

“The truth is, men make terrible pigs”:

Giving Voice to Women from Homer’s *Odyssey* in Twenty-First-Century Rewrites

By Mary Reynolds

1. Introduction

The Odyssey is widely considered one of the foundational texts of western literature and an important part of the Greek mythological canon. The poem’s popularity has also reached outside the academic world due to mythology’s increasing popularity in modern media, such as the *Percy Jackson* book series (2005-2009) and the *Thor* movie franchise (2011-2020). The main characters who are the focus of both the original Greek text and modern adaptations are male. Female characters, in contrast, occupy roles such as wife, mother, villain, or sex prize. They function as aides or obstacles in the male hero’s journey. In *The Odyssey*, these roles are filled by Penelope, a devoted wife and mother; Circe and Calypso, who prevent Odysseus from continuing his journey; and Cassandra, who is taken as a prize by Agamemnon.

In contrast to usual Greek heroes who rely on physical strength, Odysseus himself is marked by intelligence and wit, and his journey is wrought with obstacles that prevent him from returning home for twenty years. Confronted with monsters, witches, and god-driven disasters, Odysseus is challenged to overcome them with his wit in order to journey back home to his kingdom in Ithaca and to Penelope, his devoted wife who remains faithful to him even after being pursued by countless suitors. One of the challengers he has to beat is the witch Circe, who turns his crew into pigs. She eventually submits to Odysseus’s demands since, owing to Hermes’s help, her spell fails to work on him. While Circe poses an obstacle in the hero’s

journey home, Penelope functions as the goal at the end of Odysseus's quest. Although both women fulfill completely different roles, and although Penelope is mentioned more often than Circe in the poem, neither character is given as much development as the hero.

With the rise of mythology in popular culture and interest in marginalized characters, women are given more attention. Rather than functioning as side characters who serve as props that enable the male hero to move further in his story, women characters have been given a larger presence in modern retellings, although they are still not the main focus. *The Odyssey* is a major piece of literature that cannot be easily challenged because of the poem's huge involvement in the development of modern literature, and the epic poem is almost seen as a dependable source for Greek mythology within society that has accepted the epic poem as knowledge for everyone. However, Margret Atwood and Madeline Miller challenge the canonicity of *The Odyssey* by focusing on the marginalized characters of Circe and Penelope, who originally functioned as mere props for Odysseus, in order to break the mold of shallow representation of women in literature. Focusing on marginalized characters challenge the canonicity of *The Odyssey* because the authors question Homer through their rewrites and are saying that *The Odyssey* presents an incomplete picture, not the whole story that Homer promises. Canon is determined by the continuous agreement of people and future generations to recognize a piece of an author's work as genuine. Specifically, Atwood reimagines the role of Penelope within classical Greek gender expectations, while Miller challenges the gender roles presented in the epic poem. Atwood's 2005 novel *The Penelopiad* is Penelope's side of the story told through her own voice, showing the readers that she works within the strict standards placed on her by men but still fails to create her own citizenship outside her husband. Miller's 2018 novel *Circe* is narrated by Circe, who

shows readers that while a patriarchal society puts the title “monster” on women who do not conform, women can use that title as a tool to reclaim their own citizenship.

Rewriting mythology is a popular trend in contemporary literature. Rewriting denotes taking an established story and purposefully creating a new version while using the same characters and general plot details. Christian Moraru explains that rewrites “often critique what they rewrite” and “the rewriter is a critical reader in the deepest sense” (4). He means that authors break down the original story to explore issues, such as equality for women within a man-dominated society. The rewrite is meant to critique, which means to analyze the text, and the point of this is to find issues within the original source and present those issues in the rewrite that directly highlights the flaws through the current society’s point of view. The authors must analyze the material and, via the rewrite, present the problems within the original material and offer a possible solution. Rewrites reshape the political realm of possibility in the reader’s mind by amending flawed political situations.

This idea can be applied to Atwood’s and Miller’s novels as they rewrite Penelope’s and Circe’s story while addressing the issue of female characterization in ancient mythology. Rewriting mythology has become popular in present-day culture because “myth permits endless reinvention, revisioning, refocalization, renewal” (Braund 206). Mythology is a flexible genre that allows authors to change the focus and lesson of the myth while still maintaining the integrity of the story. Any author can put their own twist to a story, presenting their opinions on a certain topic. Rewriting mythology is important for authors to do because rewriting a story that the average person knows already and just shifting the focus allows the reader to connect with the voice that the author decides to focus on.

2. Historical Context

To understand the characters of *The Odyssey*, one must understand the context of the culture in which the poem is set. Historical documents detailing the lives of women in ancient Greece are extremely biased, and one could examine *The Odyssey* to see how women were perceived during that time period. However, many historians argue about whether the epic poem should be viewed as historical evidence or mere fiction, as it was passed down through oral tradition before being written down (Graham 3). Throughout the epic poem, one can see different portrayals of women, from mortals to demigods and goddesses, and each serves a role within the narrative, although they were never considered as important as male figures.

A. J. Graham suggests that women were important in ancient Greek culture as they served as mediators between the gods and humans in their role as priestesses, which was the only high position a woman could have outside being a mother (13). That women play lesser roles than men has not always been the case in ancient Greece. As Graham states, women are often tied to religion in Greece, and “at the top were the great priestesses” who held immense power and the respect of the community (13). One must remember that *The Odyssey* is only one document and cannot represent the entirety of women’s lives in ancient Greece. The Oracle of Delphi is one such example (Fontenrose 5). The words of Pythia, who was a prophetess at Delphi, were seen as the words of Apollo and were revered as truth and had to be followed (Fontenrose 6).

If one looks further back in time, women were greatly respected because many cultures worshipped one or several female divine figures. David Leeming and Jake Page in *Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine* observe that women in *The Odyssey*, like Circe and Penelope, wield significant power: “though they are owned by men, women have a power that points back to the

mysteries of the old Goddess cult” and “Behind Homer’s myths of such women as Circe and Penelope lie the oppressed but still vital figure of Goddess herself” (120-1). The Goddess cult refers to the worship of a female deity who often represents motherhood and takes on many names in different cultures for thousands of years. The worship of a goddess was common before the worship of a male deity became more common. Leeming and Page believe that, in the wake of this development, goddesses were relegated to a submissive role (91-127), changing society’s view of gods and goddesses. According to popular belief, male deities have been more prevalent in cultures for most of human history, however, historians remind us that this was not necessarily the case. This is important to know because this shows how information can be distorted within society, even though history says otherwise. According to popular belief, male deities have been more prevalent in cultures for most of human history. Lemming and Page refute this misconception, stating that the “Goddess had had the preeminence of what we now think of as God for at least some 25,000 years in most part of the world,” while “the male-oriented view that eventually achieved supremacy can claim only some 5,000 years of history” (47). For thousands of years, women were revered and held significant power within society, but then were forced to submit to their male counterparts when the God figure rose in popularity.

Ancient Greece was a patriarchal society that emphasized men’s authorities over women’s and the role of women were mainly limited to wives and mothers. In ancient Greek society, women went through many stages in life as they were educated in their roles as future wives and mothers. Louise Bruit Zaidman’s article “Pandora’s Daughters and Rituals in Grecian Cities” discusses the stages that such women passed through and pays attention to the rituals in which they took part. Young girls started their training for wifehood at age seven and learned the necessary skills for being a desirable wife, such as weaving, from their mothers. This skill came

into play during the next stage, wifehood, since wives were expected to produce necessary textiles in the home and honor Athena, the patron of weaving and goddess of crafts. As wives, women did not lead rituals but instead focused on *oikos*, that is, managing the household, as they now obeyed their husband's family and left their old life behind. After being married, a woman's main goal was to give birth to a child, hopefully a male heir, and, in the eyes of society, she was not an actual woman until she gave birth. Women were also not viewed as citizens. Instead, "citizenship was granted to any man who could prove he was the son of both a citizen and 'the daughter of a citizen'" (Zaidman 339), showing that citizenship was only passed down through men. Being classified as a citizen was important in ancient Greece because citizenship allowed one to be recognized and enabled them to participate in politics (Zaidman 339). Women were removed from citizenship, thus expected to be breeders to be kept at home, which is the main problem with *The Odyssey*. To counter this, citizenship is reimagined in the rewrites of the epic poem.

The mentality that women are only meant to be wives and mothers can be seen in *The Odyssey* through Penelope but also Helen, who is criticized for leaving her husband, and thus her household. Within *The Odyssey*, "women do not star in their own tales so much as play supporting roles in the adventures of others ... but each of the women characters also has a story to tell, though their versions may be different from the official one" (Collins 57). Focusing on women characters would give greater insight to the inner workings of the culture created by women and the workings of a household while the man is off being a hero. Men are the main heroes in Greek epics and throughout mythology, while women are not given the chance to tell their own stories because they are deemed less important. These stories can be how a woman can run a large household behind the shadow of her husband, teaching children traditions that need to

be passed on, or making her own path using skills she was taught by her own mother. However, this leaves an incomplete picture in mythology as only one side of the story, that is, the story from men's perspective, has been told. The continuing impact of feminism has ushered in the recent trend of rewrites of myths focusing on women (Yurttaş 206).

3. Homer's Penelope

Homer's Penelope is commonly viewed as a role model for women as a devoted, faithful wife who, while equal to her husband's wit, still needs her husband to rescue her from her many suitors: "She is the classical world's most perfect wife" (Collins 58). The wife stays at home while the husband is away at war and protects the household with her intellect. Chastity being an important virtue for women, she uses many tricks to fend off the suitors taking over her home because she is loyal to her husband Odysseus, even though he is thought to be dead. One of these tricks includes weaving a funeral shroud for her father-in-law but undoing her work at night. This delays the suitors for several years. Her secret is finally revealed when one of her maids, who is in love with one of the suitors, tells her lover what Penelope is doing. The suitors are furious and demand that she chooses a husband, but she manages to persuade them to allow her to have time to make her decision. Throughout the poem, she never bluntly rejects the suitors, but leads them on with unfilled promises, buying her husband more time to rescue her. Later, she holds a contest wherein the man who can string Odysseus's bow and shoot an arrow through axes will win her hand. Through this, one can see that Penelope only uses her intelligence to support her husband's claim to her as his wife against the other suitors and to protect his honor and status. She is upholding the status quo of a powerful household for her husband, not for the protection of herself.

Many critics admire Penelope's resourcefulness and patience during Odysseus's twenty-year absence (Felson; Collins). Schein makes another point about Penelope being independent from her husband and having her own wit outside Odysseus's reputation: "But the poem also shows a Penelope with a mind of her own, not merely one in harmony with her husband's" (25). Her wit does not depend on her husband, and she has shown that she can take care of her household despite the invaders in her home. Despite her intelligence shown throughout the epic poem, her actions are carried out in support of her husband, not herself. As a woman, Penelope is still seen as fragile by men and cannot handle certain situations, such as the sudden appearance of her husband and the murder of the suitors. Her fragility is suggested with Penelope crying many times throughout the story and asking for death because of her husband's absence. Before the trial of the bow, her son, Telemachus, tells Penelope to go back to her room to let him host the contest:

‘So, mother,
go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks,
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
working hard as well. As for the bow now,
men will see to it, but I most of all:
I hold the reins of power in this house.’
Astonished,
she withdrew to her own room. She took to heart
the clear good sense in what her son had said. (21.389-94)

This echoes the beginning of the poem where Telemachus tells her the same thing before he heads out to search for news of his father, showing that men have power over women, even though Penelope is his mother and has been leading the household for years:

‘So, mother,
go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks,
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
working hard as well. As for giving orders,
men will see to that, but I most of all:
I hold the reins of power in this house’
Astonished,
she withdrew to her own room. She took to heart
the clear good sense in what her son had said. (1.409-17)

Telemachus believes his mother to be too fragile and weak as a woman to continue leading the house and thus takes control, telling her to go back to her rooms with her maids before the bow trial. Penelope does as he says and cries herself to sleep, and Athena keeps her asleep while the suitors are being killed. Because women cannot have real citizenship or power over a household, Telemachus, who is old enough to be seen as an adult, takes control of the house, thus also taking control of his mother. The epic poem is more interested in the maturing of Telemachus and him taking over the role of “man of the household” in the beginning of the poem and changes the focus to Odysseus and his journey back home. *The Odyssey* focuses on the two main men of the story rather than focusing on Penelope’s reality at home, and she only appears in the epic poem when the focus is directly on Telemachus or Odysseus.

The Odyssey states that Athena keeps the truth of Odysseus's return from Penelope by giving Odysseus a disguise as a beggar. His scar is still visible, which allows his old nurse to discover his identity. The question then is, why couldn't Penelope discover his identity through her own wit? One piece of evidence leading scholars to believe that she is in fact aware of the beggar's true identity is because Penelope changes her mind with the marriage contest. After twenty years of denying and tricking the suitors so she would not have to choose another husband, she suddenly decides to hold a contest to decide who will marry her. Her decision does not make sense unless she already knew the truth about the beggar's identity, which shows flaws in Homer's storytelling. This shows that Homer's sexism is undermined by some details of his own story because while he wants to make Penelope weak, she can still be read as more intelligent and plotting than he allows her to be. Still, nothing Penelope does is for herself, as it all just serves Odysseus.

An older version of *The Odyssey* reveals that Odysseus and Penelope planned the bow contest together (Katz 95), instead of Athena inspiring Penelope: "The goddess Athena with her blazing eyes / inspired Penelope, Icarius' daughter, wary, poised, / to set the bow and the gleaming iron axes out" (21.1-3) This shows that Penelope was an active part in Odysseus's return and revenge against the suitors, rather than a prop for Athena to use and a reward for Odysseus. As is common with oral traditions, the story changed through the years and that seemingly small detail changed audiences' perspectives of Penelope. Removing the detail of Penelope and Odysseus working together seems to set up a dramatic entrance for Odysseus's return and the murder of the suitors. This missing detail is also allowing a later scene in the poem where Odysseus proves his identity to Penelope by revealing his knowledge of their bed, which is made from a rooted tree. But Penelope loses her reason for confiding with the beggar about the

test and allowing him to participate despite the suitors' protests. There is no reason why she would look for the approval of a stranger or let him participate in a test for her hand in marriage if she did not already know he was her husband. The later version of the poem reduces Penelope's agency to conform her to the powerless-wife-at-home image.

Many scholars see Penelope as a complex character (Buitron-Oliver and Cohen). One of Penelope's characteristics is her intelligence that is similar to Odysseus's, which she uses to hold back the suitors and lead the household for twenty years. However, the reader is to believe that Penelope would not be able to recognize her husband even though the old maid is able to because in order for Odysseus and his son to have their revenge against the suitors, she must remain in her room, oblivious of the truth. Homer creates this complex balance of strength through wit and feminine weakness within Penelope. She is seen as a role model for women because while she can be intelligent when she is allowed, Penelope also knows when to obey the men, as they are the ones taking charge, but she has no claim to equality. Modern writers are looking at Penelope's story and seeing a woman of strength through her femininity, not weakness, and wonders what her life was like during the twenty years defending her home.

4. Atwood's Penelope

Margret Atwood's 2005 novel *The Penelopiad* challenges *The Odyssey* by complicating Penelope's role within the narrative by contradicting the men who tell her story. Atwood's Penelope tells the reader that she is breaking her silence about what really happened during the many years that Odysseus was gone. Throughout the novel, some of Penelope's facts conflict with *The Odyssey*, so Atwood can be read to suggest "that not only was Odysseus wrong, but Homer as well" (Suzuki 271). This shows that Atwood is claiming to be Homer's equal, as

authors and as people. One such scene is Penelope's dream about an eagle killing twelve geese. Penelope states: "Odysseus was wrong about the dream. He was indeed the eagle, but the geese were not the Suitors. The geese were my twelve maids" (Atwood 140). As the narrator of her own story, Penelope is telling the reader that men cannot be trusted to tell the correct story. However, "Penelope is not a reliable narrator" herself (Braund 204). This is because the novel is limited to her point of view, which is affected her own bias and lack of knowledge. Even though by telling her side of the story and showing that Odysseus's story is not the only one that matters, she is still biased against some people, like her cousin Helen, and can only tell her side of the story with her opinions, not others. Penelope does not know Odysseus's opinion of her beyond what she observes, nor does she know the hidden stories of the people around her. This makes her a flawed narrator, just like Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, but this brings a sense of verisimilitude to her character, as anyone can understand the frustration of not knowing what other people think. Even so, one must look at Penelope's story as a way to understand the woman hidden in Odysseus's shadow. Atwood "challenges us to reassess the consequences of the identifications we make when we read modern retellings of ancient myth" (Braund 203) by fleshing out a character seen as a mere prop for the hero in her original story and making her an unreliable narrator to show that Penelope is only human—a human whose story needs to be told.

Throughout the novel, Penelope faces several double standards. One that involves Penelope and Odysseus is the fact that while Odysseus cheated on his wife while he was away, Penelope was expected to remain faithful the entire time and keep the kingdom running. Virtue and chastity are a common expectation for women, including Penelope, who has to fulfill that expectation to stay in control of the household. However, Odysseus, as a man, does not have to worry about losing power and reputation when he cheats on wife. Greek men do not have the

same expectations to stay faithful within a marriage, and Odysseus does not face any consequences within his household for cheating on his wife. However, this double standard of the wife staying faithful is reinforced by Odysseus when he is angry when he assumes that Penelope has let someone else into their bedroom and cut down their bed that is made from a rooted tree.

Within Atwood's novel, Helen acts as Penelope's foil due to their different actions regarding faithfulness and the consequences that followed their actions during the Trojan War: "Atwood's Penelope throughout insists upon defining herself against Helen" (Suzuki 270). While Penelope is shamed by her own son for even thinking about marrying one of the suitors, Helen, who runs away with Paris and had countless men die for her, is still sought after because of her beauty (Atwood 20-1). Penelope, in *The Odyssey*, is contrasted with Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra. She has a lover when her husband was gone during the war and used those ten years to plot revenge against him, thus killing him and Cassandra, who he brought as a war prize. She and her lover kill her husband because, before Agamemnon left for war, he sacrificed his daughter under the pretense that she would be married off. Even though Clytemnestra avenges the death of her daughter, the gods tell her lost son to kill her to avenge the death of his father, and his is praised for it. She is seen negatively by men in *The Odyssey*, as Menelaus calls her a "cursed, murderous queen" (4.102). When Odysseus talks to Agamemnon in the underworld, the dead man tells Odysseus about his wife, saying "But she--/ the queen hell-bent on outrage—baths in shame / not only herself but the whole breed of womankind" (11.489-91). He goes on to give Odysseus advice about Penelope, another wife left at home:

‘so even your own wife—never indulge her too far.

Never reveal the whole truth, whatever you may know;

Just tell her a part of it, be sure to hide the rest.

Not that you, Odysseus, will be murdered by your wife.

She's much too steady, her feelings run too deep,

Icarius' daughter Penelope, that wise woman. (11.500-505)

This passage shows that Penelope's reputation of a loyal wife is widely known and contrasts with Clytemnestra, who is now known as a traitor, or even as a monster, because she has broken the rules of the role she is put in by men. Penelope abides by those rules, thus remaining in favor with the men, but Atwood's novel shows that Penelope is not the submissive wife many are led to believe.

Unlike *The Odyssey*, which displays Penelope as a fragile, submissive wife, "Atwood demonstrates anew the shrewdness and skepticism that are her defining features in the *Odyssey*" (Suzuki 269). Atwood's Penelope is stronger willed and more observant than the people around her realize. She knew that Odysseus was the beggar and planned the test: "I knew the beggar was Odysseus. There was no coincidence. I set the whole thing up on purpose" (Atwood 139). Atwood is building on scholars' speculation that Penelope knows who the beggar is and gives her the credit of setting up the trial, similar to the older version of *The Odyssey*. The author makes Penelope feel like a real person who has opinions and regrets, instead of merely a goal for Odysseus to achieve. But Atwood still fails to create full citizenship and agency for Penelope, who still acts for her husband, even in the underworld where she still waits to hear of his adventures in the living world.

5. Homer's Circe

As one looks at *The Odyssey*, one might question why the women in the epic are not as important as the other male characters and merely used as props for the main hero. *The Odyssey* is “a series of diverse, wide-ranging stories about the pleasures and dangers of human existence, stories that tend to represent what is ‘human’ as male and most of the ‘pleasures’ and dangers’ ... as female” (Schein 19). But women have as much right to the category of ‘human’ as men. A majority of the poem is told from a man’s point of view, specifically Odysseus’s, whose obstacles are represented as feminine, such as Calypso, Circe, and Scylla.

Twice during Odysseus’s journey he is delayed by sex and one of those women is Circe, who he stays with for a year. Concerning Odysseus’s encounter with Circe, Oliver and Cohen have a similar view to Schein when they state that “the Kirke episode is now interpreted as a male-female pursuit (the prelude to a sexual encounter) ... In the poem, Kirke, once subdued, becomes Odysseus’s lover and advisor, and her palace is his home for a year” (Oliver and Cohen 38). Men and women fight for power on a sexual terrain and the man wins by subduing the woman. Homer’s Circe is often perceived as a villain who is an obstacle in Odysseus’s path home but proves to be weak-willed because her magic is ineffective. This is misogynistic because the scene involves established stereotypes that equate the strength of a woman’s will with her weak physical strength. In *The Odyssey*, one can see that Circe has more power than the average human, as she has bewitched wolves and lions, and the sailors hear her “spellbinding voice as she glided back and forth / at her great immortal loom” (10. 243-44). Half of Odysseus’s remaining crew explores the island on which they have landed and hear singing coming from a house. Circe draws the men in with food and drugged wine, and casts a spell with her wand to

turn them into pigs. One of the sailors senses a trap and goes to Odysseus, who receives help from Hermes in the form of an herb that does not allow magic to touch him. Even though one can see that Circe is a powerful witch, as soon as her magic fails and Odysseus points his sword at her, she submits to him and follows his commands. In the passage below, Homer's Circe follows the expectations for a woman to submit and obey:

She screamed, slid under my blade, hugged my knees
with a flood of warm tears and a burst of winging words:
'Who are you? Where are you from? Your city? Your parents?
I'm wonderstruck – you drank my drugs, you're not bewitched!
Never has any other man withstood my potion, never,
once it's past his lips and he has drunk it down.
You have a mind in you no magic can enchant!
You must be Odysseus, man of twists and turns—
Hermes the giant-killer, god of the golden wand,
he always said you'd come,
homeward bound from Troy in your swift black ship.
Come, sheathe your sword, let's go to bed together,
mount my bed and mix in the magic work of love—
we'll breed deep trust between us.' (10. 659-702)

When Odysseus draws his sword, Circe falls to the ground weeping, and loses her powerful status among the mortal men within her own home. Her words are panicked and hurried as she asks Odysseus several questions but then moves into amazement, as if trying to win Odysseus's favor, even though her power is gone. Circe is aware of Odysseus's reputation because she says

“you have a mind in you no magic can enchant” (10.665) and mentions that Hermes had forewarned her of Odysseus’s coming. This shows that Circe, although isolated, cannot escape from the male deities who determine what her life will be. In a last effort to save her life, Circe offers sex, thus her own body, which Odysseus accepts under the conditions that Hermes told him to set in order to save the other men. Homer presents sex as the price a woman must pay to a man in order to gain protection, especially for Circe, who is seen as a monster in Odysseus’s story.

The Odyssey’s female obstacles, such as Circe, “are often monstrous, and their menace is literally or symbolically sexual,” as one can see when Circe offers her own body to save her life (Schein 19). When Circe buys her life with sex, this shows that men force women into a non-optional prostitution that echoes the mandatory expectations of wife and mother. But if a woman tries to evade this situation, they are seen as monstrous and are ‘tamed’ into submission by rape. Throughout the epic poem, “Odysseus represents his experiences with sea dangers as encounters with the feminine and repeatedly tells escaping these dangers when the threatening females eventually befriend him, after he survives or overcomes them” (Schein 19). Homer’s Circe is a weak-willed witch when she loses her dependence on her powers and becomes the obstacle for Odysseus to overcome again because of her sexual lure, which causes him to stay for a year. *The Odyssey* presents Circe as a sex object that tempts Odysseus to stay, restricting the view of her character to just a sexual conquest for the hero. But authors are starting to present this sexualized character as a woman who can make her own choices, not to be used as a tool by men.

6. Miller’s Circe

Circe’s meeting with Odysseus, as narrated in *The Odyssey*, is refracted through a double lens of masculinity: first by the male poet Homer, and then through Odysseus’s male-centric

narration. Madeline Miller's 2018 novel *Circe* challenges *The Odyssey* by providing an alternative, female-centric, view of the events of the poem, in which Circe assumes the role of narrator. At the beginning of the novel, Circe states that "the name for what I was did not exist" (Miller 3), setting up her role as an outcast among the divine. She goes on to say "They called me nymph ... In our language, it means not just goddess, but bride" (Miller 3), emphasizing the role that women, even the divine, were expected to fulfil. When she was born, her mother, Perse, was not pleased with Circe being a girl, but her father, Helios, "did not mind his daughters" as "men and gods paid dearly for the chance to breed from their blood," and his treasury greatly benefited from this fact (Miller 5). This shows that women are merely seen as objects meant to be bartered and sold for the benefit of men. Circe's mother is never fond toward Circe due to her unusual looks and instead focuses on keeping Helios' attention and gossiping with her sisters. Even Helios says that his daughter will marry a mortal prince instead of a son of Zeus because "Her hair is streaked like a lynx. And her chin. There is a sharpness to it that is less than pleasing," further establishing Circe as an outcast right from birth (6). A characteristic of Circe that is prevalent throughout the novel is her voice, which is often described as screechy, or like a mortal's. Her siblings, Pasiphaë and Perses, constantly pick on her for her oddity, saying "Her eyes are yellow as piss. Her voice is screechy as an owl. She is called Hawk, but she should be called Goat for her ugliness" (9). Even among her own family, she is an outcast and often feels alone. Unlike the other nymphs and goddesses in her family, Circe does not participate in the gossiping and scheming because "they gossiped of things I did not care for and could not understand" (7). Because of her differences from the other women, such as not meeting the standards of beauty and her lack of interest in traditional female activities, she does not meet the gender expectations of her society and is isolated.

Circe is seen as inferior to everyone else, especially by her own family members. Her inferiority is represented by the fact that she sits at her father's feet whenever she can, but is still ignored by her family. This is showing that Circe tries to gather her father's attention by being near him and going with him on his daily rides through the sky on his chariot. However, sitting at Helios' feet literally makes herself submissive to her father, who does not care for her. Even though she is devoted to her father, she is exiled to an island as soon as she becomes a problem for him by attempting to use her powers against a nymph. Now she is literally isolated from her family. Circe acknowledges the dull life she lived before allowing herself to become her own person through magic: "I would like to say that all the while I waited to break out, but the truth is, I'm afraid I might have floated on, believing those dull miseries were all there was, until the end of days" (13). Even though Circe has magic like her siblings, her form of magic is seen as lesser or weaker than the others, as they can call dragons or display forces of power, while her strength lies in illusions and potions: "If Aeetes had been there, he would have choked on his beard to see such kitchen-tricks. Yet because I knew nothing, nothing was beneath me" (86). Just like her siblings see her magic as weak and lesser, the other gods also see her as less than them because they assume she is just a mere nymph. Hermes tells her "sometimes lesser nymphs are born with human voices. Such a one are you," not acknowledging that she is not just a lesser nymph, but a powerful witch, most likely due to the fact that she is a woman and he sees himself as more powerful because he is male (93). Because she grew up isolated and learned her craft on her own, her magic appeared like a powerful tool for her to hone and make her own. The male gods in Circe's life believe that their own powers are greater but do not acknowledge that strength comes in different forms. This is showing that men will not accept any other strength besides their own, believing that any sign of power from women must be lesser than their own.

Although others may not find illusions and potions to be powerful, Circe is able to hold off powerful gods and goddesses because all magic is equal, and strength comes from the person wielding it. Circe believes she is capable of anything, so she is. In contrast to Homer, Miller suggests that all power is equal, which Homer does not do because Circe is quickly overpowered in *The Odyssey*. Miller thus introduces an emancipatory element that Homer's story lacked.

Witches are commonly seen as monsters in literature. Circe embraces being an outcast and witch by developing her powers, which one can see when a boar fails to threaten her and walks away. Circe states "that was the first time I truly felt myself a witch" (87). Through her isolation, Circe grows confident in her skills, and she realizes how she wasted her life before the island:

Had I really spent ten thousand years ducking like a mouse? ... I tracked my father's burning chariot across the sky. Well? What do you have to say to me? You threw me to the crows, but it turns out I prefer them to you. No answer came. (89)

Circe is so confident in her magic that she is willing to face anyone and accept that fellow divinities will view her as a monster because of her magic and willingness to be separated from her family. When a woman refuses to abide by the rules of society set by men, men see her as a monster in their eyes. Miller, however, proves that they're in fact not monsters, but individuals. When Circe is exiled, the other divinities think that isolation would destroy her, as she was removed from her given role as a woman in society. However, exile turned out to be not a punishment, but a way for Circe to make her own path outside the control of men and gender expectations. By becoming the monster, she is able to have her own agency and accomplish what she wants rather than being controlled by the expectations of her father or the women around her.

Circe is driven to become more of a monster figure to men in order to protect herself from men coming to the island. This is a deliberate move by Miller because, in *The Odyssey*, Circe is seen acting like a monster, but in the novel, she is creating her own agency by taking control of the men wanting to hurt her. The concept of monstrosity and agency are connected because a woman who attempts to create her own citizenship, or agency, is seen as a monster by men, a title meant to belittle them for not conforming. Before Odysseus and his men come to her island, other sailors arrive. She welcomes them into her house, but on discovering that she, a woman, is the only one living in her house, the leader of the men overpowers her and rapes her. He takes advantage of her hostility because women cannot be heads of household or be citizens. Rape is a way to take away a woman's claim to full citizenship. Before the other men could do the same, Circe uses her magic to turn them all into squealing pigs. A pattern develops with every group of sailors coming to her island, with her welcoming them into her house and turning them into pigs before they attempt to harm her. By protecting herself against the lust, desires, and will of men, she becomes a monster in their eyes who assume they are entitled to women without resistance. The same fate befalls Odysseus's men when they try to take advantage of Circe and her hospitality. Unlike *The Odyssey*, Miller develops a backstory and gives her a reason for embracing monstrosity. However, Circe seems to let go of her monstrosity during her banter with Odysseus, who is smart enough not to drink the wine and strikes a deal with Circe, which is a different exchange compared to the original epic poem. In the epic poem, Homer's Circe very quickly offers Odysseus sex, but, in the novel, the two become lovers much more slowly. The relationship in Miller's novel develops because Circe is looking for a connection with another person and is the one in power over sex, but she lets him go when he needs to continue his journey. Later, when traveling, Circe overhears a poet who sings out of tune about

Odysseus's adventure and comments on how she is presented in the song: "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" (206). This shows a progression of Circe's character because at the beginning of the book, she cowers to her father's will, adhering to the stereotype of the weak-willed woman that the poets utilize in their songs. By the end of the novel, Circe is stronger through her exile and faces her father without backing down from her demands, proving the songs wrong about her character. Instead, she travels with Telemachus and is in love with him, showing that women still cannot opt out of heterosexual love. He, as Odysseus's son, is expected to take his father's place, gaining power, fame, and authority. But he rejects the role expected of him, similar to Circe, and the two treat each other as equals. They end as outcasts who have stepped away from the roles society has placed on them.

Throughout the novel, Circe can be viewed as a monster in contrast to the divine and mortal society, even using her monstrosity as a weapon to protect herself. She is an outcast among her family because she does not fit traditional gender norms because she does not socialize with the other women and is not seen as beautiful. When she is exiled, Circe is seen as a monster by divine society due to taking herself out of her role as a woman. This title of monster is supposed to weaken her claim to independence and separate her from the rest of the divinity, making sure she can never hope to be a full member of their community. Men give women the title monster in order to weaken them and remain in power over women. However, Circe embraces that title and uses her monstrosity as protection against the divine and the mortal. Circe develops her witchcraft and becomes comfortable with her title as a witch. Gods start to send their unruly daughters to Circe's island to straighten them up before sending them back to follow

the orders of their fathers. Instead, Circe just lets them stay for however long they want and does not order them around, unlike any other goddess in her position would do. This small community of divine women create their own citizenship on the island away from the expectations of men. But their citizenships once again end when the women have to return to their families and the peace of the women-only island is broken by the arrival of sailors. Circe wields her title as monster when she is raped by visiting men on her island and turns them all into pigs, and continues to turn men into pigs when they land on her island. She protects herself by using her image as a monster against mortal men, and that image is what is seen in *The Odyssey*. In Miller's novel, when Odysseus visits, her mask of monstrosity drops when she is able to have decent conversation and find comfort with Odysseus. After her son is born, she is just a strong-willed woman who wants to protect her son and no longer sees herself as a monster, even though the other divinities may see her as a monster who lives outside their normal society and defies their laws. At the end of the novel, Penelope takes Circe's place as the monster of the island and learns how to be a witch, taking Circe's place as a woman removed from traditional women-based roles. Miller is showing through Circe's actions that rewriting is a political act that goes against Homer's worldview.

Throughout the novel, Circe's voice is an important part of her story. Because her voice sounds more human than divine, she finds herself in between two worlds, unsure where she fits in. But because she is the narrator of the story, she shows the reader the evolution of herself as a person, or citizen, outside the divine society. To put more simply, this is a story of a woman who, after being oppressed by the people around her, is free to find and become herself. She finds strength within herself, as a woman and as a witch. Miller echoes this theme in an interview with Nikki VanRy: "This is the story of a woman finding her power and, as part of

that, finding her voice. She starts out really unable to say what she thinks and by the end of the book, she's able to live life on her terms and say what she thinks and what she feels. So, voice also played into the evolution of the character." Voice plays a role in citizenship as one must have their voice heard in order to be considered a citizen, but even though Circe is not granted full citizenship within the novel, her voice is still being heard by the readers, redefining true citizenship. Through Circe's journey, Miller is creating a world wherein women, even non-witches, can find strength in their own femininity and do not have to be restrained by the standards of men.

7. Conclusion

Rewrites have become more popular in recent years and mythology has been a common focus. Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Miller's *Circe* challenge the infallibility of *The Odyssey* to rewrite the stories of two women to show the missing voices within the epic poem. In *The Odyssey*, "Some piece of the narrative seems to be missing, someone isn't telling the whole story" (Collins 59), and Miller and Atwood seek to fill in the blanks with their novels. By challenging *The Odyssey*, the authors show the greatest flaw with Homer's story-telling: silencing voices that need to be heard.

In Greek society, citizenship was an important part of life and enabled one to be recognized by the community. However, women were not given this title and instead their role was to be in the home to bear children. But any woman who did not abide by the role given to them by society was seen as a monster, a figure exiled from society. Penelope is a figure in Greek mythology that is known to be a loyal wife and an example to other women. Circe is her opposite as she is the monster of Greek society because she is removed from society, but still submits to a

more powerful man. Atwood and Miller seek to challenge the view of these characters by rewriting their stories, thus challenging the canonicity of *The Odyssey*. The authors use the themes of citizenship and monster to show that rewrites can help women from mythology take back these terms that once belittled them and use them for strength instead, creating their own citizenship to have freedom away from the society of men in order to have their own voices heard. Citizenship is about being recognized for who a person is in society and seen as an equal. Monster was a title created by men for women to belittle them but is now a tool for women to use against men in order to protect themselves and create their own citizenship outside of men. Atwood and Miller do not grant full citizenship for Penelope and Circe because, while they seek to challenge the details of Homer's story, they cannot fully break away from the original story (Ingersoll 111). But they succeed nevertheless to tell Penelope's and Circe's story. While Homer silenced Penelope and Circe in his epic poem, Atwood and Miller give these characters their own voice to tell their side of the story.

Atwood shows that Penelope has her own voice that discredits *The Odyssey*, and Miller shows that Circe takes back her own agency and isn't the monster that society wants her to be. Although neither novels grant full citizenship for the women because the authors are working within constrictions of Greek mythology, Atwood and Miller are paving the way for others to break the mold of rewriting women characters from mythology: "Atwood uses the epic subtext to suggest that the novel... serves as the contemporary epic form and that women writers can engage that form" (Suzuki 268). Although mythology can be seen as inflexible, women writers like Atwood and Miller have shown that mythology can be empowering for women through rewrites.

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