

Modernizing Myth: Madeline Miller and the Continuation of the Monomyth

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ABSTRACT

Greek mythology is generally looked upon as stagnated stories of made up characters and monsters; however, through the words of one contemporary author, Madeline Miller, mythology is revealed to be a modern phenomenon, not solely a classical one. This essay explores the works of Miller's Young Adult novels, *Song of Achilles*, *Circe*, and *Galatea* that reveal unrepresented and misunderstood segments of mythology, interpreting them to empower and reveal aspects of not only Antiquity but also modern society. Her interpretation inevitably encourages young readers to challenge classical history that people have normally accepted as absolute truths, which allows myths to be more accessible to the modern reader while utilizing an evolving perspective. The stories she creates are different compared to mainstream interpretations, but they are still authentic. In a way, Miller is the modern Homer, adding to the ancient tapestry of mythology while weaving in her own threads to add to history and myth that transcend both time and space.

Literature Review

When people hear names like Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Hypsipyle, and Terpsichore, intimidation quickly follows. These names themselves have caused many modern readers to feel alienated from antiquity's stories and characters as a result of not being able to pronounce something as simple as a name. If we cannot even pronounce names, how could we expect to understand plots, themes, and nuances? As a result, it is difficult to feel as though the myths from ancient societies bear any relevance to the lives of individuals in modern society. However, today's distance from antiquity does not stem from its archaic language; it is the result of a long history of declining popularity.

During the Middle Ages, the classics were their contemporary canon. Instead of grouping classical authors—such as Virgil, Ovid, or Homer—separate from other works of literature like it is today, classical authors were regarded as a fundamental aspect of their society and education.¹ Historical and diplomatic treaties of this period drew extensively from major classical “authors (especially Virgil and Cicero) in an effort to establish literary standards.”² Additionally, strengthened by the development of the printing press and rising literacy rates, the study of the classics boomed as the accessibility to printed bibles and original works was substantially increased. Furthermore, groups such as the Jesuits and other Protestant believers strove to interpret the New Testament from its original language—Ancient Greek.³

Although Western culture has a long history of honoring its past, the study of the classics has been on a downward trend since the Renaissance. By 2003, Britain, one of the last countries to de-emphasize the classics, offered classical subjects in only about 10% of state schools.⁴ The study of the classics was already stigmatized

¹ From “The classical past,” by C. O'Hogan, *Khan Academy*.

² From “The classical past,” by C. O'Hogan, *Khan Academy*.

³ From “What language was the Bible originally written in?” by The Editors of Encyclopedia, *Britannica*.

⁴ From “Latin types,” by S. Cook, *The Guardian*.

to be only for the elite, further separating it from the general masses. Fortunately, contemporary authors have begun to revive the classics once more.

In 1949, Joseph Campbell published his book “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” which discusses his theory of the mythological structure that exists in all myths across history and different cultures. Also known as the Hero’s Journey, Campbell coins his proposition as the Monomyth. Campbell’s premise is that all stories consist of the same elements and sequence of events, thus all stories from all cultures reflect the entire human experience.⁵ Although never labeling himself as one, Campbell’s ideas are parallel to the ideas of transcendentalism, a philosophical movement that developed in the late 1820s. Transcendentalism argues that history need not exist to have art; thus, it emphasizes the universality of art in all cultures throughout history, which allows additions to be made to classical myths without being taboo.⁶

Popular contemporary authors have exposed readers to the classics in the form of creative storytelling. One of the most popular examples is the Percy Jackson series by Rick Riordan. Although simplistic and aimed at younger readers, Riordan skillfully weaves mythological characters and plots into a fantasy of his own making. He blends ancient Greek and Roman mythology with the modern day by creating a story of young demi-god Percy Jackson on his Hero’s Journey. Through the series, readers encounter various parallels with the original myth like Percy Jackson’s beheading of Medusa, who—in the original mythos—was also slain by the Greek hero Perseus. Percy Jackson also models the Homeric style of plot structure by making Percy Jackson visit the underworld, a signature motif in many Greek and Roman epics. However, Riordan’s books do not add to mythology. Rather he makes carbon copies of the same mythological stories that are told in the modern day. By simply repeating these stories, Riordan does not add to ancient mythology. This rendition of classical mythology sterilizes it from the ancient past because he curates simple names and certain themes to modernize rather than writing within the scope of antiquity.

Then came one classicist in particular who has spread exposure to the classics through ancient Greek myth more than any other—Madeline Miller. Before Miller, authors like Riordan had made an attempt to modernize mythology, but Miller has truly carried the lineage of antiquity to modern readers. By emphasizing the “timelessness of these stories” through themes that are relevant in the past and present like sexual abuse, betrayal, and destiny, Miller has brought these foreign names closer to the modern reader.⁷ As a teacher with a background in the classics, she recognized the disconnect that exists between the modern reader and mythological figures, even though many of the themes and motifs in myth are recognizable and relatable to modern readers. Upon publishing the Young Adult (YA) books *Song of Achilles*, *Circe*, and *Galatea*, which were all named after famous Greek mythological heroes and heroines with obscure names, Miller created symbolic figures, connecting ancient characters to the modern person. In her interpretations, mythological figures express nuanced characteristics that original interpretations of the classical myths have failed to recognize or willfully ignored. Her decisions to reflect a new understanding of ancient mythology broadens and contributes to the myth-making process. Therefore, Miller’s additions to myth, keeping with Campbell’s philosophy, is not heretical; it should be considered as authentic as the original canon, since her writings reflect the entire human experience throughout time.

Miller’s primary criticism of modern interpretations is that it is heavily biased, creating a false sense of what is being expressed. For instance, Achilles and Patroclus have been understood as great platonic friends; however, Miller challenges this traditional view by making them lovers. When modern readers discuss the *Iliad*, Homer’s recounting of the Trojan War, Patroclus has been explicitly described as a close friend, confidant, and emotional support of Achilles. However, many times in the *Iliad*, Achilles’ thoughts and actions towards Patroclus cannot simply be explained by mere friendship. After Patroclus is killed, Achilles reacts with intense

⁵ From *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by J. Campbell, New World Library.

⁶ From “Transcendentalism,” by The Editors of Encyclopedia, *Britannica*.

⁷ From “Madeline Miller,” by J. Reed, *National Endowment for the Arts*.

sorrow and anger, claiming that he had lost the will to live until he could avenge Patroclus' death. And when Patroclus returns as a ghost to speak with Achilles, he requests that their bones are mixed so they could lie together forever.⁸ The idea that their relationship was intimate and sexual has always existed, yet this interpretation is not widely received. This may be partly to the fault of LGBTQ elements which has caused this interpretation to be significantly less popular than the original.

Even if Achilles and Patroclus' relationship indeed did not exist from antiquity, Miller draws upon classical mythology in a symbolic manner. In contrast with Miller's way of interpreting mythology, as Folklorist Alan Dundes explains, Literalists "tend to seek factual or historical bases for a given mythological narrative."⁹ They are essentially Euhemeristic¹⁰ historians who have tried to literally interpret mythology to decipher certain historical events. However, instead of interpreting myth literally through a historic lens, Miller interprets it through symbolic one that reveals elements of the human condition and society. By extending mythology to encompass women's voices and revealing LGBTQ themes, Miller continues the Monomyth by writing her own chapters to give credence to those characters and themes that are relevant to this day.

Miller's interpretation not only inevitably encourages young readers to challenge the classical history that people accept instantaneously as fact but also simultaneously makes myths more accessible while utilizing an evolving perspective. The stories she creates are different, but it is still as authentic as the original. In a way, Miller is similar to the ancient Roman poet Ovid who wrote *The Heroides*, or *Epistulae Heroidum*. The *Heroides* are a collection of "letters" as though written by aggrieved heroines of Greek and Roman mythology. In these letters, in which they address to their heroic lovers, the heroines address their grievances of being mistreated, neglected, or abandoned, revealing the complexities and realities of these women.¹¹

For example in letter one, Ovid takes the voice of Penelope to voice her pain of waiting for her famous husband, Odysseus, to return after 20 years away from home. Although Penelope was never the main character in *The Odyssey*—the primary source of Odysseus' journey home—Ovid brings Penelope to the main stage in order to reveal the suffering of Penelope.¹² In this way, Ovid adds to the original mythos by showing the repercussions of Odysseus' long return home. Thus, mythology is a cornerstone that can be read and added to. It would be a mistake to perceive mythology like it is preserved in amber; therefore, even though these letters may not exist in the original mythos, Ovid's addition to the myth based on his understanding and perspective contribute significantly to the complexities of the myth.

Not to mention, in Antiquity, mythology used to be told *orally*. These stories were never set in stone—it has always been an adapting and evolving one. Based on the poet reciting the myths, its contents inevitably changed to adhere to each poet's style as well as their personal interpretations and biases. Because this is the true nature of mythology, it should be treated as such.

Similar to Ovid, during the process of creating her books, Miller worked "closely to the text."¹³ Miller used four original epics to source the book *Circe: Homer's The Odyssey, Ovid's Metamorphoses, Apollonius Rhodius's Argonautica, and Eugammon of Cyrene's Telegony*. In *The Odyssey*, Circe is only mentioned within a few lines in the epic, and in those few lines, Homer's description was immensely self-serving towards enhancing Odysseus' character.¹⁴ As Miller put it, in the original myth, Odysseus "shows up on the island of

⁸ From *The Iliad* by Homer, R. Fagles and B. Knox, Penguin.

⁹ From "Ways of interpreting myth," *World Mythology Course Index*.

¹⁰ Euhemeristic, defined by Merriam-Webster, is "interpretation of myths as traditional accounts of historical persons and events." Essentially, the theory that mythological characters and events derive from factual history.

¹¹ From *Heroides* by Ovid and H. Isbell, Penguin Books.

¹² From *The Odyssey* by Homer, R. Fagles and B. Knox, Penguin Audiobooks.

¹³ From "Madeline Miller on 'Circe,' Mythological Realism, and Literary Correctives," by J. Plotz and G. Turrigiano, *Public Books*.

¹⁴ From *The Odyssey* by Homer, R. Fagles and B. Knox, Penguin Audiobooks.

this terrifying witch; he defeats her; she throws herself on him, and falls in love with him, and invites him to stay.”¹⁵ The entire narrative serves Odysseus’ purpose as the conqueror and the stereotypical ancient Greek image of the charismatic and strong man. In response to such a narrow description of Circe, Miller “corrects” the original myth by giving a stronger voice to Circe, adding a complex understanding of her love for Odysseus.¹⁶ The retelling of Circe’s story powerfully juxtaposes Odysseus’ longing for his wife with Circe’s longing to be part of a real family. Pulling on the few threads that Homer offers, Miller weaves an entire story that becomes a new chapter in mythology.

Building upon her “corrections,” Miller also created an origin story for Circe’s first love that was also a love triangle, which she sourced from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.¹⁷ Ovid originally depicts Circe as a powerful and angry witch, disregarding her psychology and thought process. He makes Circe to be a pitiful girl who falls in love with the wrong men, causing her to lash out with her frightening magic. After Glaucus, the man Circe loved, chose Scylla, Circe was enraged. “[H]er love had been rejected, she quickly / ground up some poisonous herbs” to poison the water in which Scylla would bathe.¹⁸ So Miller, recognizing the lack of character development, “wanted to give her much more of a psychological reason . . . for making this terrible mistake, and then, more importantly . . . wanted to make her live with it.”¹⁹ Thus, in her book *Circe*, Miller creates a revealing conversation between Daedalus and Circe, in which Circe reflects upon the memories of Scylla before she was turned into a monster while considering what to do in order to survive the deadly strait of Scylla and Charybdis.²⁰ Circe’s recalling of the past—combined with the impending doom of facing Scylla—adds guilt and consequences of her impulsive action of the past which was fueled from jealousy. Because this process was wholly written out in Ovid’s original myth, Miller acts as a contemporary myth-teller, infusing new dimensions of Circe, and making her relevant to the modern person. Miller subjects Circe to the consequences of her actions and free will, simultaneously reminding readers of the true purpose of myths—to depict the human condition that transcends centuries.

Then from Apollonius Rhodius’s *Argonautica*, Miller sourced Circe’s interaction with Jason and Medea. In *Argonautica*, it is briefly mentioned how Jason and Medea show up on Circe’s island looking for exoneration from their various crimes.²¹ Despite the lack of sources, Miller was able to dedicate an entire chapter in *Circe*, dialogue and social nuances written all from her imagination. Miller again shows how creative and valuable interpreting mythology can be since Miller’s publications primarily follow insignificant goddesses in Greek mythology with limited primary sources to cite. In a way, Miller animates a lost historical myth into reality.

Miller describes her work as a form of “literary adaptation” under the genre of “mythological realism.”²² Although Miller’s work could arguably be historically irrelevant, ancient mythology becomes flexible by not limiting the creation of myth to ancient poets. Miller’s work in many modern classicists’ eyes is as valid of mythology as Homer’s or Ovid’s. Because all of her past works have worked with characters that have previously been underrepresented and misinterpreted like Patroclus, Circe, and Galatea, there are few

¹⁵ From *The Odyssey* by Homer, R. Fagles and B. Knox, Penguin Audiobooks.

¹⁶ From *The Odyssey* by Homer, R. Fagles and B. Knox, Penguin Audiobooks.

¹⁷ From *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, Penguin.

¹⁸ From *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, Book 14, Penguin.

¹⁹ From “Madeline Miller on ‘Circe,’ Mythological Realism, and Literary Correctives,” by J. Plotz and G. Turrigiano, *Public Books*.

²⁰ From *Circe* by M. Miller, Back Bay Books / Little, Brown and Company.

²¹ From *The Argonautika* by A. Rhodios and P. Green, University of California Press.

²² From “Madeline Miller on ‘Circe,’ Mythological Realism, and Literary Correctives,” by J. Plotz and G. Turrigiano, *Public Books*.

historical texts to compare and contrast the accuracy of Miller's myths. Miller merely represented history that has yet to be told.²³

By extrapolating new stories from ancient myth, Miller has contributed to the classics by exposing over two million readers to the classics, causing authors of various different genres to begin weaving in references to Greek mythology of their own, moving the classics further away from being only for scholars or "elites." Current trending YA novels that have nothing to do with Greek myths like *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* by V. E. Schwab and *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides mention mythological literature. Even though books like these are not inspired by mythology or dedicated to the myths, many contemporary YA books never fail to mention it. Even video games such as the *God of War*, a game continuing the lineage of Cronos and his cursed prophecy, have built their entire franchise off of mythological characters and reinterpretations. Modern authors are beginning to jump onto the bandwagon first popularized by Riordan and then advanced by Miller.

In fact, as soon as Miller published *The Song of Achilles* in 2011, it won the 2012 Orange Prize for Fiction and became a New York Times bestseller. It intrigued many readers for its openly LGBTQ elements, contrasting greatly with the popular views of how Greek heroes look, as best demonstrated by the 2004 film *Troy*: this film starring Brad Pitt as Achilles depicts Achilles and Patroclus' relationship as very much heterosexual.²⁴ Indeed, throughout the film, Achilles is portrayed in nude lying with multiple different women, and later developing a deep love for his female war prize, Briseis, for whom he dies in the film.

This view of what Greek and Roman heroes looked like, as shown by Miller, is not historically accurate. By bringing light to what historians and translators have hidden, Miller singlehandedly unveils many obscured parts of antiquity and its history to show that the voices of the LGBTQ community or of oppressed women exist within mythology. Her work exposing these elements of classical history has opened the gateway for authors like Emily Wilson who was the first woman to translate *The Odyssey* by Homer.

Although her works are beautiful and incredibly detailed, Miller has only become popular recently. Miriam Parker, a vice president, and associate publisher at Ecco said the company saw a sudden spike in sales of Miller's books due to a TikTok trend.²⁵ BookTok, where readers shared books that made them cry, highlighted *The Song of Achilles*. Although it wasn't an intentional marketing strategy, Miller achieved her goal of making the Classics mainstream. The popularity of her book could not be more timely in the midst of various human rights movements involving LGBTQ occurring around the world. It goes to show how the themes of ancient stories are relevant to today's issues.

Although the field of classics may seem irrelevant due to the fact that Latin is a dead language or that it is the study of ancient civilizations *thousands* of years ago, Miller has popularized the classics by making them accessible and exposing them to future generations. Translated over twenty-five languages including Dutch, Mandarin, Japanese, Turkish, Arabic, and Greek, Miller's books allow any interested reader to access her book.

Readers need to become more comfortable with the type of storytelling Miller has done and treat mythology as something that can be used as means to reflect on modern society. As author and professor Mary Beard said, "the narrative of history must be reopened, must be widened to take in the whole course of civilization." By filling the empty chapters of various myths with the realities of oppressed voices of the past,

²³ See Bernal (1987, 1991, 2006), in "Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization," for an insightful theory of origin and, therefore, untold history. Bernal argues that ancient Greek civilization and language are based on the Aryan Model which reinforces a white male oriented history and perspective. Bernal instead presents a syncretistic—the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought—view of mythology and its origins.

²⁴ From "The Song of Achilles, 10 Years On," by J. Biggi, *Retrospect Journal*.

²⁵ From "How Crying on TikTok Sells Books," by E. Harris, *The New York Times*.

we can create a more relevant mythology. Therefore, we must not be afraid of these stories, but rather see them as an opportunity to learn about ourselves.

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