



MAKING HERSTORY: A READING OF MILLER'S *CIRCE* AND ATWOOD'S *PENELOPIAD*

Ester Díaz Morillo

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)

This article is concerned with *herstories* and the retelling of myths. For the purpose of the present research, we will analyse Madeline Miller's *Circe* and compare it to Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. North-American author Madeline Miller gives voice to goddess and sorceress Circe, protagonist of this book inhabited by other Homeric characters. For its part, *The Penelopiad* is a novella written by Canadian author Margaret Atwood in a series of rewritings of myths. In this book, based on the Homeric *Odyssey*, the focus is turned to Penelope, wife of Odysseus, who tells us her story from the Hades, as well as to her maids, hanged by Telemachus after Odysseus's return. Both books are, therefore, related to Greek mythology and, more precisely, to Homer's *Odyssey*. Both authors aim at retelling those myths through a female perspective, making use of *herstory* in order to do so. Analysing the novels from the perspective of feminism, we will see how the authors make their revisions of a canonical work in order to give voice to previously silenced voices in history how they present their female characters by calling myths into question, and, therefore, by challenging male authority and patriarchal society.

Keywords: herstory; myths; women; Odyssey; feminism

1. Introduction

A quick look at new book releases will let us see the allure mythology still has on us. In that sense, many are the writers who are nowadays aiming at rendering myths more inclusive by changing the perspective from which they are told. Among them we find two works, which are the subject matter of the present research. Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* and Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* are both focused on the rewriting of myths from the *herstory* perspective, which is the principal notion behind this research. By analysing the novels from the perspective of feminism, this paper seeks to examine the way in which these authors revise a canonical work with the primary purpose of allowing those who have been silenced throughout history to find their own voice by challenging the patriarchal society that gagged them for so long. After a theoretical introduction into the topic, we will examine how myths and, hence, patriarchal society are called into question by both authors and we will draw comparisons between the main characters in both writings, as well as between other female characters important to their respective plots. This analysis will allow us to see the many similarities found in these works, but also their points of divergence.

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminism and *Herstory*

Women's Studies and the notion of *herstory* have gained momentum especially since the 1970s, with the rise of feminist literary theory. Feminism has made the case for the importance of revisionism in literature and history. In the words of Adrienne Rich (1972, 19), “[w]e [females] need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.” As such, concepts as *herstory* have become paramount in this respect, since it is an “act of survival” (Rich 1972, 18) and “[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing” (Cixous 1976, 875). This usually means writing new stories or rewriting (hi)stories from the female gaze. As such, myths should not be forsaken, since, according to Vanda Zajko (2008), “[m]yth is important to feminism

because it is one element of literate culture that has the potential to incorporate women's traditions and perspectives”.

In that sense, *Circe* can be perfectly considered to fit into this category, for Miller has decided to rewrite part of Greek mythology, most especially that concerned with a canonical work of literature such as *The Odyssey*, from the female perspective, just as Atwood's *Penelopiad* intends to rewrite Penelope's story. This means, at the same time, giving voice to those unheard until now and filling in the blanks. Some authors have argued that Atwood's novella could, in fact, be regarded as a “female epic” or a “mythographic metafiction” (Nunes 2014, 231-232), a category in which Miller's *Circe* could also be included, since both books share similar characteristics, as we shall later examine. We see, therefore, how contemporary literature, as well as other media, nowadays is immersed in creating mythological revisions or reinterpretations which allow us to fill that apparent lack of feminine space in these narratives, for these myths are an important part in Western cultural conceptualisation. This does not mean that the mythological world does not include female characters, but these are oftentimes a reflection of a female aspect devised by men and for men. Hence, these new depictions recover and celebrate female characters and their context, in an attempt to demonstrate the relevance that the past still has over our present.

3. Mythology Called into Question

Myths are part of human history from the beginning of time and have always played an important role in the shaping of our consciousness. In the beginning of the Atwood's book (2006, 4), there is an introduction to the series that says, “[m]yths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives – they mirror our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that attempt to help us make sense of the world”. All cultures have their own mythology. As with history, Western mythology, Greek in this case, has always been characterised by male aristocratic dominance. A simple look at Greek mythology will reveal how all heroes are men and how women are only there as secondary characters, whether as objects of desire or ruinous characters –let us think about Pandora. As feminism reclaims in history with the concept of *herstory*, so do Margaret Atwood with *The Penelopiad* and Madeline Miller with

Circe concerning myths: they focus on female characters and retell a well-known myth from the female perspective. In these novels the “ex-centric” or decentred character, because of gender, race, ethnicity, etc., becomes the focus of attention.

Atwood’s novella is a deconstruction of the myth of Odysseus and Penelope, since Atwood “explores the very nature of mythic story telling” as a review in *The Guardian* said (Atwood 2006, 2). Miller shows a similar intention in her novel. Both attempt to self-reflexively question mythology and the creation of myths, as well as storytelling and truth. There are constant references to the difference between truth and rumours, and about how stories are constructed and who builds them, most especially in Atwood. As such, the official version of the story of the *Odyssey*, the one in which Penelope only counts as the loyal and patient wife, is the version Atwood’s novella, through Penelope’s own voice, attempts to deconstruct. Penelope’s intention is very clear from the beginning of the book: “Now that all the other have run out of air, it’s my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself” (Atwood 2006, 13). She wants to tell us her side of the story, *herstory*, because she is dissatisfied, and even horrified, with her portrayal in mythology. Howells (2006, 11) notes that “[t]hrough Penelope is strictly speaking faceless, it is her words which restore her identity through her narrative of self-justification”.

In fact, storytelling can be connected to obliteration and untruth: often stories –or myths– can silence one side of the story or they can narrate untrue facts. Finally, there is another association that Penelope raises –she links storytelling with weaving when she asserts her decision to tell her side of the story and “spin a thread of my own” (Atwood 2006, 13). Nevertheless, this association entails its own risks, for Penelope is renown for using weaving as a method for deception. This makes us wonder –should we completely trust what Penelope is telling us? Together with the maids, we could conclude, “[t]he truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain” (Atwood 2006, 83). Atwood, moreover, uses the chorus of maids to throw more shadow in this respect, since the twelve are quizzical about Penelope’s role and behaviour. It is not only the notions of authority and truthfulness which are here in question, but also the idea of different readings that can be made of the same text, whether of *The Penelopiad* or *The Odyssey*. One clear example can be found in

chapter XII, when Penelope is still waiting for news regarding her husband, where rumours and official truths are place face to face:

Rumours came, carried by other ships. Odysseus and his men had got drunk at their first port of call and the men had mutinied, said some; no, said others, they'd eaten a magic plant that had caused them to lose their memories, and Odysseus had saved them by having them tied up and carried onto the ships. [...] Needless to say, the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably (Atwood 2006, 52).

Something very similar can be found in Miller's novel. Here again we have a female character telling her side of the story from her own perspective. The main source behind this retelling is once more Homer's *Odyssey*, although we can find her story retold by different authors throughout history. As Penelope, Circe is tired of patriarchal order, even among gods and titans, and resolves to uncover her story. In addition to that, she also has to face rumours. In fact, gossip is one of the topics covered throughout the book. Both Circe and Penelope know about the weight of gossip, of all those things which are spread throughout the world about them and about those around them, sometimes with dreadful consequences.

3.1. Silenced Voices: from the Female Perspective

Myths, as well as history, have always suppressed women and, for that reason, we must “put [ourselves] into the text –as into the world and into history” (Cixous 1976, 875). In her introduction, Margaret Atwood reveals that she has “always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself”; that is why she has “chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids” (Atwood 2006, 11). The author, thus, (re)tells a story from the female perspective, which focuses on formerly marginalised characters:

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence (Cixous 1976, 881).

First of all, we should bear in mind at this point the fact that this epic poem has been considered throughout history as a canonical literary work. That is precisely one of the main goals of different current trends such as feminism, colonial studies, etc., in other words, to change the literary canon so that they become more inclusive.

As a matter of fact, the topic of the voice is an important one in *Circe* too. She is said to be a titan with a mortal voice, which the rest of gods and titans abhor, since for them it sounds “like a gull crying” (Miller 2019, 81). But Circe finds that her voice is a consequential characteristic in herself, for it will allow her to become close to humans, as they will not fear her. Therefore, finding her own voice is a turning point for her. That is why both books, appropriately, are told always in the first person. Furthermore, it is precisely the patriarchy which attempts to silence all these female voices, and they do it in different ways. Ridiculing female voices is one of them, as well as taking women’s claim to name things, for names are powerful. As we shall see in Pasiphaë’s storyline, men are always in the position to name things, and they usually give their names, while women remain voiceless.

In this section we will analyse the main female characters featured in both texts and we will see the changes and transformations which they have experienced. Conversely, the need to escape from patriarchal society is intense in both books and for all the female characters presented there. As Circe wonders herself, “[w]ould I be skimmed milk or a harpy? A foolish gull or a villainous monster?” (Miller 2019, 183). Women seem to be always depicted within a very powerful dichotomy which only distinguishes between the angel in the house and the fallen woman. The “angel in the house” is the much celebrated topic of the homonymous poem by Coventry Patmore from the mid-nineteenth century which praises the figure of the loving wife and devoted mother, whereas the “fallen woman” is usually connected with the loss of innocence on the part of the woman, who can also become aggressive and manipulate men at will, never submitting to patriarchal order, prompting what will be later called the *femme fatale* (Díaz Morillo 2019, 12-13).

Penelope, for instance, falls into the first category, for those are precisely the characteristics she is always attributed, while Circe would be part of the second one. Women within this last category can find themselves being given adjectives such as “bitch” and “witch”, or even both at the same time; in Miller’s own words, “‘witch’ is still used today as a slur against woman with an amount of power that makes society nervous” (Wiener 2019). In that sense, Circe is depicted as a witch in the patriarchal perspective in the sense that she provokes in men an anxiety about female empowerment for she cannot be controlled by them. Ironically, everyone avoids her and they all fear her, while her brother, who shares her powers, is highly esteemed. As a matter of fact, Circe is punished by her father and those around him for seeking to enhance her powers (Miller 2019, 63) and to “bend the world to [her] will” (Miller 2019, 73).

3.1.1. Penelope & Circe, Challenging Patriarchal Authority

The comparison between both characters and books is considerably valuable, for both authors have very much in common when retelling a famous myth. Moreover, both characters share different features, the most obvious being that they are part of the same myth as told by Homer in his epic poem *The Odyssey*. Similarly, both women have a relationship with Odysseus himself, albeit a very different one. Moreover, while Circe is only mentioned in Atwood’s novella, Penelope is a secondary character in Miller’s novel, who will delight in a truly different finale. For the purpose of this article, we shall compare Atwood’s Penelope and Miller’s Circe, notwithstanding some references to Miller’s Penelope.

Both Circe and Penelope go through almost identical life experiences. First of all, they demonstrate their endurance and self-sufficiency, learnt through a harsh childhood. Circe is the daughter of a nymph, while Penelope’s mother was a Naiad or a Water Nymph. The latter is a neglectful mother, never present in her daughter’s life and whose only piece of advice to her was to “be like water”, for “[w]ater does not resist [...] [W]ater always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. [...] If you can’t go through an obstacle, go around it” (Atwood 2006, 34). It certainly seemed an oracle. Moreover, the two of them have unloving fathers, who considered their daughters as a

curse, for none of them is suitable enough to attain for them the glory they think they deserve, neither for their qualities nor for their prospects of getting a good marriage.

None of them possess beauty either. Circe and Penelope are both depicted as unattractive women, which causes them many troubles. We can see the importance of beauty in women with the example of Scylla in Miller's novel. Circe's jealousy of the nymph Scylla drives Circe mad and she decides to retaliate by transforming her into a monster. Circe's brother, Aeëtes, goes as far as saying that, instead of a punishment, Scylla's transformation into the much-feared monster is an improvement, for now she will be dreaded but unconstrained. She has freedom and renown. Interestingly, from his point of view, the most suitable chastisement would have been ugliness, as a hideous nymph "would be [...] less than nothing" (Miller 2019, 61). Beauty is, therefore, the most precious attribute. Penelope experiences the very same ordeal: she has good qualities for a wife, but she is not physically attractive, as Helen is. As such, those surrounding them always find the moment to scorn them for their lack of beauty. Circe is most especially abused by her sister, Pasiphaë, who never misses an opportunity to remind her of her physical unattractiveness. On the other hand, Penelope is constantly mocked by the beautiful Helen, her cousin.

Circe and Penelope are both, on the other hand, masters of illusion in their own different manners. Circe is a powerful witch with "a knack for illusion" and whose "greatest gift was transformation" (Miller 2019, 74); she transforms Scylla into a monster, she casts a spell over her island to protect her home, etc. Penelope deceives people as well with her weaving and unweaving of the burial shroud. Both women, thus, know their tricks and they know how to use them for their own benefit, just as Odysseus. In fact, Odysseus and the god Hermes are presented as the archetypical tricksters in mythology. Nonetheless, in the two books we are offered two female figures with the same attributes as counterbalance. In addition, Penelope and Circe are weavers, both of cloths and of stories. Penelope is renowned for the trick of the shroud, as we have previously seen, but Circe weaves too, she "spins spells and threads alike" (Miller 2019, 131). It is, therefore, not a surprise to notice how both authors use throughout their books vocabulary very much related to the art of sewing.

As we see, we are here presented with two different but very similar female characters, who defy patriarchal society in diverse spheres. Both are intelligent, resourceful, powerful, epithets which are always associated with men throughout mythology –and history. Circe and Penelope are poised to face those who oppress them, be it gods or suitors; throughout their lifetime they develop boldness. This is especially noticeable in Circe, who, as a protagonist in a *Bildungsroman*, turns from her innocent and hopeless youth to plain adulthood, learning about herself and her powers throughout the novel. Hence, women are not here depicted as “delicate creatures, flowers, eggs, anything that may be crushed in a moment’s carelessness” (Miller 2019, 174). They are not passive, as mythology has recorded most of them. In fact, when we think about the adjectives used to describe Penelope (faithful, patient...), we can see that these attributes refer mainly to passivity, a state in which women do not have to do anything; on the contrary, what is expected of them is to remain inactive.

It is interesting now to note how Penelope and Circe are both portrayed by Homer as very different models of femininity: whereas Penelope is the faithful wife, the perfect prototype of how a woman should be, Circe is a goddess, a witch, terrifyingly imposing her will upon men, even upon Odysseus, who cannot resist her charms. The “official version” of the story, therefore, transformed Penelope in an “edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with” (Atwood 2006, 12). In other words, while Homer’s Penelope is portrayed as a faithful and patient wife, shaped according to the feminine model of virtue of patriarchal society, Atwood’s Penelope reclaims the opportunity to tell her version of the events, even to advise women not to follow suit (Atwood 2006, 13). Penelope, as Atwood, is aware of the narrative imperative of happy endings (“happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked”, Atwood 2006, 13), which means that one side of the story has to be silenced, and, in this case, it is hers.

On the other hand, Circe lives alone on an island, while Penelope languishes in a palace waiting for her husband to return. Again, we see that firm dichotomy which classifies women into two different categories, the angel in the house and the fallen woman. While Penelope represents the perfect wifely attributes, Circe is depicted throughout mythology, history and art almost as a *femme*

fatale, a predatory woman, even a misandrist, sexually free and independent, who, as a mermaid, lures men to her home only to transform them into swine. In fact, she is considered to be the very first witch in Western literature, modelling subsequent female witchcraft (Hodges 2020, 18). The figure of the witch, in effect, “was the stereotypical opposite of the good wife. She was the woman who was trying to act independently of male control, asserting her own powers, sexual and otherwise” (Jackson 1995, 72). No wonder, then, that John William Waterhouse, so fascinated by beautifully sensuous women, painted Circe at least three times to represent feminine power and sexuality.

Nonetheless, by the end of her adventure with Odysseus in the epic poem, Circe is brought down by the Homeric hero. In fact, according to Homer, Circe outdoes herself in order to become the perfect host. Therefore, a female who was first portrayed as sexually predatory and powerful is later depicted “before the hero’s sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. Humbling women seems [...] a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep” (Miller 2019 181). Here, Miller refers to the moment in *The Odyssey* (Book XX) in which, guided by Hermes’s advice, Odysseus rushed at Circe with his sword as if to kill her and she, terrified and debased, screams and pleads for her life. And, thus, order is restored, for Circe is spellbound by Odysseus and submits to him. Yet Miller offers us a Circe who seeks sexual pleasure and asserts her independence regardless of the situation.

3.1.2. Of Witches and Bitches, Other Female Characters

In this part of the article we will focus on other female characters included both in mythology and the retellings, such as Helen and Pasiphaë. Both women are represented as the antagonists of Penelope and Circe, respectively.

Firstly, we shall briefly talk about Helen, who appears above all in Book IV in the *Odyssey* and who also suffers some alterations in *The Penelopiad*. Atwood’s Helen is the source of all the woes inflicted on Penelope, according to this character (Atwood 2006, 75). Helen is here shown as a beautiful and vain woman, who is always the point of comparison: Penelope blames her cousin, she reprimands her for being evil especially towards her and, moreover,

she compares herself as someone less beautiful but more good-natured. Helen, therefore, undergoes a process of magnification in her role (Ingersoll 2008, 116) and, besides, she is here depicted as Penelope's archenemy. Therefore, Helen serves the purpose of presenting a sort of sororophobia among women. To a certain extent, she is used by Penelope as an excuse for her problems ("Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes", Atwood 2006, 78).

For her part, Pasiphaë is depicted as a beautiful and powerful witch, Circe's enemy for the most part. Nevertheless, her role is an important one, since it is thanks to her that Circe understands two decisive things: the true force of their magical abilities and the essential need for female independence. Both sisters have been striving all their lives towards the same aim: self-reliance. In contrast to Circe, Pasiphaë was given in marriage to a king, Minos, son of Zeus, a man who is constantly unfaithful to her. Pasiphaë evidently sees this as an affront to her, who is a witch, the daughter of the Titan Helios. Therefore, she takes matters into her own hands and, in return for her husband's infidelities and his ceaseless appetites, she takes revenge on these women. Moreover, Miller's proposes a rather interesting turn of events: contrary to what mythology tells us, Pasiphaë is not driven by lust to copulate with a bull, rather, she chooses to create a monster of her own free will so that she might be feared and recognised. Hence, this well-known incidence in mythology is not presented here as a punishment or a curse. Pasiphaë is not "ruled by appetites; she ruled with them instead" (Miller 2019, 117). She performs this on purpose so that people will talk and remember her as the mother of a terrifying monster. And, notwithstanding all this, Circe understands her sister's reasoning, as the monster is her "sister's triumph, her ambition made flesh, her whip to use against Minos" (Miller 2019, 121). Yet, patriarchy attempts to counteract Pasiphaë's agency and triumph by naming her monster, for Minos calls it the "Minotaur" and reclaims the glory by naming it after himself (Miller 2019, 120).

Returning to the relationship between Circe and her sister, Circe thinks Pasiphaë calls her to help with the Minotaur's birth to humiliate her, just as Helen constantly humiliates Penelope in Atwood's novella. However, Atwood's sororophobia is here overcome by Miller, who offers a different perspective on women's

relationships, a more positive one indeed. Pasiphaë is, in fact, the one who opens Circe's eyes to the reality of womanhood. That is why the moment in which both sisters reunite and have a long conversation in chapter XI is a turning point in the novel. In a noteworthy dialogue, Pasiphaë reveals how things work in a man's world. According to her, being beautiful, responding to their sexual desires is never enough, "[t]he only thing that makes them listen is power" (Miller 2019, 126). For Pasiphaë, her power comes from hatred; her means to be heard, to protect and impose herself is through witchcraft and fear. It is at this point that Circe realises that her sister and herself have more in common than she had thought, for both had been scorned by men, punished by the male divinities who wish to exert their power upon them by way of chastisement, as, in reality, they are terrified of their magical abilities and increasing power. It is the never-ending story, men trampling on women as a means of wielding their power; a common experience shared by many a woman.

3.1.3. Amid Rapes and Groping: A Common Female Experience

Physical violence and abuse is not absent in neither of the books, for, in Circe's own words, both maids and nymphs are here "an endless feast laid out upon a table, beautiful and renewing. And so very bad at getting away" (Miller 2019, 171). First, we will discuss the role of the maids in *The Penelopiad* and, then, we will analyse similar instances in Miller's novel.

Very interesting is the case of maids, who are portrayed in the *Odyssey* as unfaithful and promiscuous servants, which leads to the final misfortune in the epic poem. *The Penelopiad*, thus, offers the opportunity for these characters to explain their reasons and their version of the story: they had to play along with the suitors, which led them to endure the abuses of these men, who "order[ed] the maids about and pinch[ed] their bottoms as if they were in their own homes" (Atwood 2006, 64), so that they could render Penelope a good service. Hence, they were loyal to their very end, whereas Penelope only used them as mere instruments. These maids offer us their narration as a chorus, which reminds us of Greek choruses of classical dramas, following, thus, the postmodernist literature approach and its interest in playing with the narrative structure while delivering different narratives within a single work. In fact, Suzuki

(2007, 271) considers this act of bringing the maids to the very centre of the narrative as Atwood's most significant innovation.

Just like Penelope, the twelve maids also introduce themselves from the second chapter, which ironically is in the form of a rope-jumping rhyme –let us bear in mind that the maids were hanged by a rope. Therefore, to a certain extent they are predicting their own destiny. The maids' narrative is precisely characterised by a great use of irony, as they become “satirists who eloquently critique the ideology of the dominant order (Suzuki 2007, 272):

we are the maids
the ones you killed
the ones you failed (Atwood 2006, 14).

It is an accusation right from the opening that lays bare a topic which has been obliterated until now. Hence, the novella does not only reflect issues of gender, but also of class, for the maids were slaves and these had no role in mythological accounts. These twelve maids face double oppression: as slaves, they face social oppression; as women in a patriarchal society, they face gender oppression. These issues were suppressed in *The Odyssey*. In this sense, chapter XXVI, titled “The Trial of Odysseus”, proves to be very illustrative. Howells (2006, 14) explains how this chapter is a “satire on patriarchal institutions”, since Odysseus is here being tried for the slaughter of the male suitors, but there is no mention about the murder of the maids, until they claim justice for their case. When asked about it by the judge, Odysseus' attorney affirms he was “acting within his rights” (Atwood 2006, 96), since he was their master. Penelope describes how

most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life. It wasn't the fact of their being raped that told against them, in the mind of Odysseus. It's that they were raped without permission.

Judge (chuckles): Excuse me, Madam, but isn't that what rape is? Without permission?

Attorney for the Defence: Without permission of their master, Your Honour (Atwood 2006, 98).

The twelve maids not only accuse Odysseus and Telemachus, they also condemn Penelope for her lack of action towards their murders. It is interesting to note that these maids have the last word on the book: theirs are the last heard voice and perspective, for they

are not mere silenced victims, they critique and satirise the patriarchal and aristocratic society which sacrificed them. Hence, whereas Odysseus, as hero and man, can bask during his epic in the male privilege of committing adultery without any punishment or impact, these maids are sentenced to death, which illustrates a sexual double standard (Suzuki 2007, 272).

In Miller's novel it is especially Circe the one who is subdued to the kind of treatment which Penelope's maids had to endure. As all nymphs, she suffers the groping of men within her family: "[a] pinch, a stroke, a hand slipping under the sleeve of [her] dress" (Miller 2019, 168). However, the author decides to include an event which will alter the character of her protagonist. In chapter XIV, Circe receives the visit of a group of sailors and she offers them her kindness. But once these men discover that Circe lives alone and there is no man to be found on the island, they jump at the opportunity of appeasing all their appetites and Circe, albeit being a goddess, a sorceress, the daughter of Helios, is raped by the captain of the crew. Miller describes the scene in a manner which allows us to see how vulnerable and helpless Circe feels at what is happening to her. Her astonishment is evident and she remembers her sister Pasiphaë's words: she has been too tamed, her father Helios would never raise a finger to help her, and she was alone. After all, she was just a nymph, as she had prophetically enunciated at the beginning of the book: "[i]f anyone came, I would only be able to scream, and a thousand nymphs before me knew what good that did" (Miller 2019, 70). This pivotal moment will leave its traces on Circe and shape her later actions towards those who will come afterwards.

Conversely, unlike Penelope and the maids, Circe retaliates and kills those who have abused her. Later on, Circe reflects on this and realises that, ultimately, she "was alone and a woman, that was all that mattered" (Miller 2019, 170). That is to say, even though she is a goddess, men want to take advantage of her. They are never sorry to do what they do, they are only sorry to get caught. That is the reason why Circe becomes who she is and what she is now famed to be: a sorceress who turns men into pigs, somehow "foreshadowing the second-wave feminist cry of 'male chauvinist pigs'" (Hodges 2020, 20) or the current #BalanceTonPorc movement in France (the equivalent of the #MeToo movement).

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, Margaret Atwood makes a revision of the myth of Penelope and Odysseus by using postmodernist and feminist critical perspectives. The author plays with the narrative structure, offering her readers a parallel narrative, since the main story is taken from another work of fiction but now focused on Penelope, as well as traces of narrative collage, as when she presents the maids acting as chorus. Through the voice of Penelope, Atwood (de)constructs myths and critiques notions of story-telling and different versions of the same story. While Penelope attempts here to dispel rumours about her, but her own version of the story is biased, the maids seek justice for their deaths, which makes their narrative also biased. There is, thus, a constant tension about truths and we, as readers, are left with unreliable narrators, becoming aware of the fact that we can never know the whole truth. As Hutcheon (1988, 42) argues, “postmodernism remains fundamentally contradictory, offering only questions, never final answers”. For her part, Miller rewrites *Circe*'s myth through the voice of the character herself. For that purpose, the author makes use of the concept of *herstory*, which means that the female gaze is the focal point. *Circe* here is a character who is allowed to grow and develop her personality: she is not the same when we meet her at her father's palace as when we leave her at the end of the novel.

Atwood's and Miller's reinterpretations, thus, result in the reassessment of subject matters such as gender and class differences. The authors give voice and space to two previously suppressed or undermined voices in Homer's *Odyssey*, while, at the same time, trying to mirror the circumstances of numerous women, even up to our present age. In that sense, Penelope and *Circe* attempt to deconstruct the official Homeric version, becoming true weavers of *herstories*. If telling stories is what characterises us as human beings, then these two female figures are given the opportunity to fight for selfhood and subjectivity and to define themselves by narrating their story. We are presented with two female quests, Penelope's and *Circe*'s own odyssey, and the perspective of powerless women such as the maids. For this reason, Wilson (2000, 226) argues, “Atwood's re-visioning of patriarchal myths creates a new feminist mythology” and the same could be asserted about Miller. As such, both books examined here stand as clearly feminist

rewrites which confront issues of gender –and class– and how myths/histories are constructed on the suppression of women. The authors, in fact, depict several female characters who struggle for their own autonomy in differing manners.

Furthermore, Miller offers a new perspective on feminism, different from the one portrayed by Atwood. The relationship, for instance, between Circe and Penelope by the end of the book is one of respect and mutual understanding. Miller’s Penelope has here the chance to open up, to talk to someone who will, in effect, listen carefully to her side of the story, which is precisely what Atwood’s Penelope seeks. Both women share numerous similarities; both have been alone throughout most of their lives. Through the hardship and toils of life both female characters learnt endurance, most especially by facing the distress and trauma of not being as the others want them to be. It is as if Miller wants to offer Circe, and also Penelope, that Penelope portrayed in mythology and in Atwood’s novella, the opportunity to find peace, to find someone who understands, to find protection in a true sisterhood. As a matter of fact, Miller gives Penelope a new ending, or rather, a new beginning, for she becomes the new witch of Aiaia. That is how Miller succeeds in writing a *herstory* of nearly epic dimensions. Future research could fruitfully explore this notion of *herstory* further by analysing this trend in literature where mythology seems to stand as a category of its own.

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