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“At the heart of legend”: Feminist Revisionist Mythology in Twentieth-Century Poetry

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Madison Rozells

Lewiston, Maine

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Here's to those who believe in the second island.

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Abstract

The female existence and experience is not singular in the way that is often perpetuated by the narratives of Greek mythology. In acknowledging that each female revisitation to a myth is an attempt to add a kind of humanity to narratives of female existence which have been made static by myth and tradition, one can begin to question whether myth has the power to tell a true story. My project investigates the feminist project in the poetry of Eavan Boland, Rita Dove, Louise Glück, and Margaret Atwood in revising the existing and well-known myths of Demeter, Persephone, and Circe. It will use these poets' different treatments of each myth to investigate the nature of myth as a cultural touchstone, or as something that is culturally powerful enough to change the patriarchal narrative that exists within society surrounding these myths. Each poet, in choosing to interact with and revise myth, has a different project which ultimately seeks to imbue a vein of the "true" and fluid female experience into the base or image of the female that is established within the myths that they engage with. Through analysis of the differences and individuality of each interpretation, this project shows how feminist revisionist mythology plays a complicated role, having the potential to both advance and inhibit the representation of the wide variety of contemporary female experience by entering voluntarily into discourse with patriarchal narrative.

Introduction

Myths are often heralded as the archetypal images and stories of humanity that will remain timeless for their universality. If one is to accept that myths are timeless and continue to be relevant to modern, twenty-first-century society in the same way that they were in previous eras, one must also accept that the gendered, racial, and economic hierarchies that determined one's status in antiquity continue to ring true; one must accept that white, powerful men will continue to reign supreme for the foreseeable future and beyond. The twentieth century, with the rise of first and second wave feminism, saw an interest on behalf of women poets to push back against this view of myth as unchangeable and continually relevant in its original and revised formulations. As poets such as Eavan Boland, Rita Dove, Louise Glück and Margaret Atwood demonstrate, the myths are relevant; however, their revisions suggest that they have to come into a new life, they have to be reckoned with somehow in order continue to hold the applicability and force of myth. This project is known as feminist revisionist mythmaking. As defined by Alicia Suskin Ostriker in her foundational article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," feminist revisionist mythology, at its core, is "the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (73). Ostriker notes that poems which adhere to this kind of feminist revisionism of myth necessarily "consist of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (74).

Through this lens, this thesis seeks to analyze the invocations of myth in the works of Boland, Dove, Glück, and Atwood and the state of their feminist projects in the form of a two-fold diptych. The epigraphs at the beginning of each diptych, taken from the Homeric source material, display the nuances in each poetic interpretation of the received narratives. The myth of Demeter and Persephone will be explored in the works of Boland and Dove, and Circe in Glück

and Atwood. In this way, the importance of the personal and the distinct in each poet's revisitation of the myths can be understood. As well, the two chosen myths can demonstrate the two generalized categories of women, as dictated by patriarchal society: good girls and bad girls. Each poet's invocation of their chosen myths reveals the inner-workings of these essentializations of womanhood and their effects on their women speakers. Thus, the poets use their inhabitations to test the boundaries of myth and its ability to tell a true story, to be representative of a contemporary female life which necessitates breaking the confines of traditional gender norms while simultaneously demonstrating and resisting the oppressions that continue today.

As defined by Lois Tyson, feminist criticism "examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (83). In many ways, the poems studied in this thesis are themselves examples of feminist literary criticism in that they examine how these myths have historically oppressed women and what needs to be reimagined in order to bring myths into a new relevance for contemporary readers. This, fundamentally, requires an acknowledgement of the traditional gender roles which have been perpetuated and, in the cases of the feminist revisionist poets which this thesis investigates, an understanding of how to destabilize those roles which "cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive;" while women are deemed "emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (85). According to Tyson, "these gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities, which still occur today" (85). With this in mind, the impulse of feminist revisionist mythmakers that Ostriker describes serves as a method of deconstruction to, as Tyson asserts, "help us see, among other things, when our thinking is based on false oppositions, that is, on the belief that two ideas, qualities, or categories are polar opposites" (94). To adhere to the gender binary that is often presented in traditional

narratives and the gender roles that they describe is to refuse people the opportunity to determine for themselves their role in society which is just as limiting to men as it is to women. The gender binary also fails to represent those who do not identify as either male or female, thus erasing those individuals from the narrative by confining representation to those that do fall within the limits of the normative genders. The poetry explored in this study are largely heteronormative and cis-normative in their treatments of what counts as female and womanhood, despite their feminist project which is a potential limitation to the representation that they seek. As our understanding of gender has advanced since these poems were published, readers today might find that revisionist mythmaking poetry could open a space in which those who identify outside of the norms society has created can find representation.

Tyson cites language as a means to move beyond the confines of patriarchy (102). Feminists have long struggled with the lack of representation in the literary canon, as articulated in Lilian S. Robinson's 1983 article "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon." She writes:

For more than a decade now, feminist scholars have been protesting the apparently systematic neglect of women's experience in the literary canon, neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognized female writers and excluding the others. Moreover, the argument runs, that predominantly male authors in the canon show us the female character and relations between the sexes in a way that both reflects and contributes to sexist ideology—an aspect of these classic works about which the critical tradition remained silent for generations. (84)

Although this article was written nearly 40 years ago, now in 2020 there continues to be a need for nuanced representation which acknowledges the changing conceptions of womanhood and gender identity. Male voices predominantly occupy the cultural space and literary canon which has the power, as language does, to shift the narrative away from the gendered power structure that is perpetuated. Women's voices, even brilliant ones, are traditionally excluded to an extent which obscures the humanity of the individual experience by offering only male-authored representations of archetypal women with no power over the way that their story is told and, therefore, received. Thus, if we continue to devote a readerly and writerly practice to the creation and acknowledgement of feminist literary criticism, as the poets in this study have done through the practice a poesis or poetic "making," language as a form of resistance emerges as feminist practice. It becomes something that holds the power to make and change the narrative that has been received.

As a received narrative that continues to be culturally important, myth has the power to influence the cultures in which it exists. To this end, the representations that they portray play an important role in the freedom of identity that can be achieved within modern societies. In the introduction to her book *Medea's Chorus: Myth and Women's Poetry Since 1950*, Veronica House insists:

Myth is neither inherently misogynistic nor paternalistic. It is an imaginative rendering of a culture's beliefs, which implies that as a culture changes, the wellsprings of the culture's imagination should change along with it to remain viable. When the women poets in this study engage in mythic revision, they are doing far more than re-writing old stories. They are embarking on the radical

work of cultural transformation, work that confronts latent assumptions and drives modern culture to venture into new psychological landscapes. (xv-xvi)

To understand that in order to remain relevant myths require change is also to acknowledge that the female existence and role in society is not singular or static in the way that is often displayed in classical mythological narratives. Poets such as Boland, Dove, Glück, and Atwood in their revisitations of myth are not simply “re-writing old stories,” they are recognizing that myth works as a cultural touchstone, but taking the initiative to transform it into something that more truthfully represents the individuality of humanity, and especially the female characters.

The Greco-Roman myth of Demeter and Persephone (or Ceres and Proserpina) is the quintessential mythic representation of daughterhood and motherhood: the finite cycle of womanhood in the eyes of many. Both Eavan Boland and Rita Dove interact with this myth in myriad ways. Boland returns to this myth over the course of her career as a means to comment on her own personal experience as a mother, as seen in the two poems studied here, “The Making of an Irish Goddess” and “The Pomegranate,” while Dove’s inhabitation of Demeter and Persephone spans a whole collection in which the cycle of daughter growing into mother occurs multiple times over. Throughout their works, both Boland and Dove reject the idea of a single, static representation of the female experience of motherhood, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of motherhood as an identity marker in those who choose to take on that role. That being said, their work and their focus on the individual and the personal experience call into question the reductionist and essentialist tendencies of such myths as that of Demeter and Persephone and their inability to make room for those women and those female experiences which do not directly align with the portrayed gender norms. Boland sees the mundane and the personal as a way to counteract the essentialist and archetypal qualities of myth and to make

these characters immediately relevant for her readers. Likewise, Dove's interest in what makes a person an individual and how that might shape their experience within the arc of the Demeter/Persephone myth shows how human connection, despite difference, is what allows for personal growth. In her essay "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde writes: "it is not the differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation" (115). Poets like Dove and Boland who inject their revised myth with the personal and the individual—that which makes them different—aim to recognize the differences which are inherent to humanity and raise them up, instead of using them to tear others down.

Traditionally, women are categorized within a dichotomy of good and bad in which you can only inhabit one of the two labels. If the representations of motherhood that are presented in the Demeter/Persephone myth fall into the category of the "good" and domestic, then it is contradicted with the image of the "bad girl:" the sexually predatory female, the other woman, the bitch. For the purposes of this study, this binary is analyzed through revisitations of the enchantress Circe in the poetry of Louise Glück and Margaret Atwood. In some ways, these poets do not mitigate the cruelty commonly associated with Circe; however, through their inhabitations of Circe both Atwood and Glück demonstrate the unfairness and the falsehood in the representation of powerful women such as Circe as purely evil with no other character traits. Glück resists the way that female power is vilified and suggests that only an awareness of our own oppression can lead to a freedom from the traditional constraints of gender roles. Atwood's Circe seeks representation within the narratives that she exists. She wants to be included and to coexist and belong, without being relegated to the margins. Both reveal the detrimental effects of

portraying women as only this or that by utilizing Circe's own voice to exhibit the nuance of any female existence, to show that female identity goes beyond what men are capable of portraying. In the inhabitations of Demeter, Persephone, and Circe, the poets contend with different faces of the same limiting and ultimately misogynistic rendering of real human (and, importantly, female) life.

In recognizing the oppression which women have experienced in these traditional mythic narratives and writing women back into myth and history, contemporary poets and authors are enabling a resistance which is only possible when one has the ability to see how the oppression operates in everyday life. Perhaps Hélène Cixous says it best in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa":

To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...)—tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of herself that she must urgently learn to speak. (880)

Cixous sees the project of resistance and illumination through language and writing as one that should be undertaken "urgently" in order to "tear [women] away from the superegoized structure

in which [they have] always occupied the place reserved for the guilty” (880). In order to remove oneself from a structure which consistently finds ways to make women “guilty” and *wrong* for being autonomous in any way, Cixous argues that one must “realize” their own subjugations and “urgently learn to speak” against them. Just as Tyson asserts, Cixous sees that language can be wielded like a weapon, a weapon that can break down the barriers to life and representation that patriarchal societies have built around women and other populations traditionally marginalized from roles of power and importance. Through their poetry, Boland, Dove, Glück, and Atwood revisit and revise the myths which would allow them to give women an urgent voice with which to fight the systematic oppression they have been relegated to. Although there is an antagonism between the feminist project of the poets and the received narrative, the continued use and habitual reference to mythologies also demonstrates the joys and bounty of this cultural inheritance for the poets. That is, the poets in this study are clearly deeply convinced of the importance of myth, to the point that they believe it is worth it to attempt to find the true and the contemporary within it.

I. Demeter and Persephone

[But even as [Demeter] held her child in her arms, her heart suddenly suspected some trick, and she was very afraid...and quickly she asked:] “My child, I hope you didn’t [taste] any food [when you were down there? Tell me, [don’t hide it, let’s both know about it]. For if you didn’t, you can be w[ith the rest of the immortals] and live with me and your father, the dark-cloud son of Kronos, with all the immortals honoring you; but if you tasted anything, you will go back down and dwell in the recesses of the earth for a third of the year, until the due date, spending the other two thirds with me and the other gods; and when the earth blooms with sweet-smelling spring flowers of every kind, then you will come back up from the misty dark, a great wonder to the gods and to mortals. Tell me, how did he snatch you down to the misty dark, and what did he trick you with, the mighty Hospitable One?”

Beautiful Persephone spoke to her in reply: “Well, mother, I will tell you everything just as it was. When coursing Hermes came swift with the message from father Zeus and the other Heavenly Ones that I should leave the Darkness, so that you might set eyes on me and cease from your wrath and your dreadful resentment against the immortals, I at once jumped up in joy; but he surreptitiously got a pomegranate seed into me, a honey-sweet food, and made me taste it against my will. As to how he snatched me up through the crafty design of Zeus my father, and took me off to the recesses of the earth, I will explain and go through it all, just as you ask. We were all frolicking in the lovely meadow—[...]—and we were picking lovely flowers, a mixture of gentle saffron and iris and hyacinth and rosebuds and lilies, wondrous to behold, and narcissus that the broad earth put out like saffron. I was picking away happily, when the ground beneath gave way, and there the lord, the mighty Hospitable One, leaped forth. He went off below the earth with me in his golden chariot, for all my resistance, and I screamed aloud. I’m sorry, but that’s the whole truth I’m telling you.”

—Homer, “Hymn To Demeter”¹

¹ Found on pages 63-67 in the Loeb Collection online version of *Homeric Hymns*, edited and translated by Martin L. West. See works cited for full citation.

Chapter 1: “Beautiful rifts in time”: Eavan Boland and the Humanity of Myth

In her essay “Outside History” in the edited volume *Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition*, Irish poet Eavan Boland concerns herself most prominently with the issue of women in the traditionally very male Irish poetic tradition. She expresses her frustration not only with the essential exclusion of women Irish poets from the tradition, but also, and perhaps more importantly, with the misuse of women as static symbols and motifs to be exploited and reduced by male poets:

The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry. They moved easily, deftly, as if by right among images of women in which I did not believe and of which I could not approve. The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status ... Women in such poems were frequently referred to approvingly as mythic, emblematic. But to me these passive and simplified women seemed a corruption. (Boland 14)

By writing women into myths, especially myths as accessible and well known as the classical mythologies that her poems tend to inhabit, she is subverting the status of women in the poems of Irish male poets who made women “mythic” as a means to further their narratives about other topics: about country and men and war, not about the women themselves. Alicia Ostriker posits that within feminist revisionist poetry “the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy” (73). In many ways, as stated by Ostriker, feminist revisionism must confront the archetypes of femininity which flourish within myth and literature as a means to expose the reductionist and brutal simplification of a woman’s experience as interchangeable with an approved image of “the” female experience.

Thus, by imbuing the narratives with the authentic and mundane, Boland modifies the impulse to interact with essentialist and archetypal myth so that her poetry concerns itself more fully with human legend and the truth of the multitude of possible female experiences. She does not deal in the universal or the archetypal, but instead with the personal and the individual as a way of letting gender back into the lived experience of myth. It is not a divestment of gender in its entirety. Rather, Boland raises the female to a level of representation that has largely been ignored in favor of male experience. The power of the ordinary and the necessity of the ordinary in order to properly represent human experience (both within and without myth) is stimulated by the attention that Boland and her speakers pay to their own mundane actions and domestic relations. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, in her book *Ordinary Affects*, considers the affect of everyday life, of the domestic, of the mundane. She uses affect theory as a means of activating a certain attentiveness to everyday life which mirrors Boland's inhabitation of myth in her poetry. Stewart writes: "Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of" (2). Boland's focus on that which is real and impactful within the life of women who are traditionally made "mythic" by being reduced to being "emblematic" in the work of male poets plays on what is fundamental to affect theory: every story, body, and experience is distinct and, yet, they all participate in the myth and its retelling in productive ways.

The experiences of the speakers in Boland's poems "The Making of an Irish Goddess" and "The Pomegranate" become accessible to the world outside of Ireland through their invocation of the myth of Ceres and Persephone, which signals that dilemmas of representation and humanity are part and parcel of many women's experiences in a male-dominated world. The fact that Ceres and Persephone is often considered the quintessential and "archetypal" myth of

femininity and womanhood reveals the deeply imbedded patriarchal belief that the one true female experience is that of motherhood and marriage of loss of virginity in Persephone's case. Boland contends with the cultural desire for gendered archetypes to shape society by complicating and individualizing this essentialist and biological-determinist notion with her own personal experience as a mother.

Over the course of her career, Boland has repeatedly sought out the Ceres/Persephone myth in her poetry. Her poem "The Making of an Irish Goddess" clearly confronts the Roman myth of Ceres (or Demeter in the Greek tradition) and Persephone. This allows Boland the opportunity to humanize the women who have been sublimated and made static by legend and literature. The question of poesis and the poet's role in "making" this Irish Goddess is implicit in the title and suggests that Boland exercises some of this poetic making in the poem itself. Adam Wyeth, in his monograph *The Hidden World of Poetry: Unravelling Celtic Mythology of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, posits that in this poem "Boland attempts to bring women's reality to the forefront, conjuring her own personal myth" by introducing her truth as a woman and a mother in a world in flux to the narrative of the goddess Ceres "who remains in the static world of myth, denying her of humanity" (56). Through her adaptation of the myth, the poet confronts the way that women have previously been depicted, in both myth and more contemporary literature, as singular and static; however, it seems as though she is less concerned with an actual confrontation of the myth itself than she is with the opportunity that it affords her to humanize the women who have been sublimated by legend. In many ways, Boland seems to posit a myth of her own, though revised, which deals specifically with the experience of Irish women but which has consequences in the world outside of Ireland as well. One could argue that this in and of itself is reductive of the Irish female experience as it presumes to be representative of what that

experience is, will be, or could be in a more truthful way than previous, male-authored narratives; however, the specific and individualistic vantage point from which Boland writes, focused and inspired by her own life experiences, allows for the understanding that this depiction does not attempt to be universal.

In the world of myth, “Ceres went to hell / with no sense of time,” deprived of the opportunity to experience that which is inherently human, and which time provides: change, evolution, growth, and life. Instead, Ceres is faced with the stagnant imagery of a world without life, “a seasonless, unscarred earth,” which is barren and unvaried. This line, which is isolated in its own stanza, is abrasive in its solitude holding the reading in the seclusion and sterility of the mythic world that is being depicted.

When she looked back
all that she could see was

the arteries of silver in the rock,
the diligence of rivers always at one level,
wheat at one height,
leaves of a single color,
the same distance in the usual light;

a seasonless, unscarred earth.

The sense of monotony is emphasized by the persistent parallel structure in the first two lines of the third stanza (“**the** arteries **of** silver in the rock, / **the** diligence **of** rivers always at one level,” emphasis mine). This use of mesarchia—a combination of anaphora and mesodiplosis which, respectively, are a repetition of words at the beginning and middle of a line or phrase—diminishes the importance of each particular observation, reducing the scene, rather, to a generalized monotony of images which are grammatically parallel in their entirety. There is an erasure and dissolution of vital difference and the humanity that comes with it. In this way, the speaker does not actively cast herself as Ceres, but rather it occurs to her to engage with the

mythic narrative of Ceres at this moment as a means to reckon with this received narrative of motherhood and femininity. The human experience of the speaker, therefore, is contrasted with the stagnant imagery of Ceres' world. The stasis of her existence represents her disconnect from the human world and its vitality which reveals the reductionist and essentialist qualities of mythic archetypes and characters in classical narratives.

The singularity of life and object in the world that Ceres leaves behind is compared to the speaker's own experience in the human world which is not exceedingly happy or satisfactory, but real; something filled with the truth of human suffering and the temporality of human life.

Her body

must be

an accurate inscription
of that agony:

the failed harvests,
the fields rotting to the horizon,
the children devoured by their mothers
whose souls, they would have said,
went straight to hell,
followed by their own.

Her body, thus, becomes a metaphor for "the failed harvests" which call back to the Irish Famine. In his analysis of "The Making of an Irish Goddess," Wyeth notes that the Irish Famine "permanently changed Ireland's landscape on almost every level. Through [the speaker's] ravaged body and the land, the souls of the dead find a voice" (54). Thus, with this metaphor, the poet intrinsically connects the personal and individual experience of her ancestors and those that have suffered in her history with the creation of her particular "Irish Goddess," representative of a truth of experience that previous and classical iterations of Ceres lack. The tricolon anaphora depicts the suffering of the human earth and calls back to the previous mesarchia in relation to

the world of Ceres. Here, in contrast, the anaphora emphasizes the agony and lack of stability which do not exist in the mythic sphere.

The speaker's declaration that she "need[s] time— / [her] flesh and that history—" demonstrates the difference that Boland is creating between the flesh-and-blood woman and the myth of Ceres that she is invoking. The state of one's body is a fundamentally human concern; it does not affect the mythic. Humanity, as the speaker demonstrates, "need[s] time" which is indicated by the human flesh and the changes it goes through: "my body, / neither young now nor fertile, and with the marks of childbirth / still on it." The comparison between the speaker's human existence with all its flaws—like "the stitched, healed blemish of a scar—" and Ceres' mythic, monotonous existence, attempts to confront previous (and even mythic) representations of women and the female experience as stagnant and flat. Although Ceres is thought to be the archetypal image of the great and caring mother, this division from humanity demonstrates the harmful and unrealistic expectations of womanhood and motherhood which are made present and pervasive in society through these archetypal images. Furthermore, the fact that the speaker feels as though she needs to hide her scar and her flaws ("the way I pin my hair to hide / [it]") demonstrates the way that women seek a kind of perfection in terms of their exterior appearance, calling back to the societal desire for women to hold a certain role in the world, one which is to be pretty, silent, and a mother. Boland rebuffs this imperative in the way that the speaker's imperfect and experienced body becomes the "accurate description" of the agony of a world which is also flawed and also struggles with the imperfections of failed harvests and mothers who are not enough, largely because they have been reduced to nothing by society and literature. She challenges the passive and simplified mythic beings in previous, traditional narratives which reduce women and their experience to sub-human, to beings disconnected from both the

suffering and beauty of humanity. Thus, the poem finds a way for the subject to be continuous with, not apart from, the world around her which shatters the archetypal image of the mother who loses her value following the rearing of her children.

When the speaker begins to address herself instead of Ceres, she begins to enact truths of the life of a woman. In her repeated and domestic action of “holding up [her] hand / sickle-shaped, to [her] eyes / to pick out / [her] own daughter” she embodies every woman and mother that came before her and similarly fought to seek out their children at the end of a March day. In this appeal to universality of image, Boland reveals the social constraints of motherhood as constraints that are so implicit that they do not present as constraints. In the immediate image of the speaker looking for her daughter at the end of the day—her “sickle-shaped” hand cutting the harsh light of the sun instead of grain from the fields that were once “rotting to the horizon”—and its comparison to Ceres following Persephone into hell to save her from Hades, Boland creates her own myth out of the reality of female experience and motherhood. Although she is doing her own kind of mythmaking in the creation of this Irish Goddess, she continues to be suspicious of the total and essentialist power that mythic imagery can hold over a community. The tension between her Irish Goddess and the static imagery of Irish myth such as Mother Ireland, thus, at once acknowledges the passive role that women (and mothers, importantly) have been confined to in Irish culture and suggests that Boland sees the truth of motherhood and female life as something much more powerful and goddess-like, despite its mundanity. She writes that “Myth is the wound we leave/in the time we have—.” Thus, Boland contends with her own assumptions about the power of myth and the adaptability of myth. She also suggests that, to some extent, the personal is highly involved in the evolution of myth as it is the “wound” that each person has the power to leave over the course of their life. This demonstrates her own

contradictory feelings regarding the place of myth in society and its potential to create positive change, or to hold one in the past. In an interview with Deborah Tall from 1988, Boland is quoted as saying, “I think it is true that myth has very often been used in the work of male poets as a sort of ornamental pair of handcuffs that you put on the present to tie it back to the past and shackle it” (113). She goes on to describe the “elements of manipulation” that are present in literature and media:

Some of those are mythic. Some of those are the failure to surrender to types of suffering and the attempt to organize it into types of control. I think there is quite of bit of that in myth...So I have this relationship with [myth] which on the one side is aware of the danger of it but is still drawn to it. (113)

This reveals her impulse, one that began long before the publication of “The Making of an Irish Goddess” and her other poems which engage with the myth, to engage with and subvert myth at the same time. Through the interactions between women and the mythic in her poems, Boland seeks to remedy the lack of truth and depth within previous mythic representations of women and their role in society, while also contemplating her own complex relationship with myth and its place in life and literature.

“The Pomegranate,” first published in *The New Yorker* in 1993, and then later in Boland’s 1994 collection *In a Time of Violence*, is often considered a revision of her earlier poetic adaptation of the myth of Ceres (and Persephone) in “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” which was originally published in her 1990 collection *Outside History*. This is also the title of her essay regarding the place of women poets in history and reveals Boland’s investment in the place of women on the margins of society because of their gender. “The Pomegranate” contends with the myth in a slightly more direct manner than her previous poem, as the speaker casts

herself in the role of Ceres, and the role of Persephone before that, instead of simply invoking their legend as a poetic device. As Shara McCallum posits in “Eavan Boland’s Gift: Sex, History, and Myth,” instead of using the voices of Ceres or Persephone, the speaker of the poem “reflects on her varying personal encounters with the myth over time” (162), which suggests a personal inhabitation of the myth itself rather than the mythic personas. The poem, which is in many ways a revisitation of the themes and content of “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” speaks broadly to the process of a daughter becoming a mother—moving from the role of Persephone to Ceres—and the human growth (and sometimes suffering) that must come before that change can occur. The poem begins with the speaker’s assertion that “The only legend [she has] ever loved is / The story of a daughter lost in hell” because she “can enter it anywhere / And [has].” This reveals that her affinity for this particular myth comes from personal experience with being “lost in hell” as the daughter, which allows her to relate the story to her own daughter and ultimately inhabit the role of Ceres. The idea of hell as a place that one can enter into from “anywhere,” or visit and get lost in, is complicated by the metaphor of “entry” as it ambiguously posits that the myth itself is both a potential hell and a place where one can lose oneself. This both suggests that myth has the power within a culture to sway societal desires and norms governing a woman’s place, and also demonstrates the poet’s understanding that such powerful images and narratives can be dangerous to individuality and choice for women. Boland’s own continued visitation to this myth suggests that there is something within the story that she also deeply identifies with on a personal level. Tudor Balinisteanu advances in his chapter entitled “The Persephone Figure in Eavan Boland’s ‘The Pomegranate’ and Liz Lochhead’s ‘Lucy’s Diary’” that the poem uses the myth “to intensify an ordinary experience in the life of a mother [which] serves to change the perception of the social functions of women which the myth originally envisioned” (33). The

myth both intensifies ordinary experience and offers critique. In seeking to add an element of the mundane, and therefore a more truthful and open female experience, to the myth of Ceres and Persephone, as Balinisteanu suggests, Boland questions the societal acceptance of the myths that perpetuate and “legitimate male-dominated gender regimes that alienate women from themselves” (33).

The syntax of “a daughter lost in hell” suggests that the speaker is unable to find her way herself and must be found by someone else. The specification that she is a daughter signals, before the particular myth is identified in the fifth line, that it is a mother that is responsible for searching for—if not finding—her:

Later
 I walked out in a summer twilight
 Searching for my daughter at bed-time.
 When she came running I was ready
 To make any bargain to keep her.

The speaker would like to keep her daughter safe, young, free and without worry forever but she knows that this is not possible. She knows that any attempt to keep too tight a hold on her for the sake of this freedom is paradoxical and will have the wrong effect: it will turn the “beautiful rifts in time” spent in the safety of a loving home into a prison that her daughter will resent. These “rifts” which represent the periods of separation between mother and daughter in which the distance allows for personal growth to occur.

But what else
 Can a mother give her daughter but such
 Beautiful rifts in time?
 If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.

The strength of her desire as a mother to shelter her daughter stems from the fact that she has seen what was in that hell with “the stars blighted” as well as the suburban hell that exists where “the veiled stars are above ground.” The shared and continuous experience between mother and

daughter of the ultimately unavoidable temptations and suffering of human life suggests the importance of the mother-daughter relationship to the female experience. By allowing her daughter the space to experience these “rifts in time,” the speaker of “The Pomegranate” ensures that there isn’t resentment so that the daughter continues to love the mother. The persistent repetition of “iv” and “if” sounds in these lines intensify the impact of the final word, “gift.” The affective nature of this sonic repetition implies the speaker is already experiencing this “grief” which she knows must endure for the sake of her daughter’s happiness and growth. The focus of the poem is fundamentally the relationship between the mother and daughter, a relationship in which the mother is neither villainized nor diminished by the men around her for her grief and loss as Demeter experiences in the myth.

The evolution from daughter to mother is significant to Boland’s errand because it is not a static representation of women. Rather, it is a depiction of a speaker who experiences an evolution over the course of the poetic narrative. The speaker begins as the daughter and meditates on her change into a mother as a way to relate to her daughter, which fights the stasis and emblematic nature of “women as motifs” in the work of male Irish poets. Through the poem, Boland finds a way to be both daughter and mother, to be more than one thing at once which, again, pushes back on the singular image of a woman, especially a mother, that is commonly portrayed and accepted by society. Boland’s continued inhabitation of this myth invites questions of essentialism and the maternal archetype as the idea of a shared experience between mother and daughter and the need to learn from one another is suggestive of a patriarchal image of a woman’s need to reproduce to continue this cycle of shared, and fundamentally gendered, experiences. Lynn M. Stearney, in her article “Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype,” argues that “one of the first tasks of the contemporary feminist movement was to

extricate motherhood from its moorings as a ‘natural’ desire on the part of woman and understand it instead as a socially constructed and historically, economically, and socially specific experience” (158). This unmooring, however, is complicated, as a feminist rejection of motherhood and a further distancing from this choice also signals a certain adhesion to the patriarchal powers that be and the control they hold over female bodies.

To take myth and make it both modern and relevant through the specificity of the scene and experience, so that the poem holds actual resonances of truth, requires a kind of amplification so that the poem can represent a more general experience while still acknowledging the individuality of that experience. This is demonstrated in the speaker’s emphasis on her own personal experience as she “climb[s] the stairs and stand[s] where [she] can see / [her] child asleep beside her teen magazines, / her can of Coke, her place of uncut fruit.” No matter what fruit or other temptation arises, the speaker knows:

that even in the place of death,
at the heart of legend, in the midst
of rocks full of unshed tears
ready to be diamonds by the time
the story was told, a child can be
hungry...

She is aware that her daughter is going to seek out (and eat) the things that attract her, whether or not she is warned against succumbing to the very lusts that her mother wishes to keep her away from. That is the truth of humanity: we desire what can be painful for us, the difficulty of maturity and growth into experience, we are bound to make mistakes. We are destined to surrender to temptation just as Eve does with the fruit in the Garden of Eden, an event which is hinted at in the phonetic description of a pomegranate as “The French sound of apple and / The noise of stone.” The reality of the mother-daughter relationship, and the tensions that the speaker must contend with between how tightly she wants to hold on to her daughter and the space she

knows she needs to give, presents a narrative which is emblematic of the change and inevitable loss that is inherent in all human life—the loss of childhood. The loss of a child to adulthood is also inevitable, however it is specific to parents as they have a child to lose, not just a self. This parental loss is only avoidable in one (much worse) experience and that is the premature death of a child. Boland seems to ponder this potential loss in both “The Making of an Irish Goddess” and “The Pomegranate” through the parallel mothers who seek their children at the end of the day, only to see them far beyond their reach. The way that the poem assumes to be a human myth is, at its core, a human story of motherhood and change speaks to Boland’s own desire to unfreeze the literary narrative of women and express a greater truth of the individuality of female experience, rather than a singular chronicle of female existence. Thus, the poem and the speaker’s life becomes a symbol of true humanity and the circle of life through the imperfect, but real, life of a woman. For Boland, this sense of true humanity counts as a reflection of an undeniably real story that is not stable in the way that myth perpetuates and, in its instability and dynamic nature, is true.

There are obvious Irish implications in the “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” between the fact that it is an Irish Goddess that is being made poetically, the mention of Dublin, and the allusion to the Great Famine which occurs in the ninth and tenth stanzas; however the more pronounced impulse in both “The Making of an Irish Goddess” and “The Pomegranate” seems to be to create true, multi-faceted, powerful literary figures from immediately relevant and available experiences of contemporary women. In these poems, Boland subverts the images of the disembodied and mute Irish muses that have been made of women and creates an Irish poetic tradition that constructs human legend instead. Her elevation of the mundane, individual, female existence, of the normal life of a mother and daughter to mythical levels, challenges the

canonical use of women as stagnant symbols in art and demonstrates Boland's desire to "find and repossess" history (Wyeth 57) instead of abandoning it and letting it continue to spiral into something which has the power to dictate what we believe female existence should look like.

In adding the personal and the mundane to her repossession of history through mythic inhabitation in her poetry, Boland pushes back against the male impulse to use myth as a means to confine the present to the norms of the past. In large part, this has to do with the image of women as mothers and daughters, brides and virgins. Through their female speakers, Boland's poems tests the boundaries of myth and the opportunity it affords contemporary artists to humanizes the women and archetypes that have been sublimated and limited by myth previously in the canon and in society. In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart writes, "Ordinary scenes can tempt the passerby with the promise of a story let out of the bag. Matter can shimmer with undetermined potential and the weight of received meaning" (23). Boland uses the potentiality of ordinariness to deliver a representation of her authentic experience and the sense of self which is born out of small gestures, performances, and practices; the small realities of a lived life. Stewart's assertion that "the ordinary is a thing that has to be imagined and inhabited" is not unlike Boland's own poetic practice and the inhabitation of myth which is activated in her poetry and which creates a space in the literary canon for the affect, the beauty and suffering, of everyday experience.

Chapter 2: “No story’s ever finished”: Rita Dove’s Cyclical Experience of *Mother Love*

While Boland revisited the myth of Demeter and Persephone in a career-long pursuit of the “ordinary” inhabitation of myth, Rita Dove, in her collection *Mother Love*, undertakes a revision of the complete cycle of the Demeter/Persephone myth through the form of a revised sonnet sequence which, importantly, subverts both form and content through her use of multiple voices and perspectives to complicate the myth’s reception. In the foreword to the volume, entitled “An Intact World,” Dove acknowledges the common understanding of the “true” sonnet, meaning those which adhere to the traditionally accepted structures and classifications of such forms as Shakespearean or Petrarchan, as “an intact world where everything is in sync” and where any variation in the form “represents a world gone awry” (xi). She goes on to question this conventional idea of form and tradition and their capabilities as “a talisman against disintegration” which is ultimately highly capable of telling the story of the “violated world” (xi) that Demeter and Persephone exist within: that is, one where all three beings—mother, daughter, and poet—“are struggling to sing in their chains” (xii). In a number of interviews, Dove has mentioned her impulse to work with and inhabit this particular myth because of her own personal experience as a daughter growing into a mother. The way the poems pull from the personal experiences of the poet contends with the fact that this myth is often considered *the* myth of women, but never are *all* women included in its narrative.

In an analysis that foregrounds the role of myth in *Mother Love* as a modern, cultural interpretive device, Therese Steffen posits that Dove “bases her lyric sequence on myth and at the same time transforms overdetermined source material into something deeply personal” (228). The transformation of the received myth into something with personal connections and connotations opens up the potential for the poetic material to resonate with a larger group of

people and which calls into question the general understanding or interpretation of myth as a powerful cultural symbol or device. The collection is split into seven sections and moves through the generational experience of motherhood through a number of voices, with equal time afforded to the experience of both mother and daughterhood. Seven is half of fourteen, the number of lines in a sonnet, a reminder that the story is potentially unfinished and repeatable; it is a *cycle*, which is depicted in the volume as Demeter moves from daughter to mother and Persephone does the same. This numeration also acknowledges the received form that she is working with, while similarly recognizing her own radicalization of it. According to both Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms, in order to truly be a sonnet a poem must follow a certain set of rules including a rhyme scheme and meter which Dove does not maintain in her poetry. Through her unconventional use of the sonnet form, Dove rejects the expectations of the sonnet and the traditional association of poetry with courtly love and rigid ideas of gender. Dove notes in her foreword and in various interviews that this collection was inspired in part by Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*: an adaptation of a myth in sonnet form, but one that more traditionally conforms to its relationship with courtly and unrequited love. That being said, one might argue that Dove herself simultaneously adheres to rejects the topic of unrequited, courtly love. She inhabits the form in the voices of this female, familial relationship which, in some ways, is unrequited at various points in the narrative.

The opening section is comprised of a single 28-line poem, "Heroes," in which the speaker uses the second person to address the reader directly: "A flower in a weedy field: / make it a poppy. You pick it." In the original mythic narrative, the "flower in a weedy field" that entices Persephone is a narcissus. The command-like "make it a poppy" suggests that this is a story that can be adjusted, entered from anywhere. In a sense, it is individualized; yet, at the

same time, this also suggests that the same story is somewhat universal for all women. This idea of universality and a singular, repeated, female experience is complicated by the fact that it is removed from the traditional mythic canon, written in a radicalized sonnet form, and in the voice and words of an African American woman poet. In this way, Dove's revisitation of the Demeter/Persephone myth rejects and fights against the essentialism of the myth itself and the way that myth functions in traditional societies as emblematic of true experience. Over the course of "Heroes," the "you" steals the last poppy in the field, murders the owner of the garden, and flees.

and there's nothing to be done
but break the stone into gravel
to prop up the flower in the stolen jar

you have to take along,
because you're a fugitive now
and you can't leave clues.

Already the story's starting to unravel,
the villagers stirring as your heart
pounds into your throat. O why

did you pick that idiot flower?
Because it was the last one
and you knew

it was going to die. (Dove 3-4)

Lotta Lofgren, in an assessment of the fragmentation and separation that is complicated over the course of *Mother Love*, writes about the poppy: "The flower's near miraculous task is to form new roots; this is its only chance at sustained life. Disintegration, separation, alienation, are all essential ingredients for growth" (140). Lofgren's analysis reveals the nature of growth that begins to be presented in this opening poem: the need for separation in order to thrive and have the potential to return and find a new harmony with each other and the world. Beyond nature and

flora, this analysis suggests that separation and fragmentation is essential for the growth of mother and daughter as well. The story that the speaker must tell as “fugitive” begins to unravel, much like mythic narratives do when you look back on them from a more contemporary time. Here, “idiot” functions as a qualifier for both the poetic “you” as well as the flower itself. As well, “pick” can be understood as to choose, rather than to pull from the ground. These two ambiguities suggest that one can choose the person or thing that has the ability to create chaos for them. This alludes to the lover that Persephone finds in Hades, but also questions the ideas of inevitability which are perpetuated in the original myth, giving a certain agency to Persephone and the choices she makes in her life. This is also a moment in which gendered, but especially female, determinism is rejected and the received myth of Demeter and Persephone is revealed to be too narrow and essentialist in terms of its representations of women to properly exemplify female experience. The final lines of the poem, in which the agency and reasoning for the actions of the poetic “you” are acknowledged, begin a line of questioning that is continued throughout the collection: What do you do to try to ensure the survival of something (be it innocent, idiotic, or beautiful) in the face of the “miserable garden” of life and death?

“Persephone, Falling” and “Persephone Abducted” both appear in the second section of the collection and deal with the event of Persephone’s abduction. “Persephone, Falling” takes the stanzaic form of a Petrarchan sonnet (an octave followed by a sestet); however, it does not conform to any specific rhyme scheme or meter which would be traditional to the form. While Dove conforms in some ways to this received form, her content continues to play with expectations of the canon. The first stanza largely maintains the traditional mythic narrative of Persephone’s abduction: Persephone is in a field picking narcissi “when, sprung out of the earth /

on his glittering terrible / carriage, he claimed his due.” The second stanza begins with the daily warnings of a modern mother to what seems to be an inattentive daughter:

(Remember: go straight to school.
This is important, stop fooling around!
Don’t answer to strangers. Stick
with your playmates. Keep your eyes down.)
This is how easily the pit
Opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground. (Dove 9)

The first stanza, along with the final two lines of the second stanza, closely follow the classical, Homeric myth (what with the pit, the carriage, the claiming. This is juxtaposed with the modern language of a worried, protective mother which emphasizes the way in which myth, much like a mother’s word, can be universally accepted. Furthermore, the enclosed space of the mother’s reminders within the parentheses can also be understood to mimic the captive space of the pit and the underworld. This introduces doubt as to whether hell or a mother’s overbearing love is more restrictive, more of an entrapment, for a young woman who longs only to be an individual. The opening lines also point towards the idea of individuality: “One narcissus among the ordinary beautiful / flowers, one unlike all the others!” Persephone’s attraction to that which is individual in nature mirrors her desire to be an individual within herself. The fact that she is blamed for her abduction because “She had strayed from the herd” and no one could hear her calls, suggests that, within this narrative, it is believed that women are only safe within this protective herd where individuality is hidden, where no one stands out. The tendency to victim blame here is replicated in the use of the imperative in the interjection of the mother’s voice: “remember,” “stop,” “don’t,” etc. Her commands demonstrate the conflation, on the part of the mother and society, of being invisible and being safe. Ultimately, this vilifies the existence of an

individual and places importance on similarity rather than difference which is what attracts Persephone to the world outside of her mother's constraints.

This poem, along with "Persephone Abducted," show the different ways in which Persephone's abduction can be viewed in light of the generational differences between mother and daughter, as well as a daughter's desire to be self-sufficient and capable without her mother. These impulses are exemplified in the first poem of this section, "Primer," in which the speaker's mother saves her from some bullies:

... I survived
 their shoves across the schoolyard
 because my five-foot-zero mother drove up
 in her Caddie to shake them down to size.
 Nothing could get me into that car.
 I took the long way home, swore
 I'd show them all: I would grow up. (7)

The speaker says she "survived" the encounter because of her mother; but, she wanted to have the opportunity to rescue herself. To "grow up" is also complicated for the speaker, who notes that her mother was only "five-foot-zero." Her desire to distance herself metaphorically from her mother's protection is also emphasized in the physical distance and space that she wishes to create by growing up and growing taller and therefore better than the diminutive, but powerful, stature of her mother. Following this, "Persephone, Falling" largely conforms to ideas about the narrative and myth of Persephone's disappearance into the underworld that come out of Demeter's point of view. Her point of view will eventually be pushed against when readers witness the meeting and mutual seduction between Persephone and Hades.

"Persephone Abducted," although its speaker is outside of the mother/daughter pair, more fully contends with Persephone's role in her own abduction, if you can even call it that.

She cried out for Mama, who did not

hear. She left with a wild eye thrown back,
 she left with curses, rage
 that withered her features to a hag's. (13)

The use of the pronoun “she” becomes ambiguous in the second line, which at once demonstrates how mother and daughter can be conflated, but also emphasizes the differences between them. Upon first reading, one might think that the passage above is completely from the daughter’s point of view, which would suggest that Persephone had more agency in her own abduction and that the lack of her mother’s attention spurred the event itself. However, it becomes clear with continued attention that the “she” who “left with a wild eye...curses, [and] rage” is Demeter reacting to the realization that her daughter has been taken: “She left us singing in the field, oblivious / to all but the ache of our own bent backs” (13). Already, even immediately after the abduction, Demeter abandons her duties as a goddess in a rage and flees to try and retrieve her daughter. Without Persephone she is incomplete and, therefore, incapable of allowing the rest of the world to live in harmony without her.

In her feminist reassessment of myth and poetry “Innocence & Fury: Reading the Pink in Rita Dove’s *Mother Love*,” Althea Tait relates this image of a group singing in a field, bent over harvesting whatever may be growing to slavery in America. She sees this not only in the action of picking cotton in fields but also in the forced singing and dancing performances that many slave masters may have required and which “were often mistaken by outsiders to be signs of happiness” (Tait). This conflation of misery and falsely portrayed happiness might also hint at Persephone’s desire to search for an existence outside of the expectations and orders of a master or an overbearing, passionate mother. This poem in conjunction with the later “Persephone in Hell” present Persephone’s abduction as a vexed event in which perspective is highly important. In these poems themselves, even “Persephone, Falling,” which largely conforms to the classical

Homeric verse, never is the word “abducted” used to describe Persephone’s disappearance, only in the title of “Persephone Abducted.” This suggests some doubt as to whether or not her experience is truly one of abduction or if something more is at play, such as her own desires and need for separation from her mother in order to grow.

Section III is comprised of a single poem in seven parts, “Persephone in Hell,” which breaks from the sonnet-inspired form that exists in the rest of *Mother Love* in that many of the sections do not appear as traditional 14-line poems, though through lineation the parts continue to play with numbers of lines that are divisible by seven. As Dove notes in her foreword, if the sonnet is an “intact world,” then what does not fit within its rigid structure is chaos or, in this case, the underworld that is the City of Lights. Across the seven numbered parts of the poem, Persephone’s experience away from her mother, whether it is due to a mythical abduction or something as mundane as the desire to grow up. The poem chronicles the sexual awakening and curiosity that comes in times of freedom. Along the way, there are interjections from other voices, repeated refrains from previous poems in the collection, and, eventually, a conversation between Persephone and Hades. Part V is the first instance in which Hades is the speaker. Here, Hades denounces the human population, calling them a “noisy zoo,” except for that one person he waits for “to separate from the crowd, / chin lifted for courage, as if to place / her brave, lost countenance / under [his] care...” (Dove 30)². Here, in the next generation of Persephone’s abduction, we can more clearly see the agency that is practiced by Persephone in her freedom found in young adulthood, though also exploited by Hades. He is interested in those who can hold his attention, break his “ennui:” “I need *divertissement*: / The next one through that gate, /

² Here and in subsequent quotations, based on the typography of Dove’s original publication, a sans serif font is used to represent Hades’ voice as the speaker and to differentiate his voice from that of Persephone who continues to be represented with serif font when in conversation with Hades.

woman or boy, will get / the full-court press of my ennui” (30). That being said, as demonstrated in VI, Persephone is just as interested in the game of seduction that is being played as he is.

“Pardon Me?”

“Excuse, I thought you were French.
You are looking for someone?”

“Yes. I’m... sure he’s here somewhere.”

Here you are.

“I hope he won’t let himself
be found too soon. A drink?” (32)

In the quoted passage above, it can be seen through Persephone’s silent interjection in the dialogue, denoted by the use of italics (“*Here you are.*”), that her own interest in the flirtatious meeting is as pronounced as his. One might expect, considering the previous depictions of her first meeting with Hades as a violent abduction and attack from Demeter’s point of view, that she would be less willing and even less attracted to the advances of the stranger who represents the danger of the God of the Underworld.

The seventh and final part of “Persephone in Hell” consists of two interwoven dramatic monologues, each line alternating between the voices of Persephone and Hades. This return to sonnet lineation, though still radicalized as a sonnet exists in each voice separately but simultaneously, suggests that some equilibrium has been achieved now that Persephone and Hades have found each other again. This final section contends with the themes of temptation and manipulation that have been incorporated throughout the poem. Now, however, the altered sonnet form and internal back and forth demonstrate the push and pull aspect of the seduction and Persephone’s past, despite not being able to forget or separate herself entirely from that past and her mother’s existence.

the garden gone

the seed in darkness

the city around me	I am waiting
it was cold I entered	you rise into my arms
I entered for warmth	I part the green sheaths
a part of me had been waiting	I part the brown field
already in this cold longing	and you are sinking
who has lost me?	(33)

Her inability to fully distance herself from the past is implicit in the way that time is confused in this poem because there is no clear way to sequence it in one's mind. Persephone describes a desire to be found ("who has lost me?") which can only come out of being lost in the first place. Because she has been taken, she is, especially in the relationship between her and her mother, now the embodiment of loss. As Lofgren notes and which is further developed in following sections and in the poem "The Bistro Styx:" "Persephone's experience negates all prior images of rupture and violation. She has not fallen into an 'abyss' ('Statistic: The Witness')³ and Hades has not 'sprung out of the earth / on his glittering terrible / carriage' ('Persephone, Falling'). These images have sprung from Demeter's own imagination" (136). In this way, we can begin to understand the differing perspectives between Persephone and Demeter and how this event serves to further grow the distance between the two women. For Demeter, this signals that she is beginning to be abstracted from her role of mother. This opens up a line of questioning as to the impact that giving birth and raising a child has, or threatens to have, on the female body and identity. In the foreword to her foundational text on motherhood, identity and the role of the

³ Lofgren flags "Statistic: The Witness" and "Persephone, Falling" as locations where one might find the specific moments she is referring to in her argument about the difference between Persephone and her mother's experience of her abduction and subsequent violation.

patriarchal institution on female identity *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich notes that “Woman’s status as childbearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like ‘barren’ or ‘childless’ have been used to negate any further identity” (11). Rich’s suggestion that to be a mother is to be nothing else, based on the patriarchal narrative, reveals how Dove’s Demeter loses some of her sense of self both when she becomes a mother and when she is forcibly abstracted from that identity because, in the eyes of the world around her and therefore in her own eyes, she has lost the only positive definition of her femininity. Rich has also revised the Demeter/Persephone myth and is a model for Dove in many ways. In her article “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Rich discusses the power that Western literary tradition has over women writers. She believes that women writers need to learn about tradition not to continue it but to “break its hold over us” (19). In her use and subversion of the traditional sonnet, Dove both acknowledges the traditions which have preceded her and carves her own unique space in which form and content can interact and complicate each other through their rebellions.

In “The Bistro Styx,” which appears in the fourth section of the collection, the title further entrenches the narrative within the mythic impulse of the entire collection. The mother speaker attempts to reconnect with her daughter who now lives in Paris with her boyfriend (“the Great Artist,” i.e. Hades) and has grown to be somewhat unrecognizable to her own mother. The speaker begins by stating “She was thinner, with a mannered gauntness” (Dove 40) which suggests not only a physical and emotional distance between the two women, but also that a relatively significant period of time has passed since they last saw each other. In the fourth stanza, the speaker calls her daughter her “blighted child, this wary aristocratic mole.” The

syntax of “my blighted child” suggests that something outside of the daughter herself has caused her ruination in the mother’s eyes.

Dove hints at tropes of the myth of Persephone over the course of the poem as a means to investigate the dynamics of the mother/daughter relationship in the modern world. The daughter’s hunger is insatiable to the point where, the poet writes:

...Nothing seemed to fill

her up: She swallowed, sliced into a pear,
speared each tear-shaped lavalier
and popped the dripping mess into her pretty mouth. (42)

This image calls back to the original narrative of the myth of Persephone who is so tempted by the pomegranate seed⁴ that she loses her humanity and is condemned to live the rest of her life half in the underworld, and half in the living world above. All of the food that the daughter is eating here will not restore her humanity in the eyes of her mother. To her mother, humanity is an existence that the daughter has already separated herself from in her decision to move to Paris and pursue art and fashion in the modern world with her lover. The juxtaposition of the mother’s meal, a simple “café crème,” with the luxury and bounty of the daughter’s meal—consisting of wine, cheese, fruit, and chateaubriand—illustrates just how far removed she has become from her former life and her family. This alienation is emphasized by the use of obscure French dishes which, in turn, alienate the American reader (also representative of the mother figure) from the Parisian scene that Persephone inhabits.

The daughter’s consumption of wine also calls back to the mythical reference in the title to the River Styx, which is consumed by those in between the worlds of the living and dead

⁴ “But [Hades] gave [Persephone] a honeysweet pomegranate seed to eat, surreptitiously, peering about him, to prevent her from staying up there for ever with reverend Demeter of the dark robe” (Homer “Hymn to Demeter” 61)

would cause them to forget their former lives. Therefore, the “Wine, a bloody/Pinot Noir,” which the mother does not partake in but the daughter indulges in, is another demonstration of the disconnect between the former lives and relationship of the mother and daughter, and the lives they are both living now. The way the speaker describes the wine as “bloody” is teeming with judgement, as if to indulge in a glass of “bloody” wine is to admit that she is no longer fully human. Ultimately, all of the distance between the two women and the fact that the mother is unable to reconcile the changes that her daughter has undergone in her search for fulfilment in the modern, luxurious world of Paris, comes to a head in the last, devastating line which signals the end of their relationship as they know it: “*I’ve lost her*, I thought, and called for the bill” (42). The speaker engages with her memory of the meal with her daughter in an introspective way. This, along with the invocation of myth as a means to understand this troubled relationship, demonstrates the element of interest in myth on behalf of Dove and her speakers as a means to find validation in the form of stories that feel compellingly familiar. It is this familiarity and relatability to one’s own personal experience that is explored throughout *Mother Love*.

“Demeter Mourning,” a poem which can be found in the middle of the fifth section of *Mother Love*, brings to bear the question of motherhood and the loss that motherhood inevitably implies. Demeter, the speaker, contends with the certainties and uncertainties that come with mourning and how her own self-awareness of her loss can impact the maternal grieving process negatively.

You can tell me repeatedly
I am unbearable (and I know this):
still, nothing turns the gold to corn,
nothing is sweet to the tooth crushing in. (48)

She is aware that she is “unbearable” in her grief and in her inability to recover from the loss, but she also, as Lofgren suggests, “exaggerates the fragmentation of the original loss by refusing to

heal herself and by creating universal disorder” (136). She does not wish to heal and, as exemplified in “Demeter Waiting,” her maternal grief and anguish over her lost child lead to the destruction of the natural progression of seasons and, thus, the living world.

Her internal torment, thus, drives the entire world into a perpetual winter, forcing all of the living world to grieve and experience her loss alongside her.

No. Who can bear it. Only someone
 who hates herself, who believes
 to pull a hand back from a daughter’s cheek
 is to put love into her pocket—

...

She is gone again and I will not bear
 it, I will drag my grief through a winter
 of my own making and refuse
 any meadow that recycles itself into
 hope...

...I will wail and thrash
 until the whole goddamned golden panorama freezes
 over. Then I will sit down to wait for her. Yes. (Dove 56)

She is aware that she has the choice to begin to move on, to begin to heal. Despite this awareness, she drags her grief through an unending “winter / of [her] own making.” She acknowledges that she has a choice to move towards acceptance; however, acceptance and “hope” means accepting that a mother’s loss of a child is inevitable. The first stanza begins with “No.” This stands in direct opposition to the poem’s end (“Yes.”) which emphasizes Demeter’s refusal to move towards any kind of healing because she plans to do nothing but cause pain and devastation until Persephone is returned to her (“Then I will sit down to wait for her. Yes,” 56).

As seen in “Demeter Mourning,” Demeter contends with those same questions of acceptance and happiness that are revisited in “Demeter, Waiting”:

In time I’ll forget this empty brimming,

I may laugh again at
 a bird, perhaps, chucking the nest—
 but it will not be happiness,
 for I have known that. (“Demeter Mourning” 48)

She believes that she has lost her happiness forever, that her happiness has been and will forever be locked in her relationship and intimate connection with her daughter; however, she also nudges at her own understanding of the fact that this pain will lessen and she will one day be able to laugh at other natural examples of mothers separating from their offspring like the “bird, perhaps, chucking the nest” (48). In these two poems and sections (V/VI), as noted by Therese Steffen⁵, “Demeter’s narcissistic grief and neglect of duty which interrupts the regenerative-procreative cycle, affect the welfare of the community” (230). She will not know happiness again, so she will freeze “the whole goddamned golden panorama” (Dove “Demeter, Waiting” 56) and keep all of humanity from this specific kind of natural enjoyment and completion until Persephone, the embodiment of Demeter’s maternal happiness and accomplishment as well as the embodiment of her loss, is returned to her. In her inability and refusal to continue her Olympic duties until Persephone returns, it becomes clear that Demeter’s loss of her daughter is also a kind of loss of herself. This speaks to the narcissistic aspect of her character and narrative in which motherhood is intrinsically connected to her sense of self. This is apparent in the poem “Mother Love” where the speaker, who we know is Demeter, says “Any woman knows the remedy for grief / is being needed” (17).

The final section, a sonnet corona—a sequence of sonnets related by theme and connected by concatenated lines in which the final line of the sequence is also the first line of the sequence—entitled “Her Island,” recounts the story of a family vacation to Pergusa where a

⁵ In her chapter entitled “Beyond Ethnic Margin and Cultural Center: Rita Dove’s ‘Empire’ of *Mother Love*.”

racetrack now encircles the lake (Lake Pergusa), believed in antiquity to have been the “place” of Persephone’s abduction by Hades. The speaker, who has now undergone the full cycle from Persephone to Demeter, uses the circular structure of the crown and its concatenated lines to emphasize the cyclical nature of this story, a story which is often deemed emblematic of all women’s experiences. The first sonnet in the series indicates that which is still out of balance, still unnatural in the world of the speaker: “ice cream disintegrates to a sticky residue / fit for flies and ants. Summer, the dead season” (67). The alliteration in “fit for flies” suggests some disgust at the heat and the decay that it allows. As the narrative begins to emerge so does the circular form of the crown. In order to get to their final destination, the mythological place of Persephone’s abduction into the underworld, they must “climb / straight through the city dump, / through rotten fruit and Tampax tubes” (72) until

We circle the island, trailing the sun
on his daily rounds, turning time back
to one infernal story: a girl
pulled into a lake, one perfect oval
hemmed all around by reeds
at the center of the physical world. (74)

When they arrive at the infamous lake, they find not a serene, black lake lined with reeds but “around this perfect ellipse / they’ve built... a racetrack. / Bleachers. Pit stops” (75). The speaker’s ironic inclusion of “pit stops” for the racecars in the place where “the pit” once opened emphasizes just how mundane and disappointing the site is, especially to someone who may have been trying to connect with the personal experience of the myth. The racetrack as both a rhetorical and symbolic device is fitting considering the circular form that is being created through the concatenation of the sonnets in “Her Island.” Despite the speaker’s disgust at what has become of a site that was supposed to be beautiful and enchanting enough to cause

Persephone to lose herself, she and her family are drawn to it and what it says about the nature of humanity and myth:

We drive it twice, first one way, then back,
to cancel our rage at the human need
to make sport of death. (75)

Just as a woman can experience the myth twice from two viewpoints, the speaker and her husband must drive the racetrack twice in order to truly appreciate the opposite experience. No story is complete without a knowledge of both sides, in this case the story of both mother and daughter which, as Dove posits, is destined to repeat itself endlessly. As the final sonnet says: “no story’s ever finished; it just goes / on, unnoticed in the dark that’s all / around us: blazed stones, the ground closed” (77).

Dove utilizes the voice of Persephone as well as Demeter, which is distinct from the Homeric Hymn which comes solely from Demeter’s perspective. This choice at once emphasizes the separation between mother and daughter that her collection suggests both growth and individuality necessitate and which implies the need to learn about and acknowledge tradition in order to subvert it. In her case, Dove plays with tradition through race, voice, and form. Carol Keyes in talking about form and tradition in *Mother Love*, in her dissertation “Language’s ‘Bliss of Unfolding’ in and through History, Autobiography and Myth: the Poetry of Rita Dove,” suggests that Dove’s “great delight [is] stealing not only tales, but forms, from other cultures, other traditions, and working with them as they fit, and to fit them, to ‘their new surroundings’” (144). There is something both inherently political and feminist about Dove’s use and subversion of form, which runs parallel to her use of voice. Keyes writes: “Neither the structure of the sonnet form nor the framework of the Demeter/Persephone myth impede Dove’s contemporary reworking of them. Dove follows the conventions of the sonnet form and the myth at the same

time that she oversteps them, providing her own particular reinterpretations that speak to her individual experience and that of her age” (177). Stephen Cushman, in his article “And the Dove Returned” similarly argues that “Dove’s self-imposed formal limits do not function as chains that she sings in spite of but rather as talismans she is able to sing because of” (133). Her radical reinterpretation of form is similar in its operation, as Keyes and Cushman illustrate, to her work with content and the received narrative of Demeter/Persephone. The result is a poetic inhabitation of the different voices of both Demeter and Persephone which utilizes and complicates the binary of form and content in productive and contemporary ways.

II. Circe the Enchantress

Within the forest glades [the soldiers] found the house of Circe...and round about it were mountain wolves and lions, whom Circe herself had bewitched; for she gave them evil drugs...So they stood in the gateway...and within they heard Circe singing with sweet voice...And she...invited them in; and they all, in their innocence, followed her inside...She...made for them a potion...but in the food she mixed evil drugs, that they might utterly forget their native land...then she immediately struck them with her wand, and penned them in the pigsties. And they had the...shape of swine, but their minds remained unchanged...

... Hermes of the golden wand met me as I [Odysseus] went toward the house...[Hermes] clasped my hand, and spoke, and addressed me: '...I will tell you all the deadly wiles of Circe. She will mix you a potion, and cast drugs into the food; but even so she will not be able to bewitch you, for the potent herb that I shall give you will not permit it...But bid her swear a great oath by the blessed gods that she will not plot against you any fresh mischief to your hurt, for fear that when she has you stripped she may deprive you of your courage and your manhood.'

... So I stood at the gates of the fair-tressed goddess...I went with her ...And she prepared me a potion in a golden cup, that I might drink, and put in it a drug, with evil purpose in her heart. But when she had given it to me, and I had drunk it off, yet was not bewitched, she struck me with her wand...

...I, drawing my sharp sword from beside my thigh, rushed upon Circe, as though meaning to kill her...

[Circe] 'Who are you among men, and from where?...Surely you are Odysseus...No, come, put up your sword in its sheath, and let us two then go up into my bed, that mingling in the bed of love we may come to trust one another.'

I answered her and said: '...For my part I would not wish to go up into your bed, unless you, goddess, will consent to swear a mighty oath that you will not plot against me any fresh mischief to my hurt.'

So I spoke, and she at once swore the oath to do me no harm, as I bade her. But when she had sworn, and made an end of the oath, then I went up to the beautiful bed of Circe.

--Homer, *The Odyssey*⁶

⁶ Book 10, pages 373-397 as included in the online Loeb Classical Library, translated by A. T. Murray and revised by George E. Dimock. For full citation see the works cited.

Chapter 3: “I could hold you prisoner”: Power and the Predatory in Louise Glück’s *Circe*

In her 1996 poetry collection *Meadowlands*, Louise Glück juxtaposes a retelling of the epic of the *Odyssey*, focusing on the marriage of Odysseus and Penelope at its center, with a more modern narrative of a contemporary marriage and its woes. Glück utilizes the voices of a cast of classical characters that surround Odysseus including the tempting enchantress, Circe. Circe is the speaker of three poems within *Meadowlands* in which she is forced to experience the hopeless situation to which she has been subjected by the classical narrative and subsequent representations of her character. She is also afforded the opportunity to find a voice and a vehicle through which she can confront this stasis. Although Circe, as a classical and mythic being, is present in many forms and legends throughout history, the most well-known is her depiction in Homer’s *Odyssey*. According to Homeric tradition, Circe lures those who land on her island of Aeaea with her song and beauty and then enchants and transforms them using potions. After his men are turned to swine, Hermes gives Odysseus a potion to ward off Circe’s enchantments so that he may make her swear by the gods that she will return his men to their former shape and not take any other enchanted action against him or his men (Homer 375-387). At the end of his time with her, Circe advises Odysseus as to how to appease the gods and gives him the protections and abilities he will need in the underworld to communicate with the dead—all which will allow him to return home at the end of the quest (399).

Despite these rather altruistic actions, Circe is often represented as inhabiting the role of the archetypal predatory female who preys on unknowing and undeserving men. She is also often critiqued and demonized for her magical abilities and her sexual freedom. In Lois Tyson’s guide to critical feminist theory she explains how women in fairy tales (and myths or legends) are either characterized as “good girls” (gentle, submissive, angelic, virginal) or “bad girls” (violent,

aggressive, worldly, monstrous). Tyson argues that these “characterizations imply that if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left is that of a monster...even when women are evil, their concerns are trivial” (89). In Glück’s inhabitation of Circe, the character is given a platform on which she can begin to contend with and respond to the reputation which she has been given, as well as to depict a version of the narrative which allows for Circe to be, in some ways, the victim from the very beginning. Although this may seem like a step back in terms of female representation in mythology and literature, there is something to be said for the de-vilification of a certain archetypal female character to demonstrate the breadth, subtleties, and individuality of the female experience. It can also reveal the negative or narrowing impact that maintaining a certain narrative may have. As well, a change in the narrative serves to begin to break down the “good girl”/ “bad girl” dichotomy described by Tyson so as to expose the reductionist quality of this characterization.

The diminishment of her “predatory” characteristic in these poems in no way lessens her power. It reveals the multilayered and complex existence of the character and the women she may represent and which are ignored in mythic narratives. This might be considered a feminist “reclamation” of the predatory as Glück’s Circe is given character traits which are separate from her typecast role as a female predator. Other feminist studies of the “predatory” have presented themselves as an interest in the “bitch” character in literature. For example, Sarah Appleton Aguiar’s argues in her monograph *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, that “the bitch means to men whatever they find particularly threatening in a woman and it means to a woman whatever they particularly dislike about themselves. In either case it functions as a misogynistic club” (6). Glück’s Circe, in not fully denouncing the “bad girl” aspects of her personality nor admitting that she dislikes anything in herself, attempts to reject the

“misogynistic club” of the “bitch” category to which she has been relegated because of the way that her power threatens male dominion.

In the first poem from Circe’s point of view, “Circe’s Power,” Glück introduces her as a speaker with implicit power, as someone who uses her supernatural capabilities neither vengefully nor casually. Rather, in her own words and voice, she gives reason and rationale for all of the transformation enchantments that she performs. The poem begins: “I never turned anyone into a pig. / Some people are pigs; I make them / Look like pigs.” She presents both her power as well as her character with a certain ambivalence which is rooted in the fact that the soldier’s transformations are not *her* doing but, instead, simply her response and, thus, punishment for those who act porcine or otherwise. Through this shift of guilt away from her and onto the men who act a certain way but are never punished by other men, Circe is able to modify the narrative surrounding herself—one which continues to surround her character in more contemporary understandings of her role as a predatory and punitive temptress. Despite the fact that she introduces her actions as a response rather than an unprompted attack, thus making her actions appear more reasonable, the enjambment of the second and third line also muddles the distinction between turning these men into pigs and making them “look like” pigs. This creates an ambiguity as to where the culpability lies. It also promotes the question of what it means to make something look a certain way and whether the operation that Circe describes functions as a form of poiesis. Is her action of “making” the men look like the pigs they are on the same level as Glück’s poetic creation of Circe herself? If Circe is a maker like Glück, this further empowers her in the male-dominated world in which we exist.

The second stanza begins with Circe stating that she is “sick of your world / That lets the outside disguise the inside.” The “your” here refers specifically to the world of Odysseus (and

men like him), a world in which bad behavior is learned, allowed, and left unchecked by society simply because they are men. These lines are fundamental in understanding what drives Circe towards her enchantments of these men. At her core, Circe is driven by a desire for the truth and, therefore, for the true nature of someone—that is, what is “inside”—to be represented on the “outside” for all the world to see: no disguises. As she states in the first stanza, she is not turning them into pigs, she is simply making them look like what they already are. She continues, “Your men weren’t bad men; / Undisciplined life / Did that to them.” In this stanza she passes a judgement on the lives that these philandering men and soldiers lead, as well as the “undisciplined” world and society that enable their “undisciplined” lifestyles. In this way, Circe suggests that the metamorphic enchantments she casts are in response to her subjects behavior but are also a punishment, or even a warning, for those around them who allow them to act a certain way. Circe brings discipline and, therefore, presumably practices her own discipline as well (because Circe is about controlling drives, including her own). Therefore, in exposing the “true” interiorities of the men, she also exposes readers and herself to her own vulnerabilities and limitations. Her interest in presenting truthfully is also indicative her inability to disguise her own feelings and, eventually, grief.

She goes on in the third stanza to suggest that these transformations are for the greater good of the men and allow them to experience an internal reversal of the harm that the “undisciplined” life had caused them:

... As pigs,

Under the care of
Me and my ladies, they
Sweetened right up.

There is a cruelty and bitterness that transcends Circe's arrogance in this moment. She presents her way as the only way, as if the soldier's survival depends on them adhering to her vision of society. There is an ironic twist on the patriarchal construction which places women in the position of having to adhere to a certain set of norms in order to survive, let alone succeed. Not only does this demonstrate that Circe is a superior leader to the males who have allowed their subjects to live in this unruly way previously, but it also reveals her belief that women in general are the better leaders, more able to control and "sweeten up" wild and disobedient men. Here, "sweetened" becomes suggestive of an improvement, in Circe's eyes, in the behavior and character of the men-turned-pigs. It also takes on the meaning of "sweetening up" associated with other livestock that are fattened in preparation for slaughter and consumption. In this way, there is a threat weaved into her actions. It is immediately countered in the fourth stanza, a couplet, which reads: "Then I reversed the spell, showing you my goodness / As well as my power." She views her actions as instances and proof of both her moral superiority and power. In this case, it is the women who hold the power, both when Odysseus' soldiers are men and when they are pigs. The idea of a reversal could also be viewed as another form of punishment as she sees the reversal of her enchantments as a return to the riotous character that accompanied them as men, rather than the newly acquired sweetness "Under the care of / [Her] and [her] ladies." Thus, removing the spell is yet another testament to the power and wit which are ignored or left unseen because of her outward image as a woman who is weak to Odysseus' charms. There is a sinister quality to her actions as she is not straightforward in her practice but rather appears to undertake the slightly underhanded task of convincing (or forcing) the men to remain with her and her ladies. Therefore, Glück does not shed her predatory banner completely which risks her

character once again participating in a misogynistic worldview where the only relationship between genders is antagonistic and necessarily power-driven.

The repetition of “pigs” and “pig” in the first two stanzas are the only instances in which the swine which Circe is renowned for creating out of men are mentioned in the three-poem cycle. That being said, the conduplicatio of “pigs” in such close proximity, especially in the first stanza where the word in either singular or plural form is present in each line, diminishes their humanity and status as men by focusing on their pig-like forms and the fact that these forms now reflect the interiorities of the soldiers. As in Homer’s *Odyssey*, it is suggested that the minds of the men remain unchanged, therefore the emphasis on the “pigs” at the outset of the poem hinders the reader’s ability to visualize the men as men at all, even once the spell is reversed. Following the reversal of the spell in the fourth stanza, there is a turn in the poem in which Circe takes on a slightly wistful tone.

We could be happy here,
As men and women are
When their needs are simple. In the same breath,

I foresaw your departure,
Your men with my help braving
The crying and pounding sea.

It is in these moments that the speaker allows the reader to read between the lines to the legend that is known. That is, the relationship between her and Odysseus which was the basis for his request to reverse the spell against his men in the first place. The dreaminess of her tone reveals her desires for an existence where she is no longer defined as the sinister, malevolent female to be feared for her refusal to live by the patriarchal gender roles presented to her. She wants a happiness to be available to her which allows her to have a relationship with a man without being forced to denounce her own power or to have to comply with gender norms in general. The

wistful quality to her belief that “we could be happy here, / as men and women” is countered by the strength and conviction that she displays in the following stanza. Circe’s help is the reason that the men, who traditionally are the source of strength in mythological narratives, are able to brave “the crying and pounding sea.” Circe, on the other hand, is unbothered by “a few tears,” thus she simultaneously separates and elevates herself again from Odysseus’ soldiers and their implicit lack of both bravery and emotional intelligence.

...You think

A few tears upset me? My friend,
 Every sorceress is
 A pragmatist at heart; nobody sees essence who can’t
 Face limitation.

Unlike the soldiers, she is both unbothered by and intimately aware of the necessity and existence of tears. The association that is created between those tears and the “crying” sea suggests, too, that she is more connected with the nature and the natural way of the world than the men. It is this awareness that allows her to help the men navigate and survive the tempestuous waters that will eventually lead them home. She lacks the cockiness that Odysseus and his men project, an arrogance that gets them in trouble at many turns. She, like other sorceresses, is a pragmatist who is aware of her own limitations and, thus, “sees essence.” Her argument suggests that awareness and realism, even if you hold magical abilities, is the key to power.

The poem ends with an ominous testament to Circe’s power directed at Odysseus as he leaves her to return to his wife, Penelope: “If I wanted only to hold you / I could hold you prisoner.” “Wanted” and “could” are importantly different and, therefore, expose that Circe is capable of holding him if she wanted; however, she does not want “only to hold [him]” if it means she would be holding him “prisoner,” for she desires a more reciprocal relationship, one

where she is as loved as her beloved. Furthermore, the relationship in *The Odyssey* is foregrounded on a mutual trust which would be broken if she made him her prisoner. The repetition of “hold you” accentuates Circe’s interior conflict between wanting to keep and hold Odysseus and her desire to save face and retain the image of the stoic and powerful goddess that is expected of her. There is the obvious implication that without her help none of them would have been able to leave, not to mention survive the journey. Again there is an emphasis on “I” and possession as a means to demonstrate her power and superiority over the men. At the same time, by relating everything back to her power and the fact that they need her, not the other way around, she at once disguises and diminishes her own feelings for Odysseus and the effect that helping him return to his wife might have on her. There is something ironic about the fact that, like the patriarchal culture that she criticized in the beginning of the poem for disguising one’s insides with their outsides, Circe projects an all-powerful, uncaring, and self-interested image which she uses to disguise her own feelings of vulnerability surrounding Odysseus’ abandonment of her, and (if we are following Homer’s narrative) their sons. These feelings and the effects of ignoring them, however, are revealed over the course of the next two poems in the cycle, when Circe is forced to confront these vulnerabilities and regrets.

In the following poem, “Circe’s Grief,” Circe attempts to contend with her grief by, in a sense, sabotaging Odysseus and Penelope’s relationship from the inside.

In the end, I made myself
Known to your wife as
A god would, in her own house, in
Ithaca, a voice
Without a body:

Notably, the speaker refers to the way that she appears to Penelope as being the way of a “god,” rather than a goddess. Like in “Circe’s Power,” where the speaker draws an implicit distinction

between sorcerers and sorceresses, the pattern of power is gendered. This further exaggerates the distance between Penelope and Circe in terms of power and immortality as it insinuates that Circe also transcends gender. Her emphasis, or perhaps it is more accurate to say lack of emphasis, on her gender is interesting when it is revealed that she appears as “a voice / Without a body.” Her disembodiment signifies her feminine body cannot be sexualized in the way that all female bodies, especially those of goddesses, tend to be objectified and, thus, separated from the mind (and voice) of the individual. The use of anaphora in the passage (“**In** the end,.../.../... **in** her own house, **in** / Ithaca...”) underscores her power once again as she is able to supersede space and time to be “in her own house, in / Ithaca,” when even Odysseus has not successfully returned home yet. This also suggests that, while Circe can be in Ithaca if she desires it, Penelope was not able to be with Odysseus on his journey or during his time in Aea with Circe. As well, we might expect the voice to be (or to come from) within a body, too, so the break in anaphora with “a voice / Without a body” is also significant as it further distances Circe from the expectations and limitations of humanity. Once again, this distinguishes Circe’s power and supremacy over Penelope. Despite the fact that she transcends bodily and human physical limitations, she continues to play into the gendered role of a vengeful lover which is demonstrated in her need to make Penelope jealous and suffer. That being said, Circe’s power is presented under her own understanding that this does not necessarily benefit her, because, despite her preeminence, Odysseus still left her to return to Penelope.

In her illustration of the two potential characterizations of women as either inherently “good” or “bad,” Tyson also notes: “Men sleep with ‘bad girls,’ but they don’t marry them. ‘Bad girls’ are used and then discarded because they don’t deserve better, and they probably don’t even expect better” (90). Not only does this demonstrate how women have interiorized on behalf

of society, to a certain extent, to only find worth in themselves if society finds them worthy as well. Furthermore, Tyson's observation shows how male behavior is encouraged and even justified through these societal opinions and norms which hold dominion over female bodies. These norms all make Odysseus' relationship and subsequent betrayal of Circe possible, while simultaneously vilifying Circe for inhabiting the role of the "other woman" and further propagating the pious and loyal image of Penelope. In this way, Glück's poems are revealing these dimensions—of societal justification for mistreatment—of the received narrative with which she is working.

Although this second poem is titled "Circe's Grief," the speaker does not mention or even allude to her feelings regarding Odysseus' departure. Instead, she dictates the actions that she takes as a result of her grief. She intimates a certain pleasure taken from inserting herself, as well as a thread of doubt, into Penelope and her relationship with Odysseus.

...I doubt
 She will return to her loom
 With what she knows now. When
 You see her again, tell her
 This is how a god says goodbye:
 If I am in her head forever
 I am in your life forever.

The epistrophe which ends the poem, seen in the repetition of "forever" at the ends of the final two lines, reiterates Circe's immortality and pride which will not let her be forgotten or ignored by Odysseus once he has successfully returned home to Ithaca. Instead, Circe's grief over her lost relationship has insisted that she plant herself within Odysseus' marriage through both Penelope and Odysseus. Despite this, there appears to be a deep understanding rooted in this action which is revealed in the epistrophe ("If I am in her head **forever** / I am in your life **forever**.")) and that is that Penelope will always be in his life. Otherwise, this god's "goodbye"

would not function. It insinuates that she can accept, in some way or another, that she will never be his wife or a part of his life in the physical way that Penelope will be; however, this does not stop her from demonstrating, once more, her mystical superiority in her ability to create and occupy a mental space in both partners. This also relates back to the earlier idea of disembodiment and the way that, by appearing “as / a god would,” sans body or physical presence, she is actually more powerful and more present for the fact that she does not have a body that can be attacked or, perhaps more importantly, removed.

The final poem in the cycle, entitled “Circe’s Torment,” is clearly the most emotionally candid of the three poems from the point of view of Circe in Glück’s collection.

I regret bitterly
 The years of loving you in both
 Your presence and absence, regret
 The law, the vocation
 That forbid me to keep you, the sea
 A sheet of glass, the sun-bleached
 Beauty of the Greek ships: how
 Could I have power if
 I had no wish
 To transform you:

As the title indicates, Circe is tormented by her regrets which largely stem from her inability to enact her power of transformation on Odysseus because of her feelings for him as well as because of “the vocation / That forbid [her] to keep [him].” According to the classical narrative, Odysseus made her promise in the name of the gods that she would take no further action against him or his men which, as seen in “Circe’s Power,” meant that she was unable to “keep” and control him. There is an element of self-torture that is prevalent in the poem as she seems unable to get past her own powerlessness in the face of Odysseus which causes her to regret such things as “The years of loving [him] in both / [His] presence and absence.” The use of anaphora (in this case grammatical, rather than linear) compounded with the lack of conjunctions between clauses

(otherwise known as asyndeton) in her list of things she regrets “bitterly” emphasizes the blame that she places on herself and her inability to move on or control her own feelings for this man. The asyndeton serves to emphasize the endless quality of Circe’s list of grievances. In fact, anaphora is used throughout the poem which demonstrates the breadth of the torment which she is describing as her experience with and without Odysseus (“as / You loved my body, / As you found there,” “Over honor and hope, over”). She says that she “had no wish / to transform [him]:” with her power, and thus make him her prisoner, so she is bound to lose him either way. Within this dilemma it becomes clear that Glück’s Circe is attempting to operate separately from power dynamics despite the fact that she is and will be devastated by the results of trying to live another way. Her torment, she reveals, is a constant on her mind and, thus, it constantly and consistently haunts her. This is apparent in the parallelism which continues through to the final lines of the poem in which Circe, effectually, curses Odysseus:

...in the name of that bond
I refuse you
Such feeling for your wife
As will let you
Rest with her, I refuse you
Sleep again
If I cannot have you.

The repetition of “I refuse you” constitutes a curse upon Odysseus to never rest or sleep again, a withholding curse. In a way, this could be telling as to her own experience of a restlessness without him or in her knowledge that he is now with another woman. Moreover, Circe is further differentiating herself from Penelope because Circe knows she will never be his “wife” and therefore refuses him “such feeling” as that which he shared with Circe with Penelope. There is an ambiguity as to whether or not this “difference” is positive or negative for Circe, despite the fact that she chooses to target it. In spite of the pain and separation that are potentially presented in

the direct address to Odysseus from Circe, her power is also present and brewing within her anger and regret. The power that is bred from these feelings is what affords her the ability and power necessary to curse him, even if she may not have the wherewithal to see the ways in which this curse reflects her own internal turmoil.

In her work on Glück's collection *Meadowlands*, Bonnie Costello questions the objectivity of the speakers that Glück employs in order to determine whether or not the various speakers are trustworthy. As she understands it, although the speakers "are not objective—they grieve, rage, seduce, betray—...they are trustworthy" simply for the fact that they experience this very true and representative depth of emotion and turmoil within the human relationships that they are depicting (14). Costello spends very little time directly engaging with Circe's role as speaker and heartbroken mistress within the collection; however, she makes one point very clear: "If Penelope is the figure of devotion, domestic tranquility and emotional generosity, Circe is not so much her rival as her other side: possessive will, bodily passion, jealousy that would 'refuse you / sleep again / if I cannot have you.'" (16). In this way, Costello and Glück participate in the same kind of rejection and revision of the archetypal image of Circe as the "predatory female" without feelings or emotions. She does not suggest that Penelope and Circe are rivals, or of different species, simply that it is their differences which make them who they are.

Sara Ahmed's discourse on "feminist killjoys," which outlines the way that feminism might lead to a certain type of pessimism for women who can recognize their own oppression, is interesting in the discussion of the dichotomy that is created between Penelope and Circe. She argues that feminism serves to "[open] up the world, or [to expand] one's horizons, [which] can thus mean becoming more conscious of just how much there is to be unhappy about" (70). If this

is the case, the question becomes: what can be created from these moments of feminist inhabitation and revision? Penelope inhabits the image and role of the “happy housewife” that Ahmed describes as unrealistic, as she is content in her oppression and in the work that she is required to do to maintain that image; however, feminist subjects like Glück’s Circe “in refusing to be well-adjusted not only mourn the losses [of possible ways of living] but in mourning open up other possibilities for living, as openings we inherit over generations” (79). Circe herself is bound up and tortured by the realities of the barriers that strong women face. In reading her power, guilt, and torment which exposes the trap that societies set for powerful women, there is a liberation for those women who are similarly oppressed by their strength. Therefore, in their parallel acts of poiesis and killing joy, Glück and her Circe open up representations of women living with a consciousness of their own oppression which will continue to break down the barriers to happiness and freedom that women face in patriarchal societies where strong women are feared and, thus, vilified.

Chapter 4: “*There are two islands*”: Representation and Exploitation in Margaret Atwood’s “Circe / Mud Poems”

Margaret Atwood’s Circe, much like Louise Glück’s, is highly concerned with her inability to overcome the narrative that she has been dealt. Over the course of her writing career, Margaret Atwood has demonstrated a certain interest in the interaction between a female perspective and the familiar mythological material which is present and acknowledged in our culture. The cycle of “Circe / Mud Poems,” which appears in her 1974 collection of poetry *You Are Happy*, follows the speaker, Circe, as she contends with the limited character arc she has been dealt and is, as of yet, unable to break free from. As Atwood builds the narrative arc of her Circe, it makes sense to move through the poetry largely in the order in which Atwood prescribed. Judith Yarnall, in her monograph *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress* which outlines both the conception and various revisitations of Circe since Homer through the twentieth century, writes that Atwood “seems to have been attracted to Homer’s telling of the Circe-Odysseus myth because she saw in it a metaphor for the meeting (or collision) of patriarchal manhood and feminine power occurring in her own time” (186). Similarly, Veronica House, in her chapter “Margaret Atwood’s Transformed Circe,”⁷ supposes that Atwood:

sought to expose the dangerous gender construction within the existing stories that she felt had become so engrained that they not only reflected human behavior but influenced her contemporaries’ actions, ensnaring them in limiting and dehumanizing roles. She wanted to shatter the belief that archetypes are

⁷ Located within House’s monograph *Medea’s Chorus: Myth and Women’s Poetry Since 1950*.

inflexible, that the familiar endings to stories are fixed, that the gender roles assigned to the sexes through the ages are inevitable. (77)

With this understanding of Atwood's impulses, the Circe that she creates and the ways that she objects to the social roles that are expected of her, at the same time as adhering to them at times, reveals the power that mythic narratives and archetypes continue to hold over contemporary cultures. In her resistance, Atwood's Circe demonstrates the problematic and power-driven gender structures that allow for women's oppression; however, she also shows a profound understanding at humanity's need for myth and seeks to find the place in which she and myth can coexist—she seeks the “second island.” Through her reference to a “second island,” a space in which Circe and her narrative are included instead of excluded, Atwood recognizes the power of myth and stories. Thus, she suggests that the cultural space of myth is one in which progress towards female representation and away from exploitation can be made.

The cycle opens with a poem in italics in which Circe predicts the arrival of Odysseus and his men and begins to introduce the prophecy, place and time that she occupies, as well as Circe's own role in the society in which she exists. In her prophetic vision:

the boat glides as if there is water

*Red fireweed spatters the air
it is power, power
impinging, breaking over the seared rocks
in a slow collapse of petals*

*You move within range of my words
you land on the dry shore*

You find what there is. (Atwood 46)

Much like the mythological being the Siren (which Atwood engages with earlier in this collection in her poem “Siren Song”), in various iterations of the myth, Circe is known for luring

sailors to her island with her voice and song. The italics and the lack of proper punctuation formally mimic the fact that this is a prediction that has not yet been actualized; however, it also seems to tell a tale of the disaster of patriarchal history. The poem utilizes imagery which creates the sense of a dream-like prophetic vision which is so visual as to be vague and, therefore, applicable in many situations (“*Through this forest / burned and sparse,*” [46]). Not only does this poem prophesize the arrival of Odysseus to Circe’s island, but it also seems to predict the havoc that his arrival will wreak on Circe and her territory. The island is presented over the course of the cycle as a physical manifestation of her and, therefore, is as important and illuminating to the state of Circe as Circe herself. In the prophecy, Odysseus’ boat “is power, power / impinging, breaking over the seared rocks / in a slow collapse of petals.” The juxtaposition of the hard and conventionally masculine imagery that is associated with the boat, and therefore Odysseus, with the softness and traditional femininity of flowers and their petals foretells the classic power struggle that is going to take place between Odysseus and Circe. Petals, as well, are often a symbol for female genitalia which further relates the “slow collapse of petals” to a rape and exploitation of the female body. As she is intimately related to the island and the natural forces of the earth, the association between the petals and Circe foregrounds the botanical and geological connotations that are emblematic of the island, the story, and therefore of Circe herself. It is also an immediate confrontation of Circe as the emblematic mythological representation of the maleficent magic of female sexuality and power in its suggestion that Circe is the one who will end up being ravaged in the end. The destruction of the petals, as well as the rest of the island (“*Through this forest / burned and sparse*” [46]), is also indicative of the way that Odysseus will eventually be the one to take and exploit all that there is on the island in the name of his own survival and heroic image. The focus on Circe’s body and existence as

secondary to Odysseus' creates an avenue for questions of transformation, bodily harm, and embodied difference within disability studies to be considered in Circe's experience of difference and abnormal representation because of her gender and abilities.

The relationship that Circe has to the outside world reveals the ways that she is already exploited by those around her for her powers as an enchantress. In the prose poem which begins "People come from all over to consult me," Circe's physical and emotional isolation from those around her is shown as she represents something that is neither god nor human whom they can "consult" and give their "pain" without feeling guilty about it. Circe is only worthy of their attention when she is of some use to them, as with the original myth in which she is only a stepping stone in Odysseus' final journey to return home.

People come from all over to consult me, bringing their limbs which have unaccountably fallen off, they don't know why, my front porch is waist deep in hands, bringing their blood hoarded in pickle jars, bringing their fears about their hearts, which they either can or can't hear at night. They offer me their pain, hoping in return for a word, a word, any word from those they have assaulted daily, with shovels, axes, electric saws, the silent ones the ones they accused of being silent because they would not speak in the received language. (49)

It is notable that they offer her nothing in return for the gruesome problems which they drop on her front porch. Instead, they expect her to offer them comfort for their pain to the extreme point at which "Around [her] everything is worn down, the grass, the roots, the soil, nothing is left but the bared rock." Once again, the existence (or lack thereof) of life on the island is representative of her own state of being. It becomes clear that Odysseus, when he enters the narrative, is not the first being who has taken from Circe and then left without a backward glance. The final stanza

exemplifies the physical manifestation of her isolation and the lack of nurturing which she receives from others: “Come away with me, he said, we will live on a desert island. I said, I am a desert island. It was not what he had in mind” (49). She identifies most fully with a geographically secluded and barren land that no one actually wants to live on.

A series of three poems which depict previous visitors to Circe’s island and their pleas to her power promotes the characterization of Circe as a victim of exploitation by men very similar to Odysseus. In the first of these three poems, which begins with the line “Men with the head of eagles,” Circe presents the two types of visitors she most often receives (both male) and the reason she prefers “the others” to the canonical hyper-masculine, heroic men that often arrive in search of more power.

Men with the head of eagles
no longer interest me
or pig-men, or those who can fly
with the air of wax and feathers... (47)

The repetition of “or,” which turns into a clear instance of anaphora as it persists into the second and third stanzas, reveals Circe’s exhaustion with this one kind of men who often appear in different iterations but are fundamentally the same and “common as flies,” as she says in the fourth stanza. Instead of finding these men interesting or deserving of the power and worship that comes with the clout of masculinity in a patriarchal society, Circe presents them as dime-a-dozen and altogether unsavory:

on hot days you can watch them
as they melt, come apart,
fall into the ocean
like sick gulls, dethronements, plane crashes. (47)

The use of simile and asyndeton—seen in the compact list with no conjunctions—in the final line of this fifth stanza emphasizes the fragility of the male heroism which these men represent. This instability is highlighted by the fact that they need help from Circe, a woman, who not only

is “no longer [interested]” in men like this but is also aware that “All these [she] could create, manufacture, / or find easily:” because she is more capable and powerful than these men who are “[found] easily” and, therefore, nothing special. As in Glück’s inhabitation of Circe, Atwood’s Circe practices a kind of poiesis in her “manufacturing” of uninteresting men.

Circe does, however, seek out some visitors with whom she feels more intimately connected with:

I search instead for the others,
 the ones left over,
 the ones who have escaped from these
 mythologies with barely their lives;
 they have real faces and hands, they think
 of themselves as
 wrong somehow, they would rather be trees. (47)

Although the speaker employs anaphora once again when referencing “the others” who are more interesting and appealing to her, here the fact that “the ones” repeats promotes the idea that these “others” are more singular and less “common” than the other visitors and supplicants Circe has received. She finds these “others” who are forced to contend with the grips of mythologies which they have no control over much more appealing and, perhaps, even more deserving of her help. Her interest in those who have escaped their own mythologies foreshadows how she is going to challenge Odysseus to do the same. Much of what concerns Circe is the fact that they are—like her—stuck in potentially dangerous and exploitative mythologies and that “they have real faces and hands, they think / of themselves as / wrong somehow, they would rather be trees.” Circe is more interested in these people who she considers as othered from society because she relates to them on a more personal level: she is also at the mercy of her own mythology and is subjected to the masculine powers of the “heroes” who seek her out, and yet is made to feel “wrong somehow” for the very power which people need her for. The way these other men exploit her

powers while simultaneously deeming her powerless foreshadows the way that Odysseus will mistreat her when he arrives and begins a relationship with Circe.

If she is always “wrong somehow” in the eyes of these men, Circe is always the one at fault. The question of culpability in her transformations is a common theme in the myth and the revisitations of the myth of Circe. In the third poem in the cycle, Circe maintains that “It was not my fault, these animals / who once were lovers” made the transformations that they did (48). She did not do anything; however, the fact that she calls them animals before she calls them “lovers” or men suggests that she believes the “animal” in them might be more present than the humanity.

it was not my fault, the snouts
and hooves, the tongues
thickening and rough, the mouths grown over
with teeth and fur (48)

The use of anaphora and asyndeton succinctly display the variety of changes that these previous lovers may have undergone; however, because of the repetitiveness and matter-of-fact tone, there is no hint as to the reason for which these transformations occurred. Furthermore, her nonchalance indicates the fact that this is not something that has only happened once, but rather something that has occurred multiple times and will keep recurring.

I did not add the shaggy
rugs, the tusked masks,
they happened

I did not say anything, I sat
and watched, they happened
because I did not say anything. (48)

Here in the third and fourth stanzas the question of culpability and agency become more complicated. Although she continues to deny her involvement and agency in the transformations that occur to these men (“they happened”), she admits that “they happened / *because* I did not say anything.” She implies that the changes “happened” because she did not actively stop them, a

concession which, despite her assertion that “It was not my fault,” has the power to change the significance of the whole poem. Like Glück’s Circe, she is simply manifesting what the men already are. This possible admission of guilt is immediately countered with the return of the refrain “It was not my fault” in the first line of the next stanza which incites the tension between fault and power.

The eventual dissolution of her power, authority, and individuality are foreshadowed by myths of Odysseus’ own childhood tendencies. The prose sketch often considered the “mud woman” poem is a “story told to [Circe] by another traveler, just passing through. It took place in a foreign country, as everything does” (61). The story about Odysseus as a young boy creates a mythological presence in itself, based on the way that it arrives to Circe:

When he was young he and another boy constructed a woman out of mud. She began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows: they stuck to the essentials. Every sunny day they would row across to the island where she lived, in the afternoon when the sun had warmed her, and make love to her, sinking with ecstasy into her soft moist belly, her brown wormy flesh where small weeds had already rooted. They would take turns, they were not jealous, she preferred them both. Afterwards, they would repair her, making her hips more spacious, enlarging her breasts with their shining stone nipples. (61)

This anecdote from Odysseus’ childhood that injects itself into the narrative of the relationship between Circe and Odysseus foregrounds his exploitation of women and their bodies as something that has been part of his character from a young, formative age. The woman that he constructs, which can be assumed to represent his feminine ideal, “began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows: they stuck to the essentials.” For one, it is clear that the female form

that he and his friend create is highly sexualized, to the point where any anatomy that is not involved in their sexual activity is quite simply left out. In removing, or not creating in the first place, the body parts not “essential” to the acts that they intended to commit with the mud woman, they bind her to an existence limited to pleasing their youthful, sexual whims. She has no brain or voice to say no, she has no hands to push them away, she has no legs or feet to remove herself from the situation: her choice and autonomy are non-existent. Beyond those obvious confines, she “lives” on an island, a geographically isolated place and situation which she could not leave even if she had her limbs and mind. The final sentence of this section describes how they would “repair” her after they used her repeatedly for their own pleasure; however, rather than “repairing” the damage that they had done to her form (a form which they had created themselves), they change her. They make “her hips more spacious, enlarging her breasts” (61). The dissonance created between “repair” and “change” emphasize their sexualization of her body and the “essentialization” of their ideal woman as someone who they can use and take from without consequence. These factors create an understanding of Odysseus that is deeply rooted in misogyny and sexual exploitation.

There are clear parallels that Circe is drawing from this story and the story of her own relationship with Odysseus, which she indicates in the final stanza: “Is this what you would like me to be, this mud woman? Is this what I would like to be? It would be so simple.” This builds on previous internal tensions within Circe as she is unsure of the extent to which she should be protesting or presenting herself as a strong force with her own thoughts and opinions. The parallel between the two women is highlighted by the fact that both reside on an isolated island which Odysseus visits and begins to abuse. However similar they appear to be, ultimately the mud woman represents something that Circe will never be able to attain: perfection. The mud

woman was “swept away in a sudden flood. He said no woman since then has equaled her” (61). Circe will never achieve the level of mythological importance that the mud woman holds. In this way, the foundational childhood myth of the mud woman is remote and out of Circe’s grasp, despite her desire to gain a similarly prevailing presence.

In her foundational essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous writes:

If there is a “propriety of woman,” it is paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly: body without end, without appendage, without principal “parts.” If she is whole, it’s a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that’s any more of a star than the others. (889)

Cixous, thus, suggests that if a woman is whole, she is fundamentally as powerful as any other being. The “mud woman” becomes unequal in the minds of these men because she is not whole enough to rival their own power. Circe, unlike the mud woman, is “a whole composed of parts that are wholes;” however, she is also someone who appears “to deappropriate unselfishly.” She gives herself willingly to her selfish visitors, to Odysseus, to her island.

When Odysseus first arrives on Circe’s island in the fifth poem, she can recognize the patriarchal masculine ideal that he represents and the potential destruction that that holds for her. This poem marks a shift in the tone of the poems; the narrative and diction begin to suggest that Circe is the victim of exploitation, not Odysseus or his men, as the traditional narrative presents. The first stanza, an anaphoric couplet, powerfully retrieves earlier ideas about the lack of consent and control that is afforded to “the others” of mythology: “I made no choice / I decided nothing” (50). When she begins to address Odysseus, there is an obvious anger and accusation in Circe’s

tone which is exemplified by the repeated biting use of “your” and “you” in the second, fourth, and fifth stanzas. In the second stanza, Circe as the speaker reflects:

One day you simply appeared in your stupid boat,
 your killer’s hands, your disjointed body, jagged
 as a shipwreck,
 skinny-ribbed, blue-eyed, scorched, thirsty, the usual,
 pretending to be – what? A survivor? (50)

Odysseus, with his “jagged” body, simply pretends to be a survivor as a means to appeal to her sympathies. For Circe, none of this is out of the ordinary: his appearance is “the usual.”

It becomes clear that Circe is highly accommodating, despite the fact that she knows she is often used by her supplicants (“It was not this greed / that offended me” [50]). What she is more concerned with is the fact that Odysseus, like so many others before him, was unable to admit to her and to himself that he was using her in this way (“it was the lies” [50]).

Circe continues to give him things and enable his exploitation of her and her resources by allowing him to continue to take and lie, even before their sexual relationship begins:

Nevertheless I gave you
 the food you demanded for the journey
 you said you planned; but you planned no journey
 and we both knew it.
 You’ve forgotten that,
 you made the right decision.
 The trees bend in the wind, you eat, you rest,
 you think of nothing,
 your mind, you say,
 is like your hands, vacant:

vacant is not innocent. (50)

The subtle use of epizeuxis in the final two lines of the poem, made more emphatic by the colon and stanzaic break, denotes Circe’s opinions regarding how simple and seemingly natural it is for Odysseus to take and use without a second thought. Both his mind and hands are empty, as suggested by the repetition of “vacant,” but that does not absolve him of his lies nor his inability

to recognize his privilege. The idea of vacancy as an opposite to innocence suggests that, in Circe's mind, inaction is as deplorable as direct violence. More broadly, Circe's accusation calls out the lack of action in contemporary culture against traditional, restrictive gender roles, insisting that to remain silent in the face of this reductive practice is to enact violence against those who are forced to conform to a role that does not suit them, or are punished for their inability to do so.

In the sixth poem in the cycle, Circe questions the possibilities of the future for her and Odysseus while pushing back against the male heroism which dictates that life is about winning and conquering:

There must be more for you to do
 than permit yourself to be shoved
 by the wind from coast
 to coast to coast, boot on the boat prow
 to hold the wooden body
 under, soul in control (51)

The repetition of "coast" as well as the alliteration, assonance, and flood of monosyllables used in this stanza reiterate Circe's beliefs about how the culture of male mythological heroism relies on the repetitive and continued push for victory and control over new spaces and beings. The speaker attempts to shift this understanding of life in Odysseus by guiding him towards prophecy as well as other beliefs about the meaning of life.

Ask at my temples
 where the moon snakes, tongues of the dark
 speak like bones unlocking, leaves falling
 of a future you won't believe in

Ask who keeps the wind
 Ask what is sacred (51)

Although the anaphoric "Ask" appears in the imperative, it is clear that these lines are more like pleas than orders and the desperation is only emphasized by repetition. Circe's inability to

understand how someone could not find meaning in life outside of winning is highlighted by her desire for Odysseus to find fulfillment in the natural world (“Ask who keeps the wind”). Her plea to “Ask what is sacred” also insinuates that she disagrees with the larger social (and mythological) order which has determined that power is more sacred than life or autonomy.

Atwood employs anaphora, as well as a broader parallelism, in the following quotation to accentuate the repetitive nature of Odysseus’ work and Circe’s belief that this repetition is Eat restrictive.

Don’t you get tired of killing
those whose deaths have been predicted
and are therefore dead already?

Don’t you get tired of wanting
to live forever?

Don’t you get tired of saying Onward? (51)

The first of these three questions intimates that lives, human or otherwise, are empty of meaning if one cannot think for themselves and exist beyond the previously delineated borders of their mythologies. This could also be understood to be as much self-directed as directed towards Odysseus because of Circe’s own relationship with prophecy and her desire to find a way to escape the limits of her mythology. The second question, too, contends with her own distaste for an immortal life where she continues to be bombarded by people who use her without any regard or respect for her as a person. She, unlike these men who can think of nothing but control, power, and victory, longs for some of the fleetingness and the humanity of a finite life which allows someone to find meaning in all of the moments of life: the small and the rare, the joyful and the melancholic.

Circe continues to dwell on the future possibilities of her relationship with Odysseus in the eighth poem. She begins the poem with the image of Odysseus in his battle gear:

You stand at the door
 bright as an icon,

 dressed in your thorax,
 the forms of the indented
 ribs and soft belly underneath
 carved into the slick bronze
 so that it fits you almost
 like a real skin (53)

Atwood's use of simile throughout the poem, especially in the first three stanzas, emphasizes the way that Odysseus is implicitly related to his armor and, therefore, martial male power. His constant and unflinching association with war and pillage on behalf of Circe reveals her insecurities about relenting and submitting to him. There is an awe in her tone when she looks at him, he is "bright as an icon," completely enthralling and unignorable. His awe-inspiring presence, however, does not negate the underlying threat that she perceives in him. Odysseus is "impervious / with hope, it hardens you, / this joy, this expectation, gleams / in your hands like axes" (53). In Circe's eyes, even his hope is as impenetrable as his armor. The simile in the final line of this third stanza also demonstrates her own burgeoning unease surrounding Odysseus. It displays positive things such as hope and joy in terms of weapons that have the power to destroy her and the world that she has built on her island. Unlike the "vacancy" in the fifth poem, here the abstract potential that Odysseus holds distills itself into a physical representation of destruction and danger.

The moment Circe begins to give herself to Odysseus marks a shift in narration in which the sovereignty that marked her existence and power no longer is fully in her control. Instead, the powerful male begins to usurp that which was rightfully hers. In the third stanza of the ninth poem Circe explains:

This is mine, this island, you can have
 the rocks, the plants
 that spread themselves flat over

the thin soil, I renounce them.

You can have this water,
this flesh, I abdicate,

I watch you, you claim
without noticing it,
you know how to take. (54)

Her island is in many ways a physical and natural representation of herself, her body, and the power that she gives freely to him. The diction she uses, such as “renounce” and “abdicate,” at once suggest that Circe is making Odysseus a king who has dominion over her and everything that is connected to her (namely, the sparse nature of her island) while simultaneously removing herself from her position of power and responsibility. Here, Odysseus is not directly responsible for *taking* from Circe; however, as indicated in the final stanza and previously in the cycle (“I made no choice” 50), he is so quick to claim and appropriate “without noticing it.” She states that he “know[s] how to take,” and the fact that he does not notice also implies that he is not cognizant enough to be thankful. Veronica House notes that in this poem “Atwood’s character illustrates how self-destructive women can be...Atwood uses the myth to highlight this culturally ingrained behavior: although Circe wants to free herself, she remains bound by the social formations of man as aggressor/subject and woman as victim/object” (93). Odysseus represents the male sense of superiority which manifests itself in feeling that they are “due” a certain dominion over the women in their lives, the environment, and the lives therein.

Circe continues to give herself to Odysseus despite the consequences that she may or may not have previously foretold in the poem beginning “Holding my arms down” (Atwood 55). Here begins the sexual relationship between the two characters, which marks another step in Odysseus’ exploitation of Circe; however, it is clear throughout this poem that she is deeply aware of the fact that sex is a weapon more than anything else. The sex between them is a violent

act of ownership and “extortion” which Circe does not want to believe is as hate-filled as she knows it probably is. The act is completed while he holds her arms and head down, “mouth gouging [her] face / and neck, fingers groping into [her] flesh” (55). This is followed by a short, seven-line poem which develops the sense of Odysseus’ total ownership of Circe now that he has owned her body. This is clearly exemplified in the final line of the poem which is isolated in its own stanza: “Look at me and see your reflection” (56).

The moment Atwood’s Circe comes to the realization that her power does not work against Odysseus is when he is fully able to strip her of her sovereignty. The fist, a physical manifestation of Circe’s power in Atwood’s iteration of the myth, is what “commands” the transformation of Odysseus; however, he is “protected” so that he does not change into an animal that would emit the “snarl” that Circe expects would accompany the metamorphosis (“you are protected, / you do not snarl, / you do not change” [57]). There is something delicately ominous in Odysseus’ presence in the poem at this point:

in the hard slot of your mouth
your teeth remain fixed,
zippered to a silver curve;
nothing rusts.

Through two holes in the leather
the discs of your eyes gleam
white as dulled quartz;
you wait (57)

Circe presents Odysseus here as something unmoving and unmovable, as someone (or something) who is so “fixed” and “dulled” that they remain unchanged by not only Circe’s powers but the general laws of nature: “nothing rusts.”

Odysseus’ solidity also plays a role in why Circe’s magic does not work on him and why he is able to turn the situation around and take her power from her, via the fist clenched around

her necklace. The fist, a kind of medallion on her necklace, in this iteration of the myth is what gives Circe her magical abilities:

the fist stutters, gives up,
you are not visible

You unbuckle the fingers of the fist,
you order me to trust you. (57)

When he opens the severed hand, he takes her power and commands her trust. She is left without an option to refuse. As Tyson describes, women's oppression by the patriarchy is founded on making women property through the male appropriation of their time, bodies, care, and sexual obligation so that they are "[reduced]...to the state of material objects" (99). Circe experiences this appropriation as if it is her own hand being severed from her body, while Odysseus takes it as if it is a simple, material medallion. In the final line, the anaphora and repeated "you" at the beginning of each line transforms into epanalepsis as it both begins and ends with the word "you." The emphasis and repetition of "you" further indicates the lack of choice and power that Circe has in the situation. Even her ability to choose who to trust is even taken away from her ("you order me to trust you.").

Despite the fact that Odysseus takes her power (not to mention everything else), Circe continues to have a physical and emotional relationship with him. The fourteenth poem, in its four lines, perfectly depicts her feelings regarding her relationship:

Last year, I abstained
this year, I devour

without guilt
which is also an art (59)

The physical relationship between them begins to be developed further in the following two poems as well, including through the aforementioned "Mud Woman." The fifteenth poem, which

begins “Your flawed body, sickle,” contends with the tensions and conflicts, as represented both internally and externally, between Circe and Odysseus as well as between Circe and herself. The first three stanzas begin with variations of “Your body” in which Circe describes the imperfections and scars of Odysseus’ body; however, it is revealed that despite these imperfections, he does everything “with such ease and leisure –”. What she really begins to struggle with in this poem is conflating the man that she has this relationship with and the man who is so capable of taking and plundering without a second thought of anyone beside himself or the consequences of his actions:

Your body that includes everything
you have done, you have had done
to you and goes beyond it

This is not what I want
but I want this also. (60)

Circe is forced to contend with wanting a man that she knows she should not want. This is emphasized by the repetition of “I want” in the final stanza, one of the few points in the cycle in which her own desires are considered and highlighted separate from Odysseus and the “you.” Circe’s ability to describe her own vexed desires demonstrates the complexities of human emotion and how Atwood attempts to portray female desire as dynamic and variable.

In the poem beginning “When you look at nothing” Circe contends with the way in which the past controls the present through a consideration of Penelope. The Circe imagined in Glück’s poetry also seems stuck, imaginatively, on the figure of Penelope in such a way that she is unable to let Penelope’s life and relationship continue unobstructed. Atwood’s Circe, on the other hand, wonders:

When you look at nothing
what are you looking at?
Whose face floats on the water
dissolving like a paper plate?

It's the first one, remember,
the one you thought you abandoned
along with the furniture.

You returned to her after the other war
and look what happened.
Now you are wondering
whether to do it again. (65)

These stanzas reveal that Circe is aware on some level that her relationship with Odysseus was never one that would endure the test of time and war. Circe rubs at the tension that she feels between herself as Odysseus' present and Penelope, his past. The wistful tone that is adopted in the opening question signals Circe's fear that Penelope and the past that she represents calls to Odysseus. She already knows that it is not her face that "floats on the water / dissolving like a paper plate" (65). In her cognizance that her desires for the relationship will never be fulfilled or reciprocated she builds a dichotomy between herself and Penelope at the same time as acknowledging that they are destined to experience similar things: they will both be abandoned by Odysseus in the name of his own ambitions.

The contrast between the two women is intensified by the luxurious setting given to Penelope, while Circe is consistently related to a barren and harsh desert island which she is unable to control in the presence of Odysseus:

Meanwhile [Penelope] sits in her chair
waxing and waning
like an inner tube or a mother,
breathing out, breathing in,

surrounded by bowls, bowls, bowls,
tributes from the suitors
who are having a good time in the kitchen

waiting for her to decide
on the dialogue for this evening
which will be in perfect taste

and will include tea and sex
dispensed graciously both at once. (65)

Penelope is revealed to be someone who also holds power in her particular realm, as the male suitors, traditionally barbaric soldiers attempting to steal Penelope away from the presumed-dead Odysseus, wait “for her to decide / on the dialogue for this evening.” However, this power comes to Penelope in the absence of Odysseus—an absence which yet again allows for certain parallels to be drawn between the two women. That being said, the power balance will never fall in Circe’s favor. Penelope “is weaving her version, / the one you will believe in, / the only one you will hear” (65). She has the power of revision (“she has to do them over” [65]), which is something Circe will never have because of her placement on the margins of this myth. Much like the repetition of “you” (meaning Odysseus) in previous poems, the emphasis on “she” (Penelope) here continues to diminish Circe’s role in the narrative, despite the fact that hers is the only voice heard in Atwood’s revision of the myth. Penelope, for her position of power and privilege which is endorsed by the myth and her position as an archetype of matrimonial fidelity, has a power which Circe will never be afforded: to weave “her version” of the histories. The final couplet demonstrates Circe’s acceptance of the fact that she will be erased because Odysseus will not hear or listen to her. In their article “The Forest is Hurricane: Circe’s Desires in Modern Women’s Poetry,” Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts posit that, in her acceptance of the fact that her version of the story may be erased from history, “Circe is forced to acknowledge the overriding power of the traditional *Odyssey* narrative, in which Penelope is the winner and she and all the other women that Odysseus meets and leaves behind on his journey are the losers” (209). In the preceding poem, Circe alludes to this when she begins to prophesize about the dangers of the future: “The fresh monsters are already breeding in my head.

I try to warn you, though I know you will not listen. So much for art. So much for prophecy”
(Atwood 64).

The speaker continues on the subject of the dangers of prophecies in the poem which begins with the line “Here are the holy birds,” (66). Odysseus begins to express his discontent with the life that they are leading on the island, despite the fact that they want for nothing. His greed is too all-encompassing to ignore:

We too eat
and grow fat, you aren't content
with that, you want more,
you want me to tell you
the future. That's my job,
one of them, but I advise you
don't push your luck.

To know the future
there must be a death.
Hand me the axe.

As you can see
the future is a mess, (66)

This poem sets the stage for what occurs in the final two poems in the cycle. The first of these, a prose poem, enlightens readers about the deep-seated fear of insignificance and abandonment that Circe feels:

It's the story that counts. No use telling me this isn't a story, or not the same story. I know you've fulfilled everything you promised, you love me, we sleep till noon and we spend the rest of the day eating, the food is superb, I don't deny that. But I worry about the future. In the story the boat disappears one day over the horizon, just disappears, and it doesn't say what happens then. On the island that is. It's the animals I'm afraid of, they weren't part of the bargain, in fact you didn't mention them, they may transform themselves back into men. Am I really

immortal, does the sun care, when you leave will you give me back the words?

Don't evade, don't pretend you won't leave after all: you leave in the story and
the story is ruthless. (68)

She, the enchantress that has the power to see the future, worries about the future because she knows what it means. It means that Odysseus will leave and she will disappear. Although it is the boat carrying Odysseus that “just disappears,” it is clear that it is Circe who will ultimately be erased and disappear from the story: “it doesn't say what happens then. On the island that is.” Once her role in the heroic journey of Odysseus is finished, she herself disappears despite the fact that her existence is not finished (she is immortal, after all) just because she is no longer of use to the male protagonist. She knows that the story and the prophecy of his departure will inevitably come true and she does not wish for minced words or pity, but the truth which she has always valued: “Don't evade, don't pretend.” The fact that she knows the story, beyond that she could predict it, suggests the cyclical nature of the demonized other woman who is, more than anything, innocent of malintent. Furthermore, the choice to describe the story as “ruthless” is an interesting one as it creates a tension between the narrative of the myth and traditionally accepted depictions of Circe as predatory and, some might say, “ruthless.” In this way, Atwood forces readers to reconsider what about the story is “ruthless” if it is not Circe, the predatory female enchantress, and if she, in fact, is the victim of a man and the social constructs that allow him to be “ruthless” without repercussions. Thus, Atwood creates a kind of instrument or weapon (not unlike the imagined axe) out of the myth of Circe.

In the final poem, the text is once again italicized as in the opening poem, the speaker writes: “There are two islands / at least, they do not exclude each other” (69). Throughout the collection Circe is often referred to and related to an island and in this case the two islands that

she sees in front of her represent the two possibilities for her life. On one hand, there is the first island, where “the events run themselves through / almost without us,” which can be understood as the life that is imagined for Circe in Homer’s text and from which many versions have come out of, often continuing to diminish Circe and her story. She knows this version; in fact it is the only version she has ever known:

*and so forth, it is over,
I am right, it starts again,
jerkier this time and faster,*

*I could say it without looking, the animals,
the blackened trees, the arrivals,*

*the bodies, words, it goes and goes,
I could recite it backward. (69)*

It is notable that this is one of the only poems in which there is a distinct focus on the speaker herself, on the “I” and the voice that she gives herself. The “first” island will continue to erase her after her part has been played. The second island, however, she “[knows] nothing about / because it has never happened;” (69). This island, one that is “not finished,” is vibrant with life and trees that have not been blackened and still hold their fruit. In this second island, Circe gives herself an ending to the story that is satisfactory, one where she still exists and she is not lessened even though her lover remains in her life:

We walk through a field, it is November,

*the grass is yellow, tinged
with grey, the apples*

*are still on the trees,
they are orange, astonishing, we are standing*

*in a clump of weeds near the dead elms
our faces upturned, the wet flakes
falling onto our skin and melting*

*We lick the melted snow
 from each other's mouths,
 we see birds, four of them, they are gone, and
 a stream, not frozen yet, in the mud
 beside it the track of a deer (69-70)*

There is a natural balance that Circe writes herself into which suggests an implicit imbalance in the traditional narrative that excludes the nuances and minutiae of women's stories. Atwood writes that "there are two islands / at least, they do not exclude each other" (69). Alicia Ostriker focuses on the impulse in women poets to challenge the gendered stereotypes embodied in myth through attacks on the very language and images that support their endurance within society. In her analysis of Atwood's Circe she writes:

When Circe in Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems" snarls at her lover, 'It's the story that counts. No use telling me this isn't a story [...],' she too describes the depersonalizing effects of myths on persons, the way they replay themselves over and over and 'the events run themselves through / almost without us.' But at the point of stating this, the poet declares that there are 'two islands' that 'do not exclude each other' and that the second 'has never happened,' 'is not finished,' 'is not frozen yet.' In all these cases the poet simultaneously deconstructs a prior 'myth' or 'story' and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself. (72)

In her deconstruction, however, Ostriker also acknowledges that this is not something that has happened before and, thus, questions whether it will ever grow to be anything more than a vision of possibility if women such as Circe were given the opportunity to be heard and to exist outside of their male counterparts. The second island is not stagnant as myth tends to be. It is capable of change, evolution and growth. It is no longer the barren, destroyed island but one where the

snow melts and spring comes anew. The mud that is present is no longer colored by the sexual fantasies of men, but is purely mud with deer tracks imbedded in it, revealing the possibilities for other modes of relation. The hope and possibility for change that is embodied in the second island lives in the fact that it is “not finished” and “not yet frozen” and, therefore, there is still time for changes to occur.

Similar to Glück, Atwood exposes the dangerous and limiting gender construction of existing stories. Through her creation of the “second island” which includes herself and her narrative, she acknowledges the power that myth and stories have over humanity and suggests that it is through language and stories that a space for progress and female representation can be created. In the introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader*, editor Lennard J. Davis writes that the normative structures which literature tends to rest and the normativity that it projects “will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled, the native, the colonized subject, and so on” (9). He argues that one must understand the existence of norms in order to understand the abnormal, which in this case is present in the normal and disabled human body. Atwood’s focus through “Circe / Mud Poems” on the body (through body parts and damages to bodies) invites disability studies, such as those included in Davis’ edited volume, in as a critical lens which is particularly potent in considering the new space of the second island which Atwood puts forth: a space which is not limited by the rigid norms of gender and bodies and other strict categories of being. In her chapter within *The Disability Studies Reader* entitled “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that there is something to be gained from the conversation between disability studies and feminist theory, as Atwood’s poems suggest. Garland-Thomson posits:

A feminist disability theory denaturalizes disability by unseating the dominant assumption that disability is something that is wrong with someone...it mobilizes feminism's highly developed and complex critique of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality as exclusionary and oppressive systems rather than as the natural and appropriate order of things. (336)

In poems such as the "Mud Woman" and Atwood's final gesture towards an unrealized (and freer) future on the second island, Atwood's speakers tend to the transformation, bodily harm, and embodied difference that are made possible by the oppressive systems with Garland-Thomson points out. These are the same systems which force powerful women, such as Circe, into the acts of world making in which she might find representation and escape exploitation, unlike the limbless "Mud Woman" made of nothing but the "important" bits and, therefore, never made in the true sense. The intersection of feminism and disability studies suggest that in order to be considered "whole" one must also be normal, and to be female or composed of only component body parts is to be neither, a struggle which Atwood's Circe is all too familiar with.

Conclusion: “We sing a song of consequence”

We sing because we always sing. And O sister, do the men get lost? Do the sailors, in a frenzy, in a trance, sometimes aim their ships at rocks? Do our harmonies haunt and vise the mind, pressing out all sense? Do the men sometimes leap from their boats and try to swim to where our voices are? O sister, yes they do. Is it our fault, or our intention? O sister, it is not. We sing a song of consequence. We sing a song of cost. They know it’s so and call us monstrous. Sing. Put your eyes in the eyes of a seagull. See the ships at sway. Listen for our voices. Soar about the waves. Sing. Watch those men lose themselves. Watch them rot. Everything is movement. Everything is song.

—Nina Maclaughlin, “Sirens”⁸

The question of myth and it’s place in the contemporary consciousness continues to be important, especially to female authors and artists, in the twenty-first century. In late 2019 Nina Maclaughlin published her retelling of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* which she titled *Wake, Siren: Ovid Resung*. These are not simply translations which seek to find and portray what is lost in women’s stories when they are mediated by men, although that is part of it. Her myths are “resung” from those women who have been subjected to the monstrous transformations for any number of reasons: divine punishment, self-defense, what have you. Through varied voices and modern narratives, Maclaughlin clearly demonstrates the violence within these myths that have foregrounded and justified the continued violence and limitation of women since antiquity. More so than just demonstrating it, she issues a call to women and to those who have been oppressed by these very narratives to “wake.” She necessitates their resistance. Maclaughlin asks her readers to engage with the myths in such a way that they can recognize their own oppression and refuse to allow it. Her Sirens themselves speak to this quite beautifully: “We sing because we

⁸ (*Wake, Siren* 308).

love the song. But our simple song got twisted. The men in ships they heard us sing and they could not resist the sound. And so they called us dangerous. When it's they who lack control. And so we're monsters" (307). In all of her retellings, but especially her imagining of the Sirens, Maclaughlin sees these "unsavory" female traits, traits that women have been punished for throughout the ages, as an opportunity rather than a hindrance. She wishes for women to "watch those men lose themselves. Watch them rot" (308). She does not see the "monstrous" characteristics in the Sirens, instead she recognizes those labels for what they are: manifestations of men's incapability of feeling inferior to women.

Maclaughlin's interest in retelling Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—in a way that largely fits the definition of feminist revisionist mythmaking in a modern, post #MeToo world—demonstrates myth's sustained relevance in culture and the continual need for a space in which myth can (and must) evolve with the politics of contemporary times. As displayed by the women of *Wake, Siren*: one needs to recognize their own oppression to stage a resistance, to occupy the space of Sara Ahmed's "feminist killjoy," to find representation on the "second island." Furthermore, and as poets such as Eavan Boland, Rita Dove, Louise Glück, and Margaret Atwood have displayed, the female experience is fluid when it is free from the male fantasy. In giving the women of these myths the space to be imperfect, to break the bounds of their traditional gender roles, to be unapologetically who they are, female artists create a narrative that allows for the individual experience to come forward, rather than the essentialized and reduced female experience. As Audre Lorde suggested: "it is not the differences between us that are separating us" (115). Difference is not a hindrance to human connection, there is power in the particularity and individuality of experience which can be seen in the works of these poets. Although the ideas of womanhood perpetuated in this poetry are largely heteronormative and cis-normative, the

practice of feminist revisionist mythmaking in the work of these poets, and in more contemporary writers like Maclaughlin, can begin to create a space that can accommodate the experiences of queer and transgender individuals who have yet to find representation within mythic narratives.

How does something such as a myth, an archetypal representation of the human experience, remain relevant in a constantly changing world? It changes alongside. It allows its evolution to coexist with its own. The poets in this study have used their language skills like the weapons Lois Tyson believes them to be to open up the received mythic narratives to resist the gender constraints and to reckon with myths as a means of representing a true experience. For women and traditionally othered individuals (whether it be based on gender, race, sexuality, religion) must, just as Hélène Cixous urges, use writing and language to retrieve their long lost and “immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (880). Text, and the representation that comes with it, must be used as a kind of “emancipation” from the oppressive, and at times violent, past that we have been written into and to embrace the difference and particularity of the individual, human experience.

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