translation; rewritings; paratextuality; classical reception

I. Introduction

Recent concepts in Translation Studies such as the *outward turn* (Bassnett and Johnston 2019) and *post-translation* (Gentzler 2017) encourage a reconceptualisation of translation in its broadest sense, approached in dialogue with other processes of creation and re-creation. In this context, contemporary narrative rewritings of Graeco-Roman texts constitute a particularly compelling object of study—especially when examined through a gendered lens, which may be understood as a reinterpretation not only of the hypotexts themselves but also, and perhaps more crucially, of their traditional reception (following the terminology proposed by Genette 1989). Likewise, Hardwick states that reception studies “are concerned not only with individual texts and their relationship with one another but also with the broader cultural processes which shape and make up those relationships” (2003, 5). These approaches intersect productively with a translation-oriented perspective, whereby such texts are analysed *as* and *through* translation, as Gentzler (2019) and Nikolaou (2023) have also suggested.

To provide a clear example: an ancient Homeric epic poem composed in a past era and language is reimagined today in the form of a novel, written in another language (primarily present-day English) and addressed to a radically different readership. This reimagined narrative may then be translated into yet another language, situated within a distinct sociocultural and literary context, one with its own history of reception of classical texts and its own publishing dynamics. These intersecting operations of rewriting and translation may be conceptualised as part of a rhizomatic continuum (Deleuze and Guattari 1972) that moves from creation to re-creation, where re-creation itself becomes a new form of creation within an open-ended hermeneutic and receptive process. Within this framework, translations, rewritings, adaptations and other forms of reception emerge as new textual realities that may stand closer or further from the original, broadly understood, which serves less as a fixed point of origin than as a generative foundation for subsequent layers of meaning-making.

Although a systematic and scientifically grounded taxonomy capable of classifying all these rewritings from a literary—or literary-translational—perspective remains to be developed (if such a taxonomy is even possible or ultimately necessary), this study does not pursue that objective—a useful and (still) working vocabulary is the one proposed by Hardwick (2003, 9–10). Rather, it aims to explore how these works are presented and categorised in Spanish scholarship, and whether the labels employed by scholars reflect those used

in the Spanish publishing industry. This starting point raises the question of whether publishers distinguish between translation and rewriting. While much has been written about the invisibility of translation, the growing prominence of literary rewritings invites us to consider the opposite tendency—namely, whether there is a trend toward explicitly marketing these novels as rewritings, in contrast to the more subdued framing often applied to translations.

Before turning to how these novels are presented by Spanish publishers—an issue addressed in the third section of this chapter—it is first necessary to examine how they are defined and described by scholars in Spain. This will help determine whether there are parallels, mutual influences or, instead, a total or partial disconnect between the taxonomies employed by Spanish academia and those adopted by the national publishing industry.

2. How Are Women-Authored Rewritings Approached in Spanish Scholarship?

This section offers a non-exhaustive review of recent scholarship on women-authored rewritings of Graeco-Roman classics, with a particular focus on reimaginings of the Trojan cycle and those studies that have examined them through a gender-based lens—whether transnational, queer, feminist or intersectional.

The section pursues three main objectives: first, it seeks to provide an overview of the most recent critical reception of the phenomenon in Spain; second, to examine the perspectives from which scholars approach it, and more specifically, how they define the type of works they analyse; third, to extract from this body of research a corpus of women-authored rewritings in Spanish (either originally written in Spanish or translated into Spanish) of Graeco-Roman myths—particularly those related to the Trojan cycle—published in Spain in the twenty-first century.

Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila (2023a) offer the most recent and comprehensive revision of contemporary women-authored rewritings of classical epic in Spain, including one of the widest range of examples to date. They summarise the motivations behind these rewritings in two primary aims: “reimaginar historias y mitos fundacionales de la cultura occidental” and “repensar desde la creación artística el rol de las mujeres y otros personajes silenciados en el canon literario” (2023, 57). They also consider the phenomenon to be of “alcance transnacional”, thanks to the widespread

circulation of translations, and they outline several shared features and lines of research—many of which inform the present study.

Regarding individual myths, we find several recent case studies, many of which are not directly related to the Trojan cycle. García Peña (2010), for instance, examines the “mitologemas” (“el tejido, el tapiz y la araña”) underlying “la representación del mito de Aracné” (63) in the metafictional narrative *Viajes paralelos* by Mexican writer Aline Pettersson (2002), even though the myth is not explicitly mentioned in the text.

Monrós Gaspar, although primarily focused on a poetry collection, offers an analysis—through the lens of the double—of Nicole Ward Jouve’s short story “Narcissus and Echo” (included in the anthology *Ovid Metamorphosed*, ed. Philip Terry 2001) and A. S. Byatt’s “The Stone Woman” (from *Little Black Book of Stories*, 2003), both of which rewrite the Ovidian myth of Echo as “traducciones, versiones o refiguraciones” (2011, 106).

Nisa Cáceres studies Emily Hauser’s *For the Winner* (2017) as “a reconstruction of Atalanta’s mythic identity” (2024d, 2), describing this mode of “women’s rewriting as remythologising”, and Atalanta’s cross-dressing as a form of “redressing” gendered limitations and constraints, a symbolic and practical act of resistance (7). Dolores Picazo describes Nelly Arcan’s *À ciel ouvert* (2007) as “una de las reescrituras contemporáneas más completas del mito de Medusa” (Picazo 2015, 154), and interprets the deadly interplay of gaze and the characters’ various transformations as “variantes mitémicas contemporáneas del ojo de Medusa” (150). Aznar Pérez reads Fernanda Melchor’s novel *Temporada de huracanes* (2017) as a rewriting in which the Medusa myth “no es ya un pretexto o un simple gesto encarnado en la voz apropiacionista de un personaje”, but rather “la novela es Medusa” (Aznar Pérez 2024, 9). In a similar vein, Salcedo González engages with feminist readings of the problematic power dynamics in “the romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone”, “a central figure in fandom culture” (2025, 1–2), focusing on mythology-based fanfiction in both English (2025) and Spanish (2024a). In a recent monograph (2024b), she further analyses a range of contemporary young adult rewritings in English of the Persephone myth, including Margaret Mahy’s *Dangerous Spaces* (1991), Louise Tondeur’s *The Water’s Edge* (2003), Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Wintergirls* (2009), Laura Ruby’s *Bone Gap* (2015), Lynn Freed’s *House of Women* (2002) and Francesca Lia Block’s *Psyche in a Dress* (2006).

Ippolito Speziale studies the “reelaboración” and “reescritura” of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice “como referencia inspiradora” and “reinterpretación subversiva” (2021, 14) in Amélie Nothomb’s novel *Les prénoms épicènes*

(2018), particularly in relation to the representation of femininity. Similarly, Urralburu examines the mythical rewriting “por subversión de mitemas” and “por analogía con respecto de la estructura” (2024, 205) in Esther Seligson’s short story “Eurídice vuelve”, published—alongside other rewritings—in the 2002 anthology *Toda la luz*.

Undoubtedly, the female characters of the Trojan cycle have received significant scholarly attention. Castro Jiménez analyses Helen of Troy in Francesca Petrizzo’s novel *Memorie di una cagna* (2010a), which she describes as “un eslabón más en esta cadena de modernas relecturas del mito” (Castro Jiménez 2011, 57). She notes that its transformation and distancing from the original myth are grounded in the adoption of “una perspectiva racionalista” (59). Belelli approaches the character of Briseis in Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) as a feminist adaptation and as a rewriting and appropriation of the *Iliad*, describing it as “un ejercicio de reflexión acerca del género épico” (Belelli 2022, 131), in which Homeric scenes are reordered and expanded. Nisa Cáceres (2024a) defines Jane Rogers’ *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011) as a “reescritura contemporánea de autoría femenina”, a “refiguración feminista”, a “transposición contemporánea” and a “reconstrucción del mito de Ifigenia”. Finally, Nisa Cáceres (2024c) addresses the discursive borders between the processes of translation and rewriting of classical texts from the perspective of the fictional turn in translation. Categorising most rewritings as “hybrid interventions” (8), he offers an in-depth analysis of Elizabeth Cook’s *Achilles* (2001) as a woman-authored rewriting of the Homeric myth, in tandem with its Spanish translation (2003), which he reads as a combined case of “(un)original repetition, respuesta abierta y autotraducción” (Nisa Cáceres 2024c, 10).

Rewritings of the *Odyssey* have also received considerable literary and critical attention, especially following the publication of Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005a), one of the earliest novels of the century to be situated within this trend. In an article that examines numerous rewritings of classical myths featuring female figures—mostly poetry and twentieth-century works, Cabanilles Sanchis considers Atwood’s novel to be the most radical and ironic example of “domiciliación alucinada” among the texts analysed (2007, 126). Beteta Martín offers a markedly feminist reading of Atwood’s rewriting and “revisión” of the Penelope figure, interpreting it—alongside other twentieth-century reworkings—as a “subversión” that adequates “los mitos ancestrales a las nuevas identidades del siglo XXI” (2009, 165). Rodríguez Salas examines the novel through the concept of *gyn/affection*, focusing on the relationship between Penelope and her

maids, and describes the work as “a parodic revision” and “an eclectic but compact alternative tradition of women’s writing and myth-making” (2015, 20). Zalbidea Paniagua defines it as a “postmodernist feminist rewriting of the myth” (2024, 52), focusing on class inequality and Marxist critique. Additionally, López Gregoris compares Atwood’s novel with *Circe ou o pracer do azul* by Galician author Begoña Caamaño (2009), delving into their shared representation of interior exile. She reads both as re-creations and rewritings “con finalidad subversiva, narradas desde una posición femenina o incluso feminista” (López Gregoris 2018, 1).

Los estados carenciales by Ángela Vallvey (2002) is analysed by Thompson as a “revisionist tale” (2008, 327), in a study which encompasses two other Spanish rewritings of the Penelope myth—one poetic and one dramatic: Francisca Aguirre’s *Ítaca* (1972) and Carmen Resino’s *Ulises no vuelve* (2001), respectively. He concludes that these rewritings subvert the category of women’s writing by “re-visioning the archetype itself, [...] drawing our attention to Penelope’s agency in the epic plot and giving voice to Penelope’s desire” (Thompson 2008, 329). Similarly, Pérez Ibáñez examines Vallvey’s novel as an external parody of the *Odyssey* (2018, 307) and describes it as both “una reinterpretación subversiva del sentido del mito” and “una relectura ideológica” (315).

Among other myth-rewriting short stories (such as Mónica Crespo’s “La caja de Pandora”, 2017), Vigna (2024) analyses the Peruvian author Tanya Tynjälä’s “La coleccionista” (2019) as an “actualización” and “revisión” of the myth of Calypso, reframed as speculative fiction. In a broader sense, Bakucz studies the Latin American rewritings in the anthology *Después de Troya* (Serrano Cueto 2015) as palimpsests and recreations of myth, specifically focusing on the figure of Ulysses. She highlights the predominance in these micro-narratives of “el punto de vista de los personajes secundarios o complementarios, y la visión femenina” (Bakucz 2020, 75). Velázquez Velázquez examines Spanish microfiction, identifying among its most common narrative strategies “la focalización interna y la humanización del mito” (2018, 333). Although no explicit reference to gender perspectives is made, she concludes that these techniques often function by “dando voz a aquel que nunca la tuvo” (357). Another relevant case is that of Fernández Urtasun, who, although focusing mainly on twentieth-century Latin American microfiction by male authors, identifies a tendency toward “subversión”, “adaptación” and “modificación”, aimed at destabilising “los grandes relatos” while simultaneously recovering them “para el gran público” (2012, 80). One key strategy in this process is the revoicing of female characters.

As for other narrative genres, Campos Fernández and Martos García (2017) explore the rewritings—or “remediaciones”—of Penelope in the digital era and cyberspace, focusing on fan fiction such as user Starchaser’s *The Diary of Penelope* (2002). Drawing on the concept of the palimpsest, they argue that the proliferation of such versions, which revisit Penelope “en diversas claves de lectura (sobre todo feminista, pero también pacifista o ecológica)”, allows us to speak of an expanded universe. They also describe this continuum of rewritings as “continuaciones” or “préstamos”, observing “multitud de operaciones posibles (similitud, inversión, repetición, exclusión, ampliación...)” (Campos Fernández and Martos García 2017, 2–3).

Rewritings of the *Aeneid*—itself a continuation and reworking of the *Odyssey*—have also generated considerable critical attention, especially in the case of *Lavinia* by Ursula K. Le Guin (2008). Vicente Cristóbal, in his seminal study, refers to it as a “novela virgiliana” and a “novela histórica de tema grecolatino”, noting that its main innovation lies in “la explotación del punto de vista femenino” (2015, 365–66). Cantó Llorca (2016) defines *Lavinia* as a “versión” that modernises and updates the character to enhance identification with contemporary readers. Bugada (2019) was among the first to analyse this “reinterpretación” not as a rewriting, but rather as a (pseudo)translation. Teodoro Peris examines this new narrative perspective where it comes into conflict with the Virgilian model (2019, 211), viewing this “refocalización” as a revision of the epic poem “desde una perspectiva feminista” (113). Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila (2020) critically compare *Lavinia* with Irene Vallejo’s *El silbido del arquero* (2015), defining both novels as “recreaciones” (347) and focusing on metafiction and liminality. They also study Vallejo’s narrative as a polyphonic novel in the Virgilian tradition (2022). Terol Plá (2023) also describes Vallejo’s novel as a “recreación”. Bartolomé analyses the *ekphrasis* of Aeneas’ shield in *Lavinia*, describing it as a “reescritura de la *Eneida* desde el punto de vista de una mujer” and a feminist reading (2022, 119). Finally, Cairo, in her analysis of the rewritten moments in which Lavinia blushes, positions the novel within a broader trend of “resignificación de los clásicos desde una perspectiva centrada en los personajes femeninos” (2022, 154).

Another approach to the *Aeneid* is Margaret Drabble’s novel *The Seven Sisters* (2002), studied as “a contemporary revisionist reimagining of the *Aeneid*” and a “subversive reworking” of the poem through the lens of ageing and gender, in line with other “present-day transpositions” (Nisa Cáceres 2023, 245, 247).

Some studies examine and compare multiple works engaging with different myths. The most extensive one is the doctoral thesis by De la Riva Fort (2016), which analyses twenty-one rewritings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* across various genres, offering a comprehensive theoretical reflection on the notions of rewriting and classical reception. However, given the restrictive definition of rewriting adopted in his study, only two women-authored narrative works are included: Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005a) and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011). More recently, Nisa Cáceres (2024b) has examined several novels from the perspective of rape culture and rape myths, including Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* (2001), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021a) and Natalie Haynes' *Stone Blind* (2022a). He defines these novels as "contemporary women-authored rewritings of the classical tradition", "feminist revisions", "recent iterations", "contemporary women's reimaginings" and "female-authored mythic reworking[s]". González-Rivas Fernández studies and compares "los diferentes procesos de apropiación de los mitos clásicos" and "cómo se subvierte lo monstruoso-femenino" (2024, 155) in the short story collection *Monstruosas* (2019), which features four women-authored rewritings of mythological monsters: Lamia in Cristina Jurado's "Lamia"; the Harpies in Caryanna Reuven's "Alas del viento"; Medusa in Gloria T. Dauden's "Gorgoneion"; and the Erinyes in Lola Robles' "La piedra del dolor". Finally, Florencia Saracino explores the treatment of voice and silence in several "recreaciones inspiradas en mitos clásicos" (2024, 90), including *The Penelopiad* (Atwood 2005a), *El silbido del arquero* (Vallejo 2015), *The Silence of the Girls* (Barker 2018) and *Elektra* (Saint 2022a). Saracino interprets these works as versions and subversions of myth in which women are reimagined and given a voice (2024, 84).

As noted at the beginning of this section, there are also studies that, while analysing works outside the scope of our corpus—such as those authored by men—reflect on the nature of these contemporary rewritings through a gender lens. For instance, Jaime de Pablos (2023) characterises Colm Tóibín's Clytemnestra in *House of Names* (2017) as a modern version, a revision, an updated perspective and even an appropriation that offers "una visión más humanizada—menos monstruosa—y más comprensible del mito" (46), as well as "una obra que hace de puente entre la literatura clásica y la contemporánea" (47). Similarly, Don Winslow's *City on Fire* (2022) and *City of Dreams* (2023) are examined by Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila (2023b), who describe these works as "reverberaciones de Troya" and contemporary transpositions (368) of the Trojan cycle. They categorise these novels as a hybrid intervention "construida en base a una profusión de paralelos y equivalentes naturalizados

o domesticados" (369), involving "la resignificación y desenmascaramiento de los mitos" (382). Beyond narratological or mythocritical categories, the reference to naturalised or domesticated equivalents—terms more commonly associated with Translation Studies—proves particularly useful for distinguishing how different rewritings relate to their target audiences: whether they bring readers closer to the original myth or adapt the myth to the reader. Finally, López Gregoris investigates the ghost of Helen in Andrea Camilleri's detective novel *Noli me tangere* (2017), arguing that although the Italian author never explicitly alludes to the myth, the poems of Stesichorus about Helen of Sparta serve to "perpetuar la figura de Helena como mito erótico" (López Gregoris 2024, 460) and to "recrear el imaginario masculino de la mujer deseada" (460–61) as a "reelaboración" of the classical myth's structure.

Finally, it is worth noting that this phenomenon has also attracted the interest of researchers in the early stages of their academic career, which attests to its considerable potential. Thus, there has been a significant increase in undergraduate and master's dissertations on this research topic, with several published in academic repositories or as articles in journals for emerging scholars. For example, García Leitón examines the Ovidian retelling of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe in Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007). Fernández Barroso (2019) analyses "la reescritura del mito" from a feminist perspective in Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), categorising it as an "obra derivativa" (16). Bazaga Ropero (2024) studies Hauser's Briseis in *For the Most Beautiful* (2016), comparing this reconstruction of the myth with other contemporary rewritings. Verdugo Pura (2022) considers Vallejo's novel (2015) as a rewriting and a version of the *Aeneid*. Ortiz Blanquero (2025) investigates the characters of Clytemnestra, Cassandra and Elektra in Jennifer Saint's *Elektra* (2022a). And lastly, Muñoz García (2025) focuses on the retelling and literary translation of the myth of Medusa in Haynes' *Stone Blind* (2022a and 2024).

This volume also contributes to the growing body of Spanish scholarship on contemporary rewritings of classical myths. Sánchez Gayoso (pp. 29–47) analyses Clytemnestra in Victoria Grossack and Alice Underwood's *The Mother's Blade* (2017) from an ecofeminist standpoint, introducing the notion of "eco-refiguration". Domínguez-González (pp. 49–62) explores Andromache in Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Women of Troy* (2021), as well as in Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019), focusing on trauma and survivor agency—an approach also adopted by Burguillos Capel (pp. 63–81) in her study of Rosie Hewlett's *Medusa* (2021). Cuevas Caballero and Velasco-Montiel (pp. 83–99) examine the figure of Penelope in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

(2005a), Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019) through autodiegesis and relationality.

As demonstrated, recent Spanish scholarship has amply examined women-authored rewritings of classical myths, with particular emphasis on the Trojan cycle. Studies address reception and narrative strategies through feminist and intersectional lenses, employing categories such as retelling, refiguration or transposition. Analyses of male-authored works also illuminate processes of resignification and domestication. The growing number of undergraduate and master's dissertations attests to the field's potential as an emerging area of research. Overall, this body of criticism delineates a diverse corpus that intersects with Translation Studies and broader debates on gender and classical reception.

3. Women-Authored Narrative Retellings of the Classical Tradition in Spain: A Publishing Overview

Following the analysis of recent Spanish scholarship on women-authored rewritings of Graeco-Roman myths, a compilation of the works referenced in these studies has been assembled, selecting for this overview two categories of books published in Spain in the twenty-first century: rewritings not originally written in Spanish and subsequently translated, and those originally composed in Spanish. Both categories are treated as equivalent when considering their position within the Spanish literary system, following Even-Zohar's polysystem theory (1978) and the conceptualisation of translated works, in line with Lefevere (1992), as cultural products of the receiving system.

Essentially, any given work qualifies as a rewriting when it is marketed and framed as such. Furthermore, its source texts are written in Greek or Latin and are then rewritten and translated, a process that requires two other languages. This leads us to examine whether these works are also marketed as translations. This section focuses solely on the information provided on the book cover, as this is the first element encountered by the potential reader or prescriber. Nevertheless, we suspect that a more comprehensive paratextual analysis—of, for instance, a selection of works that rewrite the same myth—would yield particularly revealing results.

Although they do fall within the relevant literary field⁹—and would therefore merit comparative analysis regarding the interdependencies among different types of texts—the following cases are not included:

- 1. Spanish translations, retranslations and new editions of classical hypotexts presented in light of these new(gendered)interpretations.
- 2. Contemporary Spanish translations, retranslations and new editions of rewritings originally published in the twentieth century.
- 3. Other Spanish-language books (original or translated) related to women-authored rewritings, including other genres (non-fiction, essays, short stories, flash fiction, drama, poetry, comics, children's and young adult literature, etc.) and male-authored rewritings with or without a gender perspective.

To organise this information, a dataset has been compiled including the following details (Table 1):

Dataset information
Original title (if a translation)
Spanish title
Author
Translator(s)
Year of original publication (if a translation)
Year(s) of publication in Spain
Spanish publisher(s)

Table 1. Dataset information

The following questions have also been posed (Table 2):

Additional information
Is it explicitly presented in the cover as a rewriting?
Is the hypotext or myth being rewritten explicitly mentioned in the cover?
If applicable, is it explicitly indicated in the cover that it is a translation?

Table 2. Additional information for the dataset

9 For a discussion of the differences and affinities between Even-Zohar's polysystem theory and Bourdieu's concept of the "literary field" as applied to Translation Studies, see Fernández (2011).

A complete list of the fifty-eight books that make up our corpus are presented in an annex (pp. 127-130). The first observation is that, although novels have been published every year since 2001, there is a marked quantitative increase beginning in 2018. While in the period 2001-2017 the maximum number of volumes published in a single year was three, in 2019, seven books were published in their original language, and in 2023, eight in Spanish translation. Moreover, translations tend to be released very quickly—often within just a few months. In thirty-one cases, less than a year elapsed between the original publication and its translation. This trend, when examined over time, shows a clear acceleration. Additionally, forty-four out of a total of fifty-eight books are translations, most of them from English, underscoring the central role of translation in creating spaces for new discourses and cultural narratives.

The feminisation of the translation profession in recent decades is also reflected in the gender breakdown of translators: twenty-eight works are translated by women, compared to fourteen by men and two by mixed-gender teams. However, it is also evident that translation continues to be largely invisible: only five publishing houses include the translator's name on the cover, and in all five cases, the translation was carried out by a woman. Interestingly, in three of these five cases, there is no paratextual element that evokes or alludes to the myth that inspires the book—*Chica conoce chico* (Smith 2022) and *Movidas que vio Casandra* (Kirby 2023) being the exceptions.

An initial surface-level analysis of the paratexts reveals that original English-language editions are more likely to explicitly present these books as rewritings—the most common term being *retelling*. In contrast, Spanish editions tend to adopt more implicit or euphemistic formulations, using expressions such as “vuelta de tuerca” (*a twist*), “giro” (*turn*), “perspectiva” (*perspective*), “soplo de aire fresco” (*a breath of fresh air*) or “visión moderna” (*modern take*). For instance, the first edition's back cover of *Los estados carenciales* (Vallvey 2002) describes the novel as an “homenaje al mundo clásico”, although the synopsis specifically names characters from the Homeric poem: “Ulises, abandonado por su mujer Penélope, vive con su hijo Telémaco”. Only six cases—Margaret George's *Helena de Troya* (2008), Francesca Petrizzo's *Memorias de una zorra* (2010b), Serrano Cueto's *Después de Troya* (2015), Montse de Paz's *La sombra del laberinto* (2023), Claire North's *Ítaca* (2023) and Jennifer Saint's *Hera* (2025)—explicitly refer to their status as rewritings on the cover, albeit often using alternative labels. In most cases (thirty-four books) the idea of rewriting is suggested or evoked to varying degrees through the cover illustration, the title or a combination of both.

Although a deeper imagological analysis of the illustrations remains pending, there is a clear trend toward homogenisation in cover design—across both original editions and translations—with recurring visual motifs, typographic compositions and colour palettes. Earlier examples often featured photographic images of women in white dresses, evoking a classical Greek aesthetic. However, current designs, with some exceptions (e.g., the novels by Angelini 2011b, 2012b, 2013b, and Heywood 2022), tend to favour drawings that incorporate elements such as masks, laurel leaves and other vegetal motifs, often accompanied by close-up images of female characters, typically gazing directly at the viewer.

Finally, even when the book in question is not explicitly feminist in its intent, there is a growing number of cases in which the female shift in terms of perspective is made explicit through blurbs—some of which are strikingly similar. Examples include: “La autora [...] rescata en su nueva novela la leyenda homérica, pero esta vez contada por la protagonista, Helena de Troya” (George 2008); “Con voz potente y conmovedora, Helena de Troya narra por primera vez su propia historia” (Petrizzo 2010b); and “Es hora de que Penélope cuente su propia historia” (North 2023).

These promotional texts often emphasise the empowerment of female characters as a means of legitimising their central role in the narrative: “Una heroína, una hechicera, una mujer que encuentra su poder” (Miller 2019); “Madre. Reina. Asesina. Infiel. Justiciera” (Casati 2023b); “Al matarla, se condenaron” (Underwood 2023b); or “La mujer más temida y poderosa de la mitología griega” (Hewlett 2025). In some instances, the justification for their female protagonism remains problematic from a gender perspective, as it reinforces their value in relation to male figures, as in “Nieta de dioses. Hermana de un monstruo. Esposa de un rey” (Shepperson 2023b).

4. Conclusions

Following the literature review presented in the second section of this chapter, we observe that the studies discussed primarily analyse narratives originally written in English—some of which have been translated into Spanish, while many have not—and, to a lesser extent, rewritings originally published in Spanish or other languages such as French or Italian. This pattern aligns with the main source languages of the translations published in Spain. The predominance of English-language retellings is due to the

fact that the phenomenon of women-authored rewritings originates mainly in the Anglophone world, where women constitute the majority among fiction authors, and has been widely disseminated through translation (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2023a), a hypothesis supported by our corpus.

Furthermore, the terminology used in these studies to describe the processes involved in such rewritings is notably diverse and often metaphorical—reminiscent of the terminological variation found in many attempts to define translation itself. These novels are described using terms such as *version*, *rendition*, *transposition*, *transfer*, *updating*, *interpretation*, *transcreation*, *bridge* and *borrowing*, among others. Some of these terms originated in the sector of linguistic services providers and have been adopted by academic discourse—such as *transcreation* or *localisation*. This raises the question of whether there is a need to standardise the terminology, or whether this lexical indeterminacy and conceptual instability—echoing Bal's (2002) notion of “travelling concepts”—actually reflects the richness and diversity of rewriting processes and practices. A similar phenomenon is observed in the ever-evolving notion of translation, particularly within the framework of the outward turn (Bassnett and Johnston 2019; Vidal Claramonte 2022), suggesting that both translation and rewriting resist rigid categorisation, instead functioning as dynamic practices shaped by diverse contexts, audiences and interpretive frameworks. The fluctuating terminology may therefore be less a sign of conceptual weakness than an indication of their adaptability and transdisciplinary relevance.

Moreover, the studies reviewed point to a parallel between the determinism/agency axis (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2020, 352) and the well-known foreignisation/domestication dichotomy in Translation Studies. The former axis concerns the relationship of the rewriting to its hypotexts, particularly on the narrative and intertextual planes, whereas the latter addresses the relationship of the rewriting to its target readership, in contrast with the original audience and reception of the hypotext. Along similar lines, Nisa Cáceres distinguishes between two types of reworking found in myth-revisionist novels: “The first follows the same spatiotemporal coordinates as the hypotexts”, expanding their margins and giving voice to female or marginalised characters; and the second “comprises those novels that adopt an indirect approach through its imaginative transposition into more or less contemporary contexts” (2024c, 8, my translation). However, it remains an open question whether these categories operate in parallel. In other words, the question arises as to whether greater character

agency in transforming the hypotext correlates with a tendency toward domestication—that is, adapting the hypotext through rewriting in order to bring it closer to a new audience, or not.

In the case of the Spanish publications analysed here, and pending a more in-depth examination of other paratextual materials—such as press kits, introductions, translators' notes or even their classification in traditional and online bookstores, although this poses a methodological challenge—we observe that the rewriting nature of these narratives is generally conveyed through the title and cover illustration, rather than through specific labels. Therefore, it remains necessary to examine how these rewritings are classified upon their initial reception—namely, by generalist critics (in newspapers, magazines and mainstream media) and readers (on social media platforms and forums)—and whether these classifications align with the ones proposed by the publishers. Conversely, it would also be relevant to ask whether publishers themselves are influenced by the reception among their target readership, and whether this is ultimately reflected in academic criticism. This study has demonstrated that women-authored rewritings of Graeco-Roman myths, particularly within the Trojan cycle, have become a significant phenomenon in the Spanish literary system at all levels, largely shaped by translation from English. Nevertheless, there has also been a recent noticeable increase in the production of retellings written originally in Spanish.

The analysis of critical scholarship and publishing practices reveals both the central role of translation in disseminating these works and the instability of the terminology employed to categorise them. Rather than indicating conceptual weakness, this lexical diversity reflects the adaptability and heterogeneity of the rewriting processes, which intersect with ongoing debates in Translation Studies on the notion of translation as rewriting. The findings therefore highlight the extent to which rewriting and translation function as dynamic, context-dependent practices that resist rigid classification. On the other hand, although translation plays a central role in sustaining and expanding this phenomenon in Spain, prevailing publishing practices continue to render it largely invisible.

At the same time, the paratextual analysis suggests a gap between English-language editions, which tend to explicitly label these novels as retellings, and Spanish editions, which convey their nature as rewritings (*reescrituras*) more implicitly. This points to the need for further research into how these texts are interpreted across different levels of reception: by publishers, critics in the general media, readers in digital spaces and scholars. More broadly, this

study underscores the importance of viewing women-authored rewritings through a polysystemic and transnational lens, opening productive lines of research at the crossroads of Translation Studies, comparative literature, classical reception and gendered cultural analysis.

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Annex

Original title	Translated title	Author	Translator	Year of original publication	Year of translated publication	Spanish publisher
<i>Wintergirls</i>	<i>Frio</i>	Anderson, Laurie Halse	Angulo Fernández, María	2009	2010, 2012, 2015	Círculo de lectores, Roca
<i>Starcrossed</i>	<i>Predestinados</i>	Angelini, Josephine	Angulo Fernández, María	2011	2011	Círculo de lectores, Roca
<i>Dreamless</i>	<i>Malditos</i>	Angelini, Josephine	Angulo Fernández, María	2012	2012	Roca
<i>Goddess</i>	<i>Diosa</i>	Angelini, Josephine	Angulo Fernández, María	2013	2013	Roca
<i>A God in Ruins</i>	<i>Un dios en ruinas</i>	Atkinson, Kate	Antón de Vez Ayala-Duarte, Patricia	2015	2016	Lumen
<i>The Penelopiad</i>	<i>Penélope y las doce criadas</i>	Atwood, Margaret	Rovira Ortega, Gemma	2005	2005, 2020	Salamandra
<i>The Silence of the Girls</i>	<i>El silencio de las mujeres</i>	Barker, Pat	Jiménez Arribas, Carlos	2018	2019	Siruela
<i>The Women of Troy</i>	<i>Las mujeres de Troya</i>	Barker, Pat	León, Victoria	2021	2022	Siruela
<i>Away</i>	<i>Lejos, más lejos</i>	Bloom, Amy	Ibarz, Jùlia	2007	2009	Destino
"The Pink Ribbon" and "The Stone Woman", in <i>Little Black Book of Stories</i>	<i>Libro negro de los cuentos</i>	Byatt, A. S.	Rodríguez-Vida, Susana	2003	2007, 2013	Alfaguara
<i>Circe ou o prazer do azul</i>	<i>Circe o el placer del azul</i>	Caamaño, Begoña	López Silva, Xosé Antonio	2009	2013	Galaxia
<i>Clytemnestra</i>	<i>Clitemnestra</i>	Casati, Costanza	Sobregués Arias, Noemí	2023	2023	Grijalbo
<i>Achilles</i>	<i>Aquiles: novela</i>	Cook, Elizabeth	Doce, Jordi, and González Oliver, Nuria	2001	2003	Turner

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"Gorgoneion", in <i>Monstruosas</i>	.	Dauden, Gloria T.	.	2019	.	.
<i>La sombra del laberinto</i>	.	De Paz, Montse	.	2023	.	Plaza Janés
<i>The Dark Flood Rises</i>	<i>Llega la negra crecida</i>	Drabble, Margaret	López Muñoz, Regina	2016	2018	Sexto Piso
<i>L'amica geniale</i> (tetralogy)	<i>La amiga estupenda</i>	Ferrante, Elena	Filipetto, Celia	2011, 2012, 2013, 2014	2012, 2013, 2014, 2015	Lumen
<i>Helen of Troy</i>	<i>Helena de Troya</i>	George, Margaret	Herrera Ferrer, Ana	2006	2008, 2009, 2011, 2013	Roca, Círculo de Lectores
<i>The Amber Fury / The Furies</i>	<i>La furia ámbar</i>	Haynes, Natalie	Gascón, Daniel	2014	2015	Alevosía
<i>A Thousand Ships</i>	<i>Las mil naves</i>	Haynes, Natalie	Echevarría, Aurora	2019	2022	Salamandra
<i>Stone Blind</i>	<i>Las miradas de Medusa</i>	Haynes, Natalie	Echevarría, Aurora	2022	2024	Salamandra
<i>Medea</i>	<i>Medea</i>	Hewlett, Rosie	Ham, Luis	2024	2025	Espasa
<i>Daughters of Sparta</i>	<i>Hijas de Esparta</i>	Heywood, Claire	Ruiz Aldana, Victor	2021	2022	Planeta
<i>Tots els noms d'Helena</i>	<i>Todos los nombres de Helena</i>	Janer, Maria de la Pau	Prats, Rosa María	2022	2022	Destino
"Lamia", in <i>Monstruosas</i>	.	Jurado, Cristina	.	2019	.	.
<i>Shit Cassandra Saw: Stories</i>	<i>Movidas que vio Casandra</i>	Kirby, Gwen E.	Salas Rodríguez, Laura	2022	2023	Hoja de Lata
<i>Lavinia</i>	<i>Lavinia</i>	Le Guin, Ursula K.	Mata Álvarez-Santullano, Manuel	2008	2009, 2011, 2021	Minotauro
<i>Psyche and Eros</i>	<i>Psique y Eros</i>	McNamara, Luna	Hernández Sendín, José Óscar	2023	2023	Umbriel
<i>Temporada de huracanes</i>	.	Melchor, Fernanda	.	2017	.	.
<i>The Song of Achilles</i>	<i>La canción de Aquiles</i>	Miller, Madeline	Pallarés, José Miguel	2011	2012, 2021	Suma, Alianza (AdN)

Original title	Translated title	Author	Translator	Year of original publication	Year of translated publication	Spanish publisher
<i>Circe: A Novel</i>	<i>Circe</i>	Miller, Madeline	Recarey Rendo, Celia, and Cano Cuenca, Jorge	2018	2019, 2021	Alianza (AdN)
<i>Elena di Sparta</i>	<i>Helena de Esparta</i>	Minutilli, Loreta	Buenaventura, Ramón	2019	2021	Alianza
<i>The Time Traveler's Wife</i>	<i>La mujer del viajero en el tiempo</i>	Niffenegger, Audrey	Aleman, Silvia	2003	2005	Debolsillo
<i>Ithaca</i>	<i>Ítaca</i>	North, Claire	Fantin Bellocq, Constanza	2022	2023	Trini Vergara Ediciones
<i>Les prénoms épiciènes</i>	<i>Los nombres epicenos</i>	Nothomb, Amélie	Pàmies, Sergi	2018	2020	Anagrama
<i>State of Wonder</i>	<i>El corazón de la jungla</i>	Patchett, Ann	Roca, Joan Eloi, and Calderón García, José	2011	2012	Principal de los libros
<i>Memorie di una cagna</i>	<i>Memorias de una zorra</i>	Petrizzo, Francesca	Vitale, Carlos	2010	2010	Ediciones B
<i>Viajes paralelos</i>	.	Pettersson, Aline	.	2002	.	.
"Alas del viento", in <i>Monstruosas</i>	.	Reuven, Caryanna	.	2019	.	.
<i>De Homero y otros dioses</i>	.	Reyes-Noguerol, Irene	.	2018	.	.
"La piedra del dolor", in <i>Monstruosas</i>	.	Robles, Lola	.	2019	.	.
<i>Ariadne</i>	<i>Ariadna</i>	Saint, Jennifer	Navarro Díaz, Natalia	2021	2021, 2025	Umbriel, book-s4pocket
<i>Elektra</i>	<i>Electra</i>	Saint, Jennifer	Navarro Díaz, Natalia	2022	2022	Umbriel
<i>Atalanta</i>	<i>Atalanta</i>	Saint, Jennifer	Navarro Díaz, Natalia	2023	2024	Umbriel
<i>Hera</i>	<i>Hera</i>	Saint, Jennifer	Sánchez Postigo, Mia	2024	2025	Umbriel
"Euridice vuelve", in <i>Toda la luz</i>	.	Seligson, Esther	.	2002	.	.
<i>Home Fire</i>	<i>Los desterrados</i>	Shamsie, Kamila	Jiménez, Socorro	2017	2018	Malpaso

Original title	Translated title	Author	Translator	Year of original publication	Year of translated publication	Spanish publisher
<i>Phaedra</i>	<i>Fedra</i>	Shepperson, Laura	Murillo, Isabel	2023	2023	Ediciones B
<i>Girl Meets Boy</i>	<i>Chica conoce chico</i>	Smith, Ali	Palmer, Magdalena	2007	2022	Nórdica
<i>Autumn</i>	<i>Otoño</i>	Smith, Ali	Palmer, Magdalena	2016	2020	Nórdica
<i>Pandora: A Novel</i>	<i>El secreto de Pandora</i>	Stokes-Chapman, Susan	Moya, Antonio-Prometeo	2023	2023	Duomo
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7. Breaking Boundaries, Broadening Horizons: An Interview with Emily Hauser on the Reception of Classics

Gema Domínguez-González

Universidad de Alcalá

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3032-2006>

gema.dominguezg@uah.es

Abstract

The following pages present the adapted transcript of an interview with Dr Emily Hauser, recorded at the University of Exeter on 25 July 2025 and available on the YouTube channel *Diálogo con las diosas*. The conversation explores the reception of Greek mythology in contemporary fiction and how these retellings—particularly those centred on women—are able to reshape traditional narratives by addressing questions of gender and collective memory. Drawing on her *Golden Apple* trilogy (2016–2018) and *Mythica* (2025), Hauser recalls her experience as an author and a scholar and reflects on the mutually enriching dialogue that exists between scholarship and creative writing.

Key words

Greek mythology; myth retellings; women-authored fiction; classical reception

Acknowledgement

Emily Hauser is an award-winning ancient historian and bestselling author, and world-leading voice in rediscovering the women of Greek myth. Having studied at Harvard, Yale and Cambridge (where she won the prestigious Chancellor's Medal for Classical Proficiency), she is the author of acclaimed novels rewriting Greek mythical women, including *For the Most Beautiful* (2016), as well as a number of academic works.

Her books have been published and translated across the world, listed among the "28 Best Books for Summer" in *The Telegraph* and shortlisted for the Seminary Co-Op's Best Books of 2023. She has appeared on several BBC Radio shows including BBC Radio 4 *Woman's Hour*, Times Radio, ABC Radio (Australia) and has been featured in *The Guardian* alongside Colm Tóibín and Natalie Haynes. Her latest book, *MYTHICA: A New History of Homer's World, Through the Women Written Out of It*.¹

We thank Dr Emily Hauser for her kindness, generosity and willingness to contribute to this volume by agreeing to publish this interview, which forms part of Gema Domínguez-González's PhD dissertation.²

1 Biodata taken from <https://www.emilyhauser.com/about> (accessed 6 October 2025).

2 This interview was conducted under a Predoctoral Contract from the University of Alcalá (FPU-UAH 2022). It is available on the Youtube channel *Diálogo con las diosas*: <https://www.youtube.com/@dialogoconlasdiosas> (accessed 6 October 2025).

In an era where Classical Studies and Humanities in general are increasingly undervalued, why do you think mythological retellings—particularly those told from women’s perspectives—enjoy such widespread success? What does this reveal about modern engagement with the ancient world?

It might seem contradictory but, to me they’re part of the same process, because it’s the issue that we’ve always had in Classics: issues around accessibility, about who gets access to Classics, about what it means for whom... Traditionally, it has been for white educated men, and the system got set up on that idea. What’s happening in the novels we are doing is they are essentially just probing that system by saying: “Why...? Why did that happen? How did that come to be seen normal? What happens if we’d looked at the ancient world from this different point of view and we don’t think about it as the preservation of the Greek and Latin elite, but as this wild and wide mythical world that anyone can tangle with?” And I think that is what is really opening up and allowing so many more voices to engage.

My hope is that’s going to have a kind of role and effect, to expand and broaden, so we won’t have that old-fashioned association of classical languages with something that is dry, dusty and old, but actually a way into these ancient civilizations.

In The Golden Apple trilogy (2016-2018), Chryseis [spelled Krisayis in the novel] and Briseis bear witness to the brutality inflicted on women during the Trojan War, while Atalanta seizes control of her fate, Admete embarks on a perilous adventure, and Queen Hippolyta forges her legacy—blade in hand, heart ablaze. How much of an eye-opener do you think myth retellings can be for our society?

I think, as you outlined, what these figures can do are a lot of different things. So, there are ways they can open our eyes to a whole series of different challenges.

The challenge with Briseis and Chryseis for me was, as you say, the violence, the horror, the trauma of war and the way that is focused on women, because women are the ones who survive. It’s not that men don’t suffer in the *Iliad*, and it’s important to say that, because there are incredibly tragic deaths that are highlighted by the poet as a source of grief and a source of hurt... But the women are the ones left behind to bear the cost of that sacrifice: whether that is the women who are mourning the men who have fallen or the women who have been captured, enslaved and raped in war. So, in that case, what you are doing is an act of drawing attention, an act of saying: “Notice these

women as well: Our eyes are being drawn towards the tragic heroes of the *Iliad* but look at the women as well”.

With women like Atalanta and the Amazons, it's slightly different because those are women who occupy a very unusual space within Greek myth and that are already challenging gender boundaries. So, while the women in the *Iliad* are doing what women are “meant” to do within the Homeric universe, which is to be subjected to men and to be put into their economy, Atalanta and the Amazons are resisting and questioning that, and it's very rare that we get women like that. With them what I was doing more was saying what this Greek society, or indeed the societies of the Mediterranean, look like when we do engage with women who break the boundaries.

So, it's two different types of women: women who are within the boundaries and say: “Look at these boundaries, look how shackled we are”, and women who break the boundaries and say: “Look what could be”.

Regarding the previous question, have you ever been criticized for “trying to re-write the past”? If so, what do you think about those critics?

That was one of my biggest concerns when I wrote the novels. I wrote them while I was doing my PhD and therefore developing my own academic persona. So, I was worried that maybe that might be seen to conflict with my academic credentials. But what's really interesting is that, by and large, I don't think it has been seen to conflict; if anything, I think what's been wonderful about this process is that the more I have seen the creative reworking as a part and a parcel of what I do intellectually, the more I've also been able to try and shape that in the field. So, I would probably not frame it in terms of resistance but frame it in terms of: “This just has hadn't been done before”, or at least I wasn't seeing it being done: someone who was doing a kind of traditional academic career, but was also trying to do something that was fiction-based and creative. So, for me, parts of the barrier or the obstacle to that was myself. My own kind of prejudices about what a classicist looks like. Once I got past that and said: “No, no. These are actually two halves of the same thing. They are two sides of the same coin. What we are doing here is we are trying to find the lost and the silenced voices of women, and indeed of all the people who have been lost to the archives of history. What different tools can we use to try and find them? Fiction is one of them, but intellectual enquiry, academic enquiry, philology, which are the tools that I use as a classicist, those are also valid tools”, I felt empowered and tried to project that outwards.

In your latest publication, Mythica (2025), you provide a new vision of Homer's world "through the women written out of it" but also claim the women "who have studied and continue to trailblaze the study of Homer" (xix). Do you perceive different approaches or priorities when women scholars study classical texts compared to their male counterparts?

Yes: *Mythica* came together when I allowed fiction and non-fiction to co-exist and I think, as you say, the other layer that was really important to me was not just the content of how we are recovering women, but also the intellectual history: Who is recovering them. We've been focusing on women as receivers but that's not self-evident, and throughout history women have tended to be written out of that history, even if they had access to classical education and to be scholars.

However, I'm not sure I would say that necessarily women see anything different. I want to say that to start with because I don't believe in that essentialist binary. I don't think that a woman is necessarily going to look at a text and see it any different than a man, but I do think that there is an act of noticing that you do when you have an awareness of the women who have gone across the centuries... And I feel like perhaps that sense of connection encourages you to look in a different way for their stories... So, it's not that the invitation isn't there within the text, it's not that you couldn't look for them, but I do think that, as women, that invitation more often tends to be taken.

The example of this that I often think of is Emily Wilson's translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. I don't like to say that she has translated this only or principally as a woman, because I think, first and foremost, she has translated it as a brilliant scholar of Greek, as a translator, as someone who was engaged and attached. She was doing a project of outreach. And then she has also noticed things that the male translators just didn't. Particularly with the enslaved women that is a really important angle to the text that you just don't see in male translations. So, it's just packaging all of that together, then women can bring something else to the table.

The next question is related to that but in the case of fiction. Would you like to add something about fiction being written differently by women and men?

I would say the same thing: in that, I think that the impulse, the empathy, particularly towards the Greek myth rewritings, is an awareness of exclusion, an awareness of silencing and marginalization both in literature and in society. Again, it's not an essentialist binary. It is because of the inherited societal and

cultural exclusion that women come to the texts with an awareness of who is been written out of it, whose side of the story didn't get told. Perhaps a certain anger at having been silenced. That, all of that, creates an engine and an energy... And I wouldn't even say it particularly for fiction since for me that was actually a driver to non-fiction, to *Mythica*, because it made me think: "How can I use that same energy, that same frustration with the fact that we have lost all of these stories? And instead of targeting it at the myth, let's target it at the real women who might be nameless in the historical record, who it would be very easy not to notice. How can we do the same thing for them?"

In fact, in the prologues of The Golden Apple trilogy, you state an inclination on marginalized women rather than well-known heroines. However, characters such as Penelope, Helen or Clytemnestra dominate modern myth retellings. In your opinion, why does the literary world mostly keep returning to the well-known heroines? Is there something that might make certain characters more appealing than others to writers and readers?

That's an excellent point. I think that for me it has been a motivating force. If you look at *The Golden Apple* trilogy, I specifically didn't choose women like Helen or Penelope or Medea... First of all, because when you're doing them, you're doing something that is "rooted in" or "beginning from" or "arguing against" male traditions. Whereas when you are dealing with nameless women or women who are completely silenced or absent you are doing a different project. It's not that its more or less important, it's just different. It's kind of what I was outlining at the beginning with the difference between Briseis and Chryseis and their attitude to society, or the way that they are oppressed *versus* the women who are at the margins. It is a different project where what we are doing is piecing together fragments of the puzzle.

The work to be done with women like Helen—who are so much a product of men's imaginations and fantasies—is always about unpicking that fantasy. Whereas with the nameless women, the less well-known, the less recognized is about drawing attention to their existence, about saying they mattered too. To me, it's looking beyond the headline names, the queens, the celebrities of the ancient world into the ones that we just tend to spend less time on, because that channels us into all of the other women who did not give birth to legends like Helen, but to my mind their stories still need to be told.

Returning to the point of women writing versus men. How important do you think it is for women themselves to narrate the stories of their ancient counterparts, or of women from any other time in history?

In general, I think the project of rewriting is important. Again, this is about making space for everyone: not just about women, not just about men. It's about everyone having a say in a collective past.

When thinking particularly about women in the ancient world—and that's the area that I'm specialized in, in terms of thinking about women as writers—what is important is to look at the amount of space women take up in ancient literature and notice how small it is. I have an academic book (2023) for which I explored some of the numbers and I still find them mind-blowing: basically, we have the names of over 3,200 male writers in Greek and less than a hundred women. The difference, the difference in scale there, is just extraordinary.

In addition to all of the things that I've said about what women would bring in terms of awareness—that anger, that sense of frustration at being unwritten, that need to redress the balance, the really important thing is taking up space and saying: "We have a place in the canon. We have a place to talk about these texts". That doesn't mean that there aren't important reworkings that are done—I think Euripides' *Trojan Women* is a brilliant reworking of the women of Troy: but we need women doing it too.

And talking about traditional discourses: What is the importance of questioning them, whether in fiction or in academia?

It is discourses, it is myths, it is norms that generate ideas around who gets to say what, and who matters in this collective storytelling that we are all engaged in. It might look like it is just a sales phenomenon or, you know, the publishers or bookshops trying to collect some kind of genre together, but if you think about it seriously, and you think particularly about that value that Classics has had for centuries in the West and the Western tradition, then doing this kind of work is central. It can be entertaining—that's the brilliance and the beauty of fiction, but it is doing something else at the same time: it is this act of rewriting, revisiting, creating space, generating voice and agency, drawing attention to acts of oppression... All of those different energies are all bound up into this.

Indeed. It also allows people who might not have had access to Classics in their education to be a part of their own past and that's wonderful.

And both as writers and as readers! I think that's important to say as well because what this has done is to open these myths and these texts to a much wider readership. But also it has said to writers: "There is a place for you, publishers will publish you. You don't have to be a scholar of Greek". I know

that sounds kind of ironic coming from me. But in some sense, I'm sort of doing that in spite of being a scholar rather than because of it. And I think it's an important distinction.

Moving on: Nearly a decade has passed since the publication of For the Most Beautiful in 2016. Would you stand out any difference or similarity in how women reinterpret myths today compared to ten years ago?

Absolutely. I teach a class on women's re-writings of Greek myth, which is such a joy because I get to revisit these retellings every year so I'm sort of tracing through my teaching how this is developing and thinking through it, and it's brilliant.

Reflecting on where the trend has gone, as you point out, *For the Most Beautiful* was published in 2016, a year before #MeToo. And I think #MeToo really has given these retellings an energy, an agency to go beyond. I mean, at that point we really only had Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011). There were others, but those two were the major ones. At that point it was more of a literary intervention, especially if you look at *The Penelopiad*. It's a very literary post-modernist intervention into the *Odyssey*. *The Song of Achilles* is different. But I think what happened after #MeToo was that women realized that they had a collective voice, a collective agency. There is a power in standing up together and saying that harm has been done. It's not hard to see the myths as a repository of that harm, they are absolutely full of sexual assault and rape, and therefore I think #MeToo gave a democratization, but also a hugely strong sense of purpose to what otherwise might have ended up feeling like a literary project rather than a cultural one.

Did any modern mythological retelling inspire or determine your narrative choices when writing The Golden Apple trilogy?

Oh well, *The Penelopiad*! (Laughs). Unfortunately, *The Song of Achilles* came out just a bit too late for me because I was writing in the fall of 2011-2012... So, at that point, my ideas were already shaped, but absolutely shaped by *The Penelopiad*. That's because I read it during my PhD, and I just loved what it was doing for the *Odyssey*. I was definitely coming to this, as I said, from a literary angle, so I was thinking: "Look, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are both really important in the canon, in the positioning of Western literature. They are also setting up norms about literature being for men, by men, about men..." And the women being silenced and invisible, particularly Briseis and Chryseis—that

have such an important part to play, made me think: “I need to do this for the *Iliad*”. In early drafts I followed Atwood’s tone, but I thought quite quickly that I wanted to make it my own thing, and quite quickly I decided I wanted it to be more Young Adult in tone, because for me outreach was a really important side of the project. So, I made sure that I was really accessible for a younger audience who might not have had access to the texts, or might not know what kind of engagement I’m doing but that could provide a way in.

And how does it feel to be one of the first ones to open these doors to the phenomenon of mythological retellings?

It is incredible, I don’t think anyone could have anticipated how much of a phenomenon it was going to become. I certainly didn’t. I think one of the things that still moves and inspires me is how much of a community this is. The traditional models of publishing—the traditional competitive capitalist models, very much try to pit authors against each other. But this is actually a community of women writers who really support each other, and I adore being a part of it. It’s not a clash, but a mythic collective where everyone is very aware that even if you write on the same myth, you would take a different approach, you would take a different perspective, and there is a richness to that. It’s not zero-sum.

I find it extraordinary to see the awareness, the support—particularly within the community of women writers, and I feel very lucky to be a part of it.

What did you find most challenging about transferring ancient Greek sources—like epic poetry—to modern fiction?

Epic poetry is very much doing its own thing, it’s got its own formal constraints, audience constraints of expectation, of plotting, and narrative, and character... Language, of course, is entirely different. Do you carry in stock epithets? It’s the kind of question you need to confront among many others... For me, plot—because of accessibility and outreach and getting the sense of the core excitement of the narrative—was the driving part. And maybe not even the narrative. It was the characters who were created as narrative instruments in Homer who I wanted to make living and breathing people.

So perhaps I’d say the people, the women who are at the heart of it, and everything else shaped around that. I wanted it to feel believable. I wanted it to feel historical. I wanted it to *feel* epic. But if you didn’t feel the characters and you didn’t feel what they were going through then, for me, I had gone off track, and I needed to bring myself back. That became a guiding principle

through the novel that then allowed me to weigh up: "Are you just doing this because there is this scene in Homer and you want to get it in, or are you doing it because this is actually a really important moment for her character development?" And it became a touchstone.

Your retellings embrace fantasy, while many others rely on realism to adapt myths for modern audiences. In your view, what does fantasy capture that realism might miss—and where does realism still succeed?

It's something I really noticed quite early on reading *The Song of Achilles* for instance—or even *The Penelopiad*, which don't really have the gods.

Now, I think I would maybe slightly hesitate to say "fantasy" although I understand it falls in that category for us. For the ancients, of course, it isn't fantasy. For the ancients it's just a different realm of existence; perhaps a slightly larger, more inflated way of being. For us I think that matches up to the kind of technicolour world of fantasy, right? You can use those registers as an author because we, as readers, know how to pack those. We find it quite difficult to unpack the idea of going down to a river and believing that that's actually a god, and indeed that that god might rape you if you wash in the water. One of the things I love about what Homer does with the gods is that he uses them to generate a sense of perspective, to generate a sense of relief from the unrelenting horror of war... And I wanted to create that sense of relief.

Now, it's really interesting because if you look at someone like Pat Barker, who to me is perhaps the hyperrealist among the authors that we are talking about, she does the kind of opposite of that, where she just does not relent from the horror. And that is important, and that is the message of the book, that is the takeaway.

For me, the using that sort of "fantasy" element of the gods was a way of drawing back and demonstrating just how frivolous they are. When you get into the mortal battles, and you get into the war and the death, the frivolity of the gods, the fact that they don't care about humans, the fact that they live forever, and therefore they just can't be bothered... To me that was a really important message, putting into perspective the toils and the struggles of humans—but it's just different ways, I guess, of approaching the same problem.

Talking about deities... When you came to Oxford to present Mythica you started by mentioning the Muses, and an idea popped into my mind while hearing you:

Why weren't the Muses male? Why did men trust women to tell them "their" history while they were oppressing real women?

There is a simple explanation in that, and it is the tendency toward an abstraction of women. And that is something that you see both conceptually and linguistically. If you look at the language of ancient Greek, abstract concepts like "justice" or "right" tend to be feminine grammatically, and they are also feminine in the divine pantheon. Now, I think the reason why women have this tendency to be abstracted by men is because it is a way of interpreting women's roles as both passive and absent, but also powerful and creative. This is one of the things that men wrestle with from the beginning of literature, and the beginning of history: the fact that women's capacity for birth gives them an inherent creativity. And I think that those concepts were joined together to create a female figure who is safely distant and cannot herself create poetry, because that would be worrying, that would be threatening. But she does have a connection to creativity and enables the man. That role of passive creative enabler is I think what women have held for a long, long time and it's enshrined in the Muses.

Would you point out any reason why, since the 2000s, most myth retellings from ancient Greece have come from the United Kingdom and the United States?

That's a really complex question. I think it has a lot to do with the way in which the Western tradition also sees itself as rooted in the old seats of Western power. So, I don't think it's an accident that it is an Anglo-American phenomenon.

The old British Empire, then the United States of America—which has become the modern twentieth-century and twenty-first-century superpower, hold and held the political power, the cultural power, the literary power in a way to respond to the "old world" power of Greece, right? To me that's a problem. One of the things that is beginning to be noticed—I don't know to what extent publishers are trying to rectify this—is, for example, that there are very few modern Greek retellings. And I think we need to have more of a problematization of why it is an Anglo-American phenomenon rather than instead just saying: "Oh, great, we are breaking down boundaries", because what kind of boundaries are we really breaking if we're just continuing the old axes of literary and cultural power? So, I think, looking forward, one of the things that would be really exciting would be to see more retellings in different languages. And I believe it is incumbent for us scholars to read those retellings, and to study them, and to make sure

that they are also included within the conversation. And hopefully that will create this larger melting pot where we can see this as a wider, shared, cultural phenomenon rather than something that is, although perhaps with good intentions, still becoming ring-fenced and streamlined.

And the last question: Lately I've been wondering why (as far as I'm concerned) we haven't yet seen films or TV show adaptations of these novels... The Return by Uberto Pasolini came out last year and Christopher Nolan's Odyssey is coming next year, but I mean: adaptations of novels like the ones you've written, because they've had a booming success in literature in the past few years. Do you think big movie studios are less willing to embrace stories focused on complex, empowered women, or is it just a matter of timing and trends?

I think it's a matter of time because I know HBO has taken on Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), so I think that will change this conversation. I completely agree with you, and I think it's also worth pointing out that both Pasolini and Nolan are men. So not only are they not doing myth retellings, but they themselves are also male directors. I really hope it will be a matter of time, and if and when *Circe* is done and really takes off, there will be an awareness that this would do really well on the screen too, because this is the thing also about these retellings: they are incredibly dynamic, incredibly cinematic... So, I think there is a huge opportunity and possibility there. I've been talking a lot about the literary canon because that's where I come from, but I have often wondered if there would be that same energy of redressing the balance in the medium of film and cinema—which of course doesn't have the written text of Homer at the beginning. Perhaps it's particularly that sense of being situated within literature that is giving women, as writers, that kind of energy, but I absolutely think that it is something that could and should do well in film as well.

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ISBN 978-84-09-78187-4



9 788409 781874