Feminist literary revisionism and the #MeToo movement

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Abstract:

In the years since the #MeToo movement began, there has been a resurgence of feminist retellings of ancient myth. Novels such as Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019) and Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021) form a cohort of books regularly appearing on bestseller charts and award shortlists. This paper traces the rising popularity of contemporary feminist revisions of classical myth and explores the ways in which such works utilise myth to depict modern concerns. Revisionary mythmaking is defined against other retellings of traditional literature, such as biblical narratives and fairytales, locating the appeal of classical myth in the "origin-figure" of Penelope, Queen of Ithaca and wife to Odysseus. Identifying Barbara Clayton's *A Penelopean Poetics* (2004) and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) as two works – one theoretical, one creative – that expound the methodology of feminist revisionism, this paper demonstrates how the feminist revisionist mode presents writers with a rich and rewarding vehicle for engaging with the #MeToo conversation, particularly when mining the material of classical myth. This paper also argues for examining novels over short stories and poetry collections because of the form's connections to and emergence from the epic.

Biographical note:

Charlotte Guest is a writer and PhD candidate at Deakin University. Her short fiction, poetry and essays have been published in journals across Australia and have won or been shortlisted for the Deakin Community Literary Prize, the Peter Carey Short Story Award and the Rachel Funari Prize for Fiction. Her debut collection of poetry, *Soap*, was published by Recent Work Press in 2017. She has worked in book publishing and bookselling for nearly 10 years.

1

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

In the years since the #MeToo movement began in 2017, feminist retellings of classical myth have experienced a renaissance. In 2019, Alison Flood wrote in *The Guardian* of an emerging trend in the Women's Prize for Fiction, a UK-based award for women's writing, with Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) (a retelling of *The Odyssey*) all making the shortlist that year. Kate Williams, chair of the judges, observed that contemporary women's fiction is asking questions of women of history, wondering "what do the women think of this", a question "which was ignored to a degree even 20 years ago" (para. 4). Flood goes on to write,

> All three stories [*Circe, The Silence of the Girls,* and Anna Burns's *Milkman,* a novel of the Irish Troubles] are set in the past, but Williams was clear about their relevance to the world today, as the #MeToo movement forces a reassessment of the way in which women are both seen and see their own lives. (2019, para. 5)

Flood and Williams identify a major impetus behind the rising popularity of feminist literary revisionist projects: the reckoning of #MeToo and the recognition of this period as a definable feminist moment. Interestingly, it is possible to map this recent re-emergence of revisionary mythmaking onto feminist literary history. To cite Veronica Schanoes,

> Feminist revisions of fairy tales and myths came into their own in the 1970s and 1990s, two decades that also saw a surge in feminist activism and theorizing. (2014, p. 14)

Schanoes's thesis is that feminist revisionist works of the 1970s and 1990s are creative expressions of contemporaneous feminist psychoanalytic theory central to second and third-wave feminism (p. 16–18) [1]. My argument is that just as revisionist projects of those decades reflect the concerns of their moment, recent revisionist projects embody the preoccupations of the late 2010s and early 2020s – that is, there is a mirroring effect. Many major themes and ideas from rewritings of the 1970s and 1990s are carried forward to today's offerings, just as feminism today has grown out of its predecessors, but feminist revisions of classical myth today are written, published and read in a #MeToo context. This, in turn, affects composition and/or interpretation. Concepts specific to or emphasised by #MeToo revisionist projects of the late 2010s onwards include the question of sexual consent and the redefining of acceptable sexual standards, particularly the identification of *gaslighting* and other manipulative behaviours in romantic partnerships and other close personal relationships.

Before examining the mechanics of contemporary feminist revisionary mythmaking, it is worth asking *why?* Why use ancient myth to explore modern concerns? This question comes with two qualifiers. The first is that feminist literary revisionism is not confined to classical myth. Retellings of fairytales and biblical narratives form their own abundant subgenres, as well as other projects that examine the western literary canon and attempt to reconfigure its masculinist tendencies. *The Mere Wife* by Maria Dahvana Headley (2018), a retelling of Beowulf, is a good example of a recent feminist revisionist work that falls outside of these three main classifications – myth, fairytale, biblical narrative – as it originates instead from the Germanic

2

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

legend. In Australia, *South of the Sun: Australian Fairy Tales for the 21st Century* (2021) expands upon the work of classics in feminist fairytale literature such as Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O* (1977) and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Feminist biblical revisionist literature likewise continues to attract writers: *The Testament of Mary* by Colm Tóibín (2012) and *The Book of Longings* by Sue Monk Kidd (2020) are key novels in this field. Feminist revisionism encompasses any text or narrative that can be characterised as canonical, classic, traditional and historical: texts foundational to and perpetuating enduring patriarchal systems of power. It is not an approach that exclusively takes classical myth as its subject.

The second qualifier to the question *why revise classical myth?* is the fact that revisionism itself is not necessarily feminist: *feminist* must prefix the term to point to a subset of works achieving certain progressive goals and effects. Examples of adaptations that are not feminist (not, in these instances, *anti*-feminist either, but simply not pursuing a feminist agenda) are David Malouf's *Ransom* (2009), a retelling of an episode from Homer's *Iliad;* and Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* (2019), which inverts Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis.* Revisionist literary projects are feminist if they seek to redress systemic power imbalances – particularly power as it relates to gender; power encoded into patriarchy – to define/redefine/explicate feminine subjectivity or the construction of the gendered self (Schanoes, 2014, p. 18) and/or foreground the experiences and lives of women and gender-diverse people (Rich, 1972, p. 18–19). As Adrienne Rich writes in her landmark essay on feminist revision, "When we dead awaken",

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival… A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see – and therefore live – afresh. (1972, p. 18)

Classical feminist revisionist writing is, then, a subset of both literary revisionism and feminist literary revisionism, and there are key reasons that authors of this classification choose to retell stories of/from ancient Greece and Rome and not fairytales, biblical narratives or modern works. These factors work in concert and are worth summarising here.

The Graeco–Roman myths – having hitherto occupied a rarefied status of being "universal, humanistic, natural, or even archetypal" (Blau DuPlessis, 1985, p. 106) and now rather better understood as the origin of "constraining narratives" (Wisker, 2017, p. 46) – are indifferent or actively hostile to feminist intervention; they pose the most formidable challenge of the story-types listed above. Gods enact their will upon mortals; men impose their will upon women [2]; rigid patriarchal structures are upheld. These ancient stories comprise "cultural memory" (Assmann, 2008, p. 110), which informs identity on the group or societal level. The term *cultural memory* and how it works (as opposed to *communicative* and *inner* memory) has been developed over the last thirty years (p. 110), making it a comparatively recent project ripe for

3

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

revisitation, intervention and interruption. Feminist revisionist mythmaking takes aim at the "exteriorized, objectified" (p. 110) and institutionalised status of myth – the subject of cultural memory – and exposes the problematics of classical antiquity's afterlife in western culture (p. 109).

At the same time, to consider a formalist approach, the story-structures of myths predispose them to "re-vision", recycling and repetition. Recurring patterns, plots, themes and archetypes characterise myths (Segal, 2004, p. 85). For theorists such as E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer, myths function to explain *recurrent* events, like the rising of the sun or the blooming of a flower (Segal, 2004, p. 81) – and, indeed, for the literary critic Northrop Frye, myths depend on the *cycles* of days, seasons and years (Frye, 1957, p. 158–159). The symbol of the circle is central to the revisionist mode (return, revise, repeat). Myths are like skeletons, able to be fleshed out, so to speak, in myriad ways. Indeed, Roland Barthes describes myth as a class of narrative that is neither alive nor dead, it is peculiarly undead – a "language that does not want to die"; a gaggle of "speaking corpses" (Barthes, 1972, p. 133) – and therefore is primed for revitalisation, for repurposing and re-imagining (or re-awakening). However, this alone is not enough to separate classical myth from biblical stories and fairytales, as all three can be described, essentially, as patriarchal and archetypical.

Myth is different to biblical stories and fairytales because it is *both* secular and ancient. Classical myth is secular because, as Robert Segal explains in *Myth* (2004)*,* it is severed from ritual: it is not read in a synagogue, church or mosque; it does not prescribe tasks, such as lighting candles, burning incense or repeating phrases (p. 74), even if these undertakings feature in the stories themselves (animal sacrifice and libations, for instance, are an aspect of ancient culture).

Classical myth, with its attendant languages of ancient Greek and Latin, has a long history as an elite field preserved for wealthy men; fairy- and folktales, by contrast, were told to children by servants, maids and womenfolk, and have their roots in the 16th-century *conteuses* of France (Harries, 2001, p. 10). Fairytales are vernacular in all senses of the word: they are spoken, domestic and feminine; they are "lowly". Further, myth is central to the development of psychology in the 19th and 20th centuries and underpins the writings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung; it has much to answer for with regards to theorising female subjectivity and the implementation of oppressive treatments for "feminine" afflictions such as hysteria.

Especially resonant for the #MeToo years (2017 onwards) are the recurring themes of gendered sexual violence and punitive transformation that pervade the Greek and Roman myths. Women are raped and transformed into birds, livestock, monsters or trees. Women are punished for the transgressions of their husbands; they carry the pain of their societies, oversee funeral rites and mourning; they lament. Additionally, *myth*, in its contemporary usage, connotes an untruth; to *demythologise* is to show something for what it truly is. Barthes calls myth a *metalanguage,* a "type of speech" that makes the historical appear natural, the ideological inevitable (Barthes, 1972, p. 142). In *The Myths We Live By* (2011)*,* Mary Midgley identifies three myths coined

4

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

in the Enlightenment era that continue to shape the physical sciences of the 21st century – "the social contract myth, the progress myth and the myth of omnicompetent science" (p. 8) – in order to demonstrate that myths are not value-neutral. In tracing the lineage of these three myths "now giving us trouble" (p. 7), Midgley reveals how they work, asserting that myths, far from being natural,

> are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning. (2011, p. 7)

Taking the term *myth* as a starting point – separate, that is, from the stories of *classical* mythology – and, as Midgley writes, to take it seriously, "to understand and criticize the thinking behind the images that charm us", (p. xvii) forms the basis of important activist work.

Perhaps what is most compelling about classical myth for feminist revisionists, however, are the ways in which the mode of feminist revisionism finds its theoretical origins in Homer's *Odyssey*. Theorists considering feminist revisionism locate its purest expression, its creation-myth, in Penelope. Penelope – who weaves, unweaves, and reweaves the death shroud for her father-in-law Laertes – is an origin figure. She is core to the conceptualising of feminist revisionism itself, a metonym for the entire textual strategy, which Barbara Clayton explicates in her monograph *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's Odyssey* (2004). For Clayton, Penelope embodies women's language, writing and subjectivity because she symbolises *process;* Penelope is a doer, she is remembered for her weaving. From a revisionist perspective, Penelope returns, revisits and remakes – she works in loops (literally) and cycles/circles. "Penelope", writes Clayton,

> is first and foremost a doer, a maker, a *poiêtês* in the most general sense. While we associate other Homeric women with specific attributes – Helen's beauty, Circe's magic, or Nausicaa's innocence – Penelope is primarily defined by what she does. She weaves and unweaves, she waits, she remembers… A weaving Penelope, then, is a figurative poet. (2004, p. ix)

Weaving and writing are intimately connected. The word *text*, for instance, derives from the Latin for *woven* (Oxford English Dictionary). In *The Odyssey*, Penelope is weaving a death shroud, "a story cloth" (Clayton, 2004, p. 35); her unpicking and reweaving becomes the rewriting of a story. Penelope demonstrates *re*writing as method: it is both a methodology for composing, revisiting and redrafting story, and also a way of doing something, a way to deceive and defer the suitors in a manner reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's idea of *différance*. The scheme (weaving by day and unweaving by night so that the shroud never gets bigger) is devised by Penelope to delay the men pressuring her to take a new husband, a new king, after the long absence of Odysseus. She tells the suitors she will choose a new husband when the shroud is complete, but not before, as this would be disrespectful to Laertes. This satisfies them, and Penelope buys herself time. The shroud, then, is made possible because of Penelope's *mêtis,* her cunning intelligence. This is her defining characteristic, and thus, as Clayton argues,

the reader is encouraged to consider incongruous elements of Penelope's story, and indeed *The Odyssey* in its entirety, as deliberate: the broken story structure, the repetition, the undermining of fixed meaning (the reader is never told, for instance, the specific scenes Penelope is depicting in the cloth), the ambiguity. Clayton explains,

> Ambiguity and multiplicity are marked by the feminine in the sense that they undermine a system based on an absolutist binarism in which one term must define itself by negating its opposite, a system which functions through the suppression of difference. (2004, p. 40)

As outlined earlier, Schanoes' *Fairy Tales, Myth, and Psychoanalytic Theory* considers how feminist psychoanalytic theory from the 1970s and 1990s found its creative expression in contemporaneous feminist rewritings of fairytales and myths, and I propose a similar approach here. That is, Clayton's 2004 study of Penelopean poetics finds its creative expression and extension in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005). *The Penelopiad* further encodes Penelope as an origin figure for feminist revisionism, and it is worth examining how revisionist projects since this novella can be largely mapped onto its conceptual/theoretical terrain. It provides a stepping-stone between *The Odyssey* and recent feminist retellings of classical myth, as Atwood anticipates the concerns explored in revisionist literature in the #MeToo era. The figure of Penelope and her significance to feminist revisionism is perhaps the key distinguishing feature of classical myth that sets it apart from fairytales and scripture, and, as we shall see, is often woven into characterisations of other women from antiquity, such as in Jennifer Saint's 2021 novel, *Ariadne.*

It must be acknowledged that the focus of this article is confined to two texts written by white women writers: *The Penelopiad* by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood serves as a cipher for an in-depth textual analysis of *Ariadne* by the English author Jennifer Saint. Both Atwood and Saint engage with the intersections of class and gender in these novels, but not, in any meaningful way, with race. Works of contemporary feminist revisionist mythmaking during the #MeToo movement that de-centre whiteness – such as Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018), and (to step outside the Graeco–Roman canon briefly) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2021), which retells *The Ramayana* from Sita's perspective – make for rich and rewarding further investigation.

The Odyssey, The Penelopiad and Feminist Revisionism

The Odyssey was read in terms of the feminine long before feminist reassessments of the epic emerged in the late 20th century. From Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897) – which claimed that the author of the epic was a woman and this explains its inferiority to *The Iliad* – to Robert Graves's imagining of Nausicaa as its writer in *Homer's Daughter* (1955), *The Odyssey* has attracted much speculation about its authorship and thematisation of gender. Penelope is often at the centre of gendered readings and re-imaginings of the epic, and – as

6

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

discussed above – has become a metonym for feminist revisionist mythmaking as creative endeavour, especially since Clayton's *Penelopean Poetics* and Atwood's *The Penelopiad*.

A quick survey of what might be termed "Penelope studies" from the last decades of the 20th century onwards reveals a rich field of feminist work. Key publications include Ann Bergren's study of language and women in Greek thought (1983); Clayton's aforementioned *Penelopean Poetics*; Suzuki Mihoko's comparative look at rewritings of *The Odyssey* in the 21st century (2007); Coral Howells's essay in a collection on revisionism in Atwood's *oeuvre* (2008); Al Omari et al's appraisal of *The Penelopiad* and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* (2014); and Kiriaki Massoura's reading of Atwood's Penelope in light of contemporary space–time theory (2017). This list, far from exhaustive, illustrates the sustained critical attention that both Homer and Atwood's Penelopes have received, and whose centrality to feminist revisionism is unquestioned. This is not to say that Penelope is an unproblematic feminist icon, but rather that the Queen's characterisation and role in the epic and subsequent re-imaginings continue to attract theorists interested in the question of women's creativity. Regarding feminist revisionism in particular, Penelope occupies a central place in the field because of the ways in which she *makes manifest* the principles, ideas and drivers behind this mode of writing.

Penelope is a figure through which the reader can interpret many women and goddesses of Greek myth and make assessments of the connection between women, weaving, writing and power in ancient Greek culture. To extend the analogy: Penelope is a thread, and by pulling it the entire topic of women's writing, past and present, begins to unspool. "Greek women do not speak, they weave", writes Ann Bergren. "Semiotic woman is a weaver. Penelope is, of course the paradigm" (1983, p. 71). Bergren's examination of language and the female in Greek thought is invaluable here, and often cited in subsequent feminist studies of myth and epic poetry (Clayton, 2004; Massoura, 2017). In her essay, Bergren argues that female language is perceived by men as intelligent and dangerous – in the stories of the Muses, the sirens, Sibyl, Cassandra, Calypso, Circe and others, women's language is divine, weaponised, and must be contained, reframed as mad or evil. Women's language is inextricably linked with ideas of *mêtis,* "transformative intelligence" (Bergren, 1983, p. 71) and weaving (a silent, metaphorical language) [3]. Indeed, the presiding goddess of the *Odyssey* is Athena, goddess of weaving and daughter of Metis. Weaving and female language figures heavily in the myths: The Fates, three sisters, write the stories of men's lives at their looms, cutting the threads at the moments of their deaths; Philomela weaves a tapestry of her rape after her tongue is cut out by her rapist, Tereus, in an effort to silence her; in *The Iliad,* Helen weaves the contests between the Greeks and Trojans of which she is the prize. And of course, there is Penelope.

Feminist revisionist literature draws attention to storytelling as *craft*, as (wo)man-*made*, and therefore also to the divide between story and truth. Thus, feminist revisionist literature is also feminist metafiction (Green, 1991, p. 1). In her book *Writing Beyond the Ending,* Rachel Blau DuPlessis recounts the interventionist narrative strategies developed by women writers in the 20th century and how such interventions expose and delegitimatise "some of the deep, shared structures of our culture" (1985, p. 2). Women rewriters of myth in the 21st century likewise

7

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

reveal the crafted nature of story and history – events misremembered, tales spun, writing both permitted and disallowed along gender, race, and class lines [4] – to reveal these same deep structures of culture. Story, storytelling and revisionism are, as it were, interwoven: a meditation on women and writing that uses classical revisionism as its vehicle is bound by the traditional tale. To be a *re*telling, the source-text must be identifiable to the informed reader through direct references or intertextual allusions. The contemporary rewriter is constrained by certain plot points, characterisations, settings, or events – the contemporary woman rewriter is *bound,* is *tied.* Again, we circle back to textiles. Nowhere does this tangle of politics, history and gender in feminist revisionism find better expression than in the analogy of weaving.

Atwood and *The Penelopiad* bear closer inspection for two reasons. Firstly, Atwood's *modus operandi* across her entire body of work is, seemingly, to reinvent tradition (that is, Atwood is considered a writer whose career is founded on revisionism [5]). Secondly, Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* articulates many of the theoretical premises of this mode of writing, as well as anticipating a central thematic underpinning of the #MeToo movement – voice.

In *The Penelopiad,* we meet Penelope in the Asphodel, a liminal space in which restless spirits wander fields. Voice is foregrounded in Atwood's characterisation of Penelope: the Queen describes being dead as "bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness" (2005, p. 1) in the same breath as explaining that,

> Down here everyone arrives with a sack, like the sacks used to keep the winds in, but each of these sacks is full of words – words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you. (p. 1)

Voice and voicelessness are central to the novella (and to many of Atwood's writings [6]). Who speaks, who is listened to, what is said and what is believed are positions within *The Penelopiad* that illustrate gendered (and class-based) power imbalances throughout history. "Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one", says Penelope, speaking of Odysseus's adventures. And yet when Penelope tries to use her voice, it does not work: "I want to scream… But when I try to scream, I sound like an owl" (2005, p. 2). In the exposition we encounter a thematisation of Penelope that speaks to feminist revisionist mythmaking as a mode of creative intervention: we are in a *liminal* time and space; there is a sense of endlessness, of eternity; and voice, language, storytelling, and feminine subjectivity are prioritised. Voice, breath, weaving and "tale-telling" are all introduced in this first chapter – titled, significantly, "A Low Art" – in a metafictional gesture to the feminine revisionist mode in which *The Penelopiad* operates:

> Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself… It's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children… but who cares about public opinion now? The opinion of the people down here: the opinion of shadows, of echoes. So I'll spin a thread of my own. (pp. 3–4)

8

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

Significantly, Atwood introduces class differences into the text from the beginning: class and voice are intertwined, and ultimately it is the Queen's silence (her failure to speak up to Odysseus) that condemns the maids to death.

Voice has direct bearing on feminist revisionist mythmaking during #MeToo. The thematisation of voice in *The Penelopiad* speaks directly to the novella's source-text: an epic, a form which originates from oral storytelling traditions, from multiple speakers and repetition, from circuity (memorisation, performance). Multiplicity is key to feminist thought – multiplicity as opposed to univocality; the many versions of truth; the expansive rather than essentialist. Atwood invokes multiplicity in the text through a very postmodern deployment of genre: Penelope's narration is interwoven with various dramatic and lyrical forms. Further, the twelve maids form a chorus, a collective of voices seeking justice in the 21st century for crimes perpetrated in antiquity. These techniques – of genre, pastiche and intertextuality, using three different temporal settings – invoke Bakhtin's theory of *heteroglossia*: a text which contains many voices, languages and standpoints.

Atwood enlists multiple genres in *The Penelopiad* as a way of "dismantling the rules of the epic poem" (Massoura, 2017, p. 394), liberating the silenced voices of both Penelope and the maids through polyphonic pastiche. Solidifying the link between weaving and language as touched on above, Massoura points out how "Penelope's traditional weaving in the *Odyssey* is replaced by her autobiographical text in *The Penelopiad*" (p. 394) and notes how the Queen's monologues are interspersed with chants, nursery rhymes, an anthropology lecture and a transcript of court proceedings. The maids are likewise doing their own "weaving, unraveling, and reweaving" (p. 395) in tandem with Penelope as they offer multiple, braided perspectives to the reader: *The Penelopiad* is "multivoiced" (p. 398) and plays with the symbology of the "silent language of weaving" (p. 397). Both Clayton and Massoura reference Bergren, who argues that in Greek culture, where women lacked access to verbal acts,

> The women's web would seem to be a 'metaphorical speech'… a 'writing' or graphic art, a   silent material representation of audible, immaterial speech. (Bergren, 1983, p. 72)

From this liminal place – like Barthes's undead and Rich's awakened dead – Penelope can launch her own act of revision: by centring her own and the maids' perspectives, and also by critiquing, from the vantage-point of eternity, the classical myths. On Helen's lineage and story of her conception, for instance, Penelope comments,

> I wonder how many of us really believed in that swan-rape concoction? There were a lot of stories of that kind going around then – the gods couldn't seem to keep their hands or paws   or beaks off mortal women, they were always raping someone or other. (Atwood, 2005, p. 20)

9

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

Able to visit our modern world thanks to illusionists and mediums, as well as recount her own life in ancient Ithaca, Penelope is both herself and Atwood: a historical personage, a myth, a trope and a feminist revisionist writer.

Penelope is not an exemplary feminist icon, however, and her feminist potential is undermined in both *The Odyssey* (Clayton, 2004, p. 16) and *The Penelopiad*: she relays how she has become, over time, the "model wife" (2005, p. 2) against which other women have been measured; the sisterhood between Penelope and the maids is broken when Penelope decides not to advocate on their behalf; and the Queen is characterised as the female counterpart to Odysseus (a foil, a mirror). The Queen is as cunning as her husband, which makes her a suitable match intellectually and morally. In *The Penelopiad*'s courtroom scene and subsequent encounters in the Asphodel, Penelope uses her class privilege to shield herself from the gendered violence to which the maids were subject.

Ultimately, the voices of women in the text are extinguished – the hooting owl, breath and air, and strangulation are reoccurring motifs in Atwood's fiction and poetry for feminine language misunderstood or silenced (see, for instance, Atwood's poems "Half-Hanged Mary" and "Owl Burning"). In *The Penelopiad,* the maids are hanged and Penelope screams ineffectually in the underworld. Many of Atwood's heroines share Penelope's compromised position, being both subversive and complicit in the oppression of self and others – such as Joan in *Lady Oracle* (1976) and Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) (Cooke, 1995, p. 212–222) – or both ambiguous and duplicitous, as in Persephone in *Double Persephone* (1961)*,* Circe in *You Are Happy* (1974) and Zenia in *The Robber Bride* (1993)*.* Atwood is alert to the intersections of gender, class and race when it comes to agency – to voice.

The multitude of voices and genres, the theme of social justice and the split temporality of *The Penelopiad* are cognate: they extend the metonym of weaving, unweaving, and reweaving as a creative expression of feminist revisionism. Atwood performs the same "poetic mimesis" (Clayton, 2004, p. 5) of the weaving process that Homer does in *The Odyssey.* In Atwood's revision, however, the maids are a central part of Penelopean poetics; they articulate, in a 21st-century setting, the political impulse behind such feminist revisionist projects (Braund, 2012, p. 202). The maids issue a direct clarion call to revisionist writers and readers of revisionist fiction:

> We implore you to inflict punishment on our behalf! Be our defenders, we who had none in life! Smell out Odysseus wherever he goes!… From one life to another, whatever disguise he puts on, whatever shape he may take, hunt him down! Dog his footsteps, on earth or in Hades, wherever he may take refuge, in tomes and in theses, in marginal notes and in appendices!… Let him never be at rest! (Atwood, 2005, p. 183)

The maids seek vengeance; writers and readers are to associate the maids with women abused at the hands of men, and Odysseus with those same men, into the present day. Atwood solidifies the link between the maids and Penelope/Penelopean poetics by transforming the maids into

owls in the final section of the text, echoing the Queen's owl-like scream in the first chapter. I avoid saying the *end* of the novella here to echo points made by both Coral Howells and Susanna Braun on the endlessness of *The Penelopiad* (Howells, 2008, p. 69; Braund, 2012, p. 206). Penelope, Odysseus, the maids and even Helen continue in the underworld, haunting and being haunted. There is no sense of closure as the work of feminist revisionism is ongoing. As Braund writes, "myth permits endless reinvention, revisionising, renewal" (p. 206). The 21st-century courtroom, the rape trial and the sense of unfinished work delivers us to feminist revisionist projects since the #MeToo movement began – itself an ongoing project.

Feminist revisionist novels during #MeToo and Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne*

In this survey I will look at novels – not poetry collections, short stories, nor dramatic scripts. This is for three reasons: firstly, the novel is the most popular form; it is the most widely consumed form of literary entertainment. If I am examining a genre with reference to a social movement, it makes sense to pair this preoccupation with the most democratic mode of writing. Secondly, the novel has long been likened to the epic, or indeed considered a form of epic: György Lukács is a key theorist on this topic, in particular his *Theory of the Novel* (1916), as well as Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Nearly a century prior to Lukács, the philosopher Hegel described the novel as "the modern bourgeois epic" (Good, 1973, p. 181), which makes the association almost as old as the genre itself. Guido Mazzoni's *Theory of the Novel* (2017) dedicates three chapters to the epic antecedents of storytelling and the novel, citing *The Odyssey* as an origin, over and above *The Iliad* (p. 64–65). This is significant as it illuminates both the gendered history of *The Odyssey* and the novel, once considered to be low entertainment best suited to women readers. As Mazzoni outlines, the development of the novel is closely tied to a female readership, who were

> Unfamiliar with the literary tradition or tended to ignore it, and [who] were relegated to living in the existential sphere that the new genre explored – that of private life. (2017, p. 163)

It is only appropriate, then, that feminist revisionist writers turn to the novel as a space both historically feminine and feminised. The epic, the novel and the feminine are intimately braided throughout history; they form a knot that can be variously untangled and retied.

In 2006, the activist Tarana Burke founded the social justice movement known as "Me Too" to support survivors of sexual misconduct, abuse and violence, particularly women and girls of colour. In 2017, the movement went global on social media and the hashtag #MeToo became a shorthand for stories of sexual harassment. There is a direct correlation between the #MeToo movement and voice, as thematised above: women and gender-diverse people subjected to sexual harassment were encouraged to speak up. The #MeToo movement began as a rally cry to articulation: to speak what had hitherto gone unspoken, to say what had happened. In this way, the #MeToo movement *is* a feminist revisionist project: it writes back into history voices that have been erased.

11

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

In this climate of vocalisation, of collective redress, key feminist novels revising Greek mythology have been published: Emily Hauser's *For the Most Beautiful* (2017), Miller's *Circe* (2018), Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019) and Saint's *Ariadne* (2021). These novels are retellings set in the ancient worlds of their source-texts: classical Greece and Rome. This list could be expanded to include recent retellings of myth with different geographical and temporal settings, such Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) – a restaging of Sophocles's play *Antigone* set in present-day Britain and Syria – Daisy Johnson's *Everything Under* (2018) – a rewriting of the Oedipal myth set in modern England – and Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) – a reimagining of *The Odyssey* set in 20thcentury America. All these novels enact a form of truth-telling by putting female perspectives back into myths in a way that ultimately dismantles the hero-paradigm. Shamsie's *Home Fire* and Jones's *An American Marriage* also examine race and racism through the lens of classical, canonical texts. In addition to voice and speech, a number of these rewritings focus on the theme of sexual consent, a major component of the #MeToo conversation. Collectively, they make the point that while the movement is part of the current moment, the issues it speaks to have existed since time immemorial.

Saint's novel *Ariadne* is exemplary in how it utilises feminist revisionism to comment on the sexual politics of #MeToo. Guided by a Penelopean poetics, *Ariadne* both redresses an historical imbalance in storytelling and addresses the concerns of the #MeToo movement. Despite Ariadne being the heroine, Penelope is present from the outset as an interpretative guide. Opening the book, a paratextual detail – an illustration of a ball of yarn – awakens in the informed reader the image of Penelope: it is both the thread which Ariadne gives Theseus to guide him back out of the Labyrinth and the material used for weaving. In the opening paragraphs, Ariadne's movements are described in terms of weaving or stitching: she "loops" through "the twists and turns of the palace" (2021, p. 6); she is fond of dancing, and sees herself,

> Spinning and weaving a dizzying dance, creating an invisible tapestry with my feet across the dancing-floor. (p. 7)

Later, when Theseus deserts Ariadne on Naxos, her early, hopeful waiting for his return recalls Penelope's long wait for Odysseus. When that hope turns to despair, however, Ariadne screams just as Penelope screams from the underworld in *The Penelopiad* – unheard:

> I screamed – long and loud and full of fury. I let a stream of invective fly from my mouth, incoherent and venomous… [I screamed] at Theseus, calling him things I didn't know I had the words for, but I foamed with anger for Minos as well and even for Poseidon – these men, these gods who toyed with our lives and cast us aside when we have been of use to them, who laughed at our suffering or forgot our existence altogether. (p. 118)

12

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

As in the above quote, Saint establishes connections between Ariadne and other women from classical mythology: the reader is encouraged to make associations, and not only with Penelope. For instance, the language used to describe Ariadne's abandonment on Naxos as, additionally, a convenient exile by her father – "What torment could he devise that would be worse than this lonely exile?" (p. 123) – references Circe, exiled by her father Helios to live alone on Aeaea (this story is the subject of Miller's *Circe,* and therefore familiar to readers of the genre). In other passages, Ariadne dreams of being drowned like Scylla (p. 98; p. 119), burned like Semele (p. 202; pp. 208–209), and "dissolve[d] like Echo" (p. 122). Ariadne is a metonym: individuated, but also all women; a single voice and a chorus – just as the #MeToo movement is a choric figure. This comes through most clearly in the childbirth scene, in which Ariadne "saw the women of the world… and felt that we surged in synchrony with one another" (p. 242), and in the epilogue: Ariadne, now a constellation, receives the prayers of all women (p. 386). The reader is urged to recognise that it is

> The women, always the women, be they helpless serving girls or princesses, who paid the price. Cursed to roam the land without refuge, transformed into a shambling bear, a lowing cow or burned to ashes by the vengeful white-armed goddess [Hera]. (p. 113)

This nod to class difference likewise recalls Atwood's *The Penelopiad,* which explores the privilege that separates Penelope's fate from that of her maids. In an interesting later allusion to Atwood, Saint has Ariadne's sister, Phaedra, die by hanging. In the ancient sources – Ovid, Euripides, and Seneca – the details of Phaedra's suicide are vague, yet Seneca writes that the Queen of Athens entered a private room with a sword, not a rope. Saint diverges from the original sources here to have this event in her novel be a hanging – "the image of Phaedra", Saint writes, "swinging low and heavy from a branch, flickered" just as the image of the maids hanging from their ropes, flickers. It is difficult not to see Saint's choice as a reference to *The Penelopiad.*

Having situated the novel within a Penelopean poetics, further revisionist strategies in the text start to emerge. Saint employs metafictional techniques to expose the mechanics of storytelling and history-making: *Ariadne* is a tapestry of revision. The novel opens with Ariadne retelling the story of Scylla, remembered as a monster but in fact a "foolish and all too human girl, gasping for breath" who was, "at the moment of her drowning… transformed into a seabird" (p. 5). Demystifying and demythologising monstrous women, recounting their metamorphoses from women to beasts (and, in doing so, reversing the transformation), lends the novel structure. Oral storytelling is built into the text: stories are told and then retold in a different light. After each episode the narrator often alerts the reader to the status of these vignettes as stories, as crafted: "There were many such stories" (p. 11) she says, or, "That leads us to another story" (p. 12). Structurally, the book references Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (an association encouraged by the book's epigraph, taken from Ovid's *Heroides*), which is a significant referent for the sexual politics to come. *Ariadne* positions itself as a revisionist work alert to the workings of the genre: metafictional layers are built into the text that comment on the strategies and purpose of such texts.

In a clever inversion of the mode, *Ariadne* functions not only as a retelling of myth, but also requires of its audience a re*reading*, for each of the early tales stitched into the overarching narrative change with the knowledge gained by the end of the book. The story of Medea, for instance, is first told by Theseus: Medea is a witch, a serpent who committed unspeakable crimes. She is married to Theseus's father and therefore Queen of Athens when Theseus returns from his adventures abroad. In the hero's version, Medea attempts to murder him with a cup of poison having told the King Theseus is "a criminal, a usurper, a despicable killer come to infiltrate the palace" (p. 77). When he recognises his son, the King prevents Medea from pouring the poison, and she, realising her precarious position, urges him to listen to her. "Aegeus", she says,

> This is not your son… I have seen his soul; the dark, filthy core of it. This man brings us only harm – you must listen to me Aegeus! I saw your death the moment he crossed our threshold! I saw you, gasping in the freezing depths of the ocean, dashed from a cliff, and this man is the cause! (p. 79)

Aegeus, disbelieving, instructs Medea to flee, which she does "tripp[ing] over her skirts as she ran, hiccupping with sobs" (p. 79) – a very human exit for a supposed monster. Later, we learn that Theseus's father died in exactly the manner prophesised by Medea. He "stood on the cliff edge… [and] flung himself into the sea" (p. 155). Once again, Theseus is seemingly not to blame, but we can read between the lines and indeed reread the earlier narrative considering what came to pass and what it implies: Medea was right; Medea was human; Medea was wronged.

Just as Ariadne is a metonym for all women, Saint's characterisation of Theseus recalls *The Penelopiad*'s Odysseus, that metonym for patriarchy and male violence. Odysseus, in *The Penelopiad,* is reborn throughout history:

> He's been a French general, he's been a Mongolian invader, he's been a tycoon in America, he's been a headhunter in Borneo. He's been a film star, and inventor, an advertising man. (Atwood, 2005, pp. 189–190)

Odysseus is all arrogant, powerful men; all arrogant, powerful men are Odysseus. And seeing as the maids have forewarned us that Odysseus will likely take refuge in "songs and plays, in tomes and in theses" (Atwood, 2005, p. 183) our suspicions are aroused when Saint's Ariadne imagines Theseus into songs and plays and poems yet to be written. Tellingly, in Ariadne's mind, Theseus is not just a hero and a prince, but an animal predator:

> He did stand alone amongst men, this great Athenian hero, of whom so many legends would be woven. He was taller, broader, handsome, of course – and with the bearing not just of a prince but the poised strength of a panther waiting to strike. A man who

14

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

would inspire songs and poems, whose name would be heard to the ends of the earth. (p. 54)

Ariadne is a text crawling with male predators: first Poseidon, who has Pasiphae violated by a bull; the Minotaur, born from that first atrocity; Minos, King and tyrant of Crete; and Cinyras, the odious suitor for Ariadne. Such men are unsubtle in their violence and clearly to be avoided. Theseus, however, is a brand of male perpetrator we have come to associate with the #MeToo movement: remembered as a hero – charming, good looking, quite literally a smooth talker, "his voice low and smooth in my ear" (p. 68) – but in fact a seducer, a liar, an abuser, a cheat. Someone who has got away with it until now – until this reckoning.

Having established the frames of feminist literary revisionism and referenced source texts by Ovid and Homer [7], Saint moves the novel into a contemporary space: the sexual politics of #MeToo. Mirroring Ovid's focus on sexual violence in *Metamorphoses,* Saint urges the reader to look closely at these encounters: through Pasiphae, for instance, Saint explores trauma following sexual violence. Ariadne describes how her mother

> Infused the world with her light; before she became a translucent pane of glass through which the light was refracted but never poured forth its precious streams of brightness again. (p. 13)

Rape features heavily in the novel, and the transformations prefigured by Ovid are given new meaning by Saint: women are transformed into lesser versions of themselves, they are reduced by male violence. The most salient investigation of contemporary sexual standards, however, is through Theseus. As Theseus seduces Ariadne, the reader is made aware that Theseus may not be as heroic as he appears. Despite her desire, Ariadne is not an equal participant in the exchange, and key descriptors alert the contemporary reader to its problematic nature:

> He *pulled* me inside the dark room… He *pushed* me against the wall and I didn't care that *the harsh stone scraped my skin.* His kisses were urgent, not soft like they had been at the rocks. I felt like he was *branding me…* his arms were clamped around me like *iron bracelets.* (pp. 93–94, italics author's)

This scene, which should be one of pleasure, is laced with the language of coercion and violence. Ariadne is "branded", transformed into a cow by connotation. Sexual consent is flagrantly ignored, and the romance of the scene undermined. Instead of satisfied by the union, the reader is positioned to feel discomfort. Objections to this reading (*it was a different time back then*) simply invoke the comments of the Judge in *The Penelopiad* and the maids' response:

> *Judge: …* Your client's times were not our times. Standards of behaviour were different back then… *The Maids:* We demand justice! We demand retribution! (Atwood, 2005, p. 183)

15

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

This is a pivotal moment in the book, as the heroic image of Theseus soon after starts to unravel. Theseus gaslights Phaedra, giving her directions to the wrong cove so that she is left behind on Crete, later telling her she misheard, making her doubt her memory:

> As time took me further away from that night, I began to wonder – in the thrill of the moment, was it possible that I really had misheard Theseus? If I had listened more carefully, could I have been there at the right cove when they left? (p. 191)

Ariadne, wishing to wait for her sister, is hauled by Theseus to the ship in a passage that reads as assault:

> Theseus *took hold of me*, pulling me towards the boat. *I struggled against him*, though I may as well have struggled against a boulder. *His grip was iron around me* as hoisted me in. Now the *screams* were boiling up inside of me, ready to erupt. (p. 107, italics author's)

Theseus is a compulsive liar and master of manipulation; he performs vulnerability to gain trust and then abruptly switches to his truer, more brutal self. Saint writes sudden shifts in Theseus's behaviour in a way that matches the tell-tale signs of abusive romantic partners:

> There was a pleading in his voice I had not heard, a vulnerability that seemed so distant from the brutal efficiency with which he had just pounded the Minotaur's body to pieces. (p. 108)

And

> Theseus came towards me. His arms were around me again, *this time* with tenderness. (p. 110, italics author's)

The reader familiar with patterns of domestic violence is encouraged to think, *this time, but what about the next?* After being deserted on Naxos, Ariadne wonders "how many women had he left in his path before me? How many had he charmed and seduced and tricked into betrayal before he went upon his way?" (p. 128). Despite the setting of classical Greece, the writing of the supposed hero in *Ariadne* has a very modern inflection – in Theseus we see film actors and producers, media tycoons, CEOs and other men in positions of power being brought down through the efforts of the #MeToo movement. Theseus, in the novel, is an archetype that works both forwards and backwards: he is Odysseus in disguise and he is every man who has enacted a form of sexual violence.

Ariadne demonstrates the enduring utility of feminist literary revisionism. This subgenre germinated in the 1970s alongside second-wave feminism, blossomed in the 1990s and returned to popularity again in the late 2010s. Renewed interest in literary retellings of ancient

myth can be mapped onto developments in feminist psychoanalysis and emergent concepts in memory studies, such as cultural memory, with interventions in both fields maintaining the conviction that classical myth has bequeathed, to subsequent generations, an inheritance hitherto taken as naturalistic, neutral and objective, but is rather deeply hierarchical, patriarchal and value-laden. Recent revisionist novels from the last five years share the theoretical underpinnings of their predecessors, but also possess characteristics of a distinctly contemporary flavour. Contemporary revisionist novels focus on sexual consent and power disparities in sexual encounters, as well as various manipulative and abusive behaviours such as gaslighting that have, in recent years, made their way into common parlance. By exploring these themes through classical myth set in antiquity, feminist revisionist authors imply that while #MeToo is new, the concerns it addresses are ancient. The advances of the #MeToo movement help explain the reappearance of feminist revisions of classical myth and their dominance on bestseller charts and award shortlists from 2017 onwards.

Notes

[1] For an account of the productive as well as troubled relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis, see *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (2016) by Alexandra M. Kokoli.

[2] See Alicia Ostriker's *Feminist Revisionism and the Bible* (1993) for an account of how Judaism, while being deeply patriarchal, at least invites questioning of divine authority. No such leniency exists in the ancient myths.

[3] Cunning intelligence is also Odysseus's defining quality, over more traditionally masculine attributes such as strength or prowess. In Odysseus and Penelope's marriage there is a doubling of the feminine – we witness how this same *mêtis* is enacted differently in differently gendered realms.

[4] Two examples of this in revisions of Judeo–Christian stories can be found in *The Testament of Mary* (2012) by Colm Tóibín and *The Book of Longings* (2020) by Sue Monk Kidd. Both works utilise scripture to comment on the disjunct between lived experience/reality and posterity/history, particularly as it pertains to religion and faith.

[5] Sarah Appleton states: "From the figure of Little Red Riding Hood in *The Handmaid's Tale,* to the retelling of the *Odyssey* in *The Penelopiad,* Atwood's novels re-scrutinize the common assumptions behind the tales and re-conceptualizes the feminine and masculine archetypes derived from these narratives" (2008, p. 1).

[6] For an analysis of voice and the confessional mode in Atwood's poetry and novels, for instance, see Nathalie Cooke's "The Politics of Ventriloquism" (1995).

[7] Saint nods towards Homeric sources by weaving phrases from *The Iliad* into the text, such as "the rosy fingers of the dawn" (p. 15) and "wine-dark waves" (p. 90), phrases repeated throughout the epic. Further, Theseus's journey to claim his birthright as hero is framed as an *Odyssey,* a path littered with "bandits, criminals and wild beasts" (p. 74) and beautiful, monstrous women (p. 75).

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20

TEXT Vol 26 No 1 April 2022
Managing editors: Nigel Krauth & Julienne van Loon. Editors: Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove