What factors contribute to the popularity of contemporary feminist retellings of Ancient Graeco-Roman myths, and what are the limitations of this trend?

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Abstract:

This paper explores the growing popularity of contemporary feminist retellings of ancient myth. Whilst these revisions aim to give voice to those silenced in classical literature, myth has also been used by alt-right groups to endorse misogynistic ideas. This paper aims to examine whether these novels are a truly impactful intervention to this, or simply a commercially driven trend. I will consider how narrative techniques, as well the novels' relationship to the wider field of feminism, contribute to their success. This research will be completed using scholarly perspectives from feminist theorists such as Helene Cixous and Simone de Beauvoir as well as drawing on feminist stylistic ideas from Djihane Chabane, Reshmi Krishnan, and others, alongside assessing public reception from sources such as 'Goodreads' reviews. The paper will conclude by adopting a 'critically optimistic' stance; arguing that, despite its limitations, the trend of feminist retellings is a necessary and significant shift in cultural attitudes towards myth.

Introduction

Ancient myth has increasingly become a cultural battleground, shaped by competing interpretations that reflect modern ideological divisions. On the one hand, feminist interpretations aim to reclaim these original narratives and give voice to the silenced female figures of the classics. However, myth and the classical world have also been manipulated by online alt-right groups, who use it to endorse traditional gender divides[1]. Within this context, contemporary feminist retellings have achieved astounding traction over the past decade. This raises important questions about what is behind the popularity of this trend. I have chosen to examine the factors behind this popularity in an effort to determine how much it is a culturally useful corrective to misogynistic narratives as opposed to merely a commercially marketable niche. To address this, this paper will look at *Circe* by Madeline Miller[2], *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker[3] and *Stone Blind* by Natalie Haynes[4]. This will involve examining the literary techniques employed in each novel and critical perspectives on adaptation from scholars such as Frances Babbage, as well as their relevance to contemporary feminist issues and place in the wider field of feminist theory; acknowledging the views and work of notable feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Helene Cixous. This is with the aim of positioning these novels within broader debates on feminism and revision. These arguments will also be supplemented by references to reader reviews to assess why these novels resonate with modern readers.

This paper will also engage with the potential limitations of the trend. Feminist retellings of myth are still positioned in the context of a worldview which is historically anti-feminist. Is it perhaps inevitable, then, that authors will inadvertently draw from these perspectives? Furthermore, their marketing and readership are often largely female, which may limit the social impact of the trend. By examining both the opportunities and dangers that stem from this trend, I will adopt, as MacMillan expresses, a 'critically optimistic' perspective[5] and evaluate whether their popularity reflects a real cultural shift or a commercially motivated literary trend.

[1] Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*.
[2] Miller, *Circe*.
[3] Barker, *The Silence of the Girls*.
[4] Haynes, *Stone Blind*.
[5] MacMillan, *"The Stories We Tell Ourselves to Make Ourselves Come True": Feminist Rewriting in the Canongate Myths Series*.

How these works' structural and linguistic techniques influence their popularity

The potency and memorability of the language and narrative techniques in contemporary feminist retellings are a critical factor in their success. Brianna King argues that these strategies provide the 'literary keys' needed to deconstruct the damaging patriarchal narratives that impede social progress[6]. A prime example of this is Natalie Haynes's Stone Blind, which utilizes a polyvocal structure to tell Medusa's story through a 'chorus of perspectives'[7]. By employing multiple narrators and complex subplots, Haynes transforms Medusa from a 'vilified' obstacle for a hero to overcome into a complex individual who is 'assaulted, abused, and wronged'[8]. This narrative choice creates an effective mirror of the Ancient Greek chorus, where independent female voices unite to form a 'loud and clear call for change'[9] to systemically destroy the ingrained biases in society. Throughout the novel, the line is also blurred between the rigid gendered binaries that characterise Ancient Graeco-Roman myths. As Alicia Ostriker noted: 'thanks to myth, we believe that a woman must be either an angel or a monster'[10]. Traditionally, for instance, myths present women as either divine, helpful figures or dangerous, manipulative witches[11]. Haynes refutes this by presenting Medusa's transformation as 'skin-deep'. Despite her monstrous transformation, she retains her human-like traits and binds her eyes to protect her family. This ultimately blurs the lines between internal character and external (grotesque) appearance. In doing so Haynes rejects the ancient theory of physiognomy – the belief that physical traits reveal inner character[8]. Haynes's literary rejection of pure monstrosity and archetypal binaries directs the novel towards becoming a fierce rejection of the traditional gendered dichotomies in ancient mythology - ultimately contributing to its potency as a revisionist novel.

Whilst it is written in a very different narrative voice, the diction and language style in Circe is also an integral part of its success. A multitude of readers and users of the reviewing platform 'Goodreads' have left reviews remarking on her 'trademark lyrical prose', described by readers as 'beautifully written' with an evocative 'vibe and aesthetic'[12]. For example, Circe comments on her relationship with Daedalus:

[6] King, 'Un-Silencing the Girls'.
[7] Sayed, 'Rewriting Myth: Feminist Reinterpretations in Modern Retellings of Classical Literature'.
[8] Reshmi Krishnan, *Monstrous Bodies as Cultural Text: The Grotesque, the Abject and the Embodied Difference in Natalie Haynes's Stone Blind*.
[9] Rogers, 'Why Myth Matters'.
[10] Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language'.
[11] Chabane, 'Giving Voice to the Villainess'.
[12] Goodreads, 'Circe'.

'But in a solitary life, there are rare moments when another soul dips near yours, stars once a year brush the earth. Such a constellation was he to me'

Here, Miller's lyricism is clear in the syntax of the passage, through the balanced clauses which mirror the poetic, yet human, voice of Circe. This lyricality, surely, is not merely for the 'aesthetic' but also a literary technique that mirrors Homeric verse through the use of language and metaphors that are 'deeply rooted in the Mediterranean landscape'[13]. This is evident in the metaphor in the passage of 'stars' and 'constellations', which gives her feelings towards Daedalus an epic scale and is resonant with the Homeric epics, where human emotion is often displayed through the natural world. In Fischer's view, by adopting this fusion of linguistic style, Miller engages in 'myth smashing' in order to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies – such as repurposing traditional 'martial' language to describe the 'epic' nature of birth and pregnancy. Additionally, Miller practices 'myth-making' by creating new gynocentric symbols. The Island of Aiaia is perhaps one of them, an almost strictly female domain separate from the male world. Ultimately, this allows Miller to give Circe 'epic scope'[14], whilst also replacing some of this detached 'epic distance' of the original Odyssey with an intimate first-person narrative voice. Consequently, the reader is dissuaded from viewing Circe through the male gaze and encouraged to form an understanding of Circe's internal conflicts. This shift effectively deconstructs the narrative structure of Campbell's traditional 'Hero's Journey'[15]. Unlike the traditional hero who quests for 'external fame' and the favour of the gods, Circe's path is one of 'self-actualization'. Specifically, Chabane[11] notes that Miller subverts Campbell's 'Atonement with the Father' stage which requires the hero to submit to patriarchal authority. Of course, the act of revising in a revisionist novel is going to be at the heart of the novel's *success*. In this case, Miller's definite act of revision is also central to the novels *impact*, as Miller intelligently reconstructs traditional androcentric narrative structures such as the 'Hero's Journey'.

However, there are perhaps some limitations to Circe's power as a revisionist novel, even if it does break out of its original stylistic constraints. A significant one being the novel's adherence to the Bildungsroman structure, which has led some to label Circe as the 'Grecian equivalent of Jane Eyre'[16] (see also Spacciante[17] for a similar critique). Feminist critics have often viewed generic categories, such as the Bildungsroman novel, with suspicion because they have historically been dominated by male voices that

[13] Fischer, 'Madeline Miller and the Midcult'.
[14] Channel 4 News, *Madeline Miller on Making the Classics Feminist, Modern America and Writing Circe*.
[15] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.
[16] Scoones, 'The Magic of Madeline Miller's "Circe"'.
[17] Spacciante, 'Circe, the Female Hero. First-Person Narrative and Power in Madeline Miller's Circe'.

ignore issues related to gender. While the male Bildungsroman model focuses on 'growing up', the female version often relates a process of 'growing-down' and subduement to fit in with patriarchal norms[18]. Another danger in this genre is 'protective coloration', where the protagonist learns to 'collaborate' with the patriarchy to fuel their own ambitions. In Circe, this is visible in her early desperation to win male attention, her later complicated relationship with Odysseus, as well as her intimate moments with Hermes. Ultimately, then, Circe's 'private success' is achieved partly through befriending and performing for the very patriarchy she is against, which perhaps makes her 'victory' inconsequential.

Despite these concerns with the genre, it is questionable whether Circe is actually a true Bildungsroman in its traditional sense. The academic definition of a Bildungsroman novel states that the protagonist will gradually accept the values of their own society. However, Circe very clearly rejects the ideals of her own society by the end of the novel as she refutes her own immortality. As she discards divine life, she perhaps also rejects the powerful and entrenched patriarchy that is associated with it. Therefore, Circe does not conform to the traditional Bildungsroman structure as she allows the novel to culminate not with acceptance, but with a dismissal of the society that has shaped her.

Connection to wider feminist thought and current feminist issues as a driver of popularity

Contemporary feminist revisions of Ancient myths can be seen as being a response to, as well as being shaped by, feminist criticism, particularly Hélène Cixous's essay – *The Laugh of Medusa*[19]. Cixous uses Medusa as a symbol to comment on how the patriarchy has demonised female power. This has meant that Medusa has been historically associated with death in order to justify male fear towards her character. However, by looking at her 'straight on', women find she's 'beautiful and she's laughing' and Medusa becomes a symbol of resistance against the patriarchy. This is reflected in Stone Blind, where Natalie Haynes presents Medusa as innocent and peaceful in childhood, surrounded by the warmth of her sisters. Annmarie Patterson, in a review of Stone Blind, also argues that Haynes's 'sense of humour' and 'fast punchlines' create a comedic voice[20], perhaps echoing the 'laugh of Medusa' and defying traditional associations of fear and death. Cixous also argues that women should 'write through their bodies' and that female writing should continue as a 'dynamic site of resistance' – her command for 'écriture feminine' explaining why modern female writers feel a duty to give voice to

[18] Lazzaro-Weis, 'The Female "Bildungsroman"'.
[19] Cixous et al., 'The Laugh of the Medusa'.
[20] The Paideia Institute, 'A Review of Stone Blind, by Natalie Haynes'.

marginalised women in myth. Therefore, these retellings are politicised and made revolutionary for contemporary readers.

Whilst Stone Blind may gain its power by drawing directly from traditional feminist theory, The Silence of the Girls and Circe perhaps obtain their significance more from engagement with contemporary feminist concerns. The remainder of this section will explore how this modern engagement gives impact to the language and narrative in these two novels and may help explain why they are the most popular of the three novels.

The success of Pat Barker's The Silence of the Girls (2018) is inextricably linked to its publication in a post-#MeToo era, where it engages with modern global debates regarding sexual violence. Brianna King argues that, by shifting the narrative focus to the silent women of the Iliad, Barker is able to transform myth into a commentary on 'rape culture' and female 'endurance of sexual violence'[6]. Critical commentaries and reviews have frequently remarked on the sheer rawness of her writing style, particularly during Briseis's descriptions of her sexual exploitation by Achilles:

"When he was finished, he rolled away from me and went to sleep"

Here, Barker, unlike Miller, avoids lyricism; the blunt monosyllabism reflects the dehumanisation that Briseis experiences. In allowing Briseis to emotionally detach from the situation, a disturbing normality is created. Ultimately, this style is central to the novel's impact because it strips away any romanticisation of suffering that is typically found in classical literature to create a personal and intimate narrative that is devoid of traditional epic narration or scale. The visceral and unembellished approach to the writing perhaps also makes space for the contemporary feminist concerns around #Me-too and 'rape-culture' to impact the reader. However, it is impossible to ignore the amount of 'Goodreads' commentors who criticise the use of Achilles as a male voice in the second half of the novel. One user remarks on how they 'don't care about the story of Achilles' as 'this all is told in the Iliad itself!' and concludes with the statement that the Silence of the Girls is a 'waste of potential' since 'the girls indeed stay silent'[21]. Perhaps, then, the structure of the novel may have limited Barker's attempted reclamation of the voice of Briseis.

[21] Goodreads, 'The Silence of the Girls (Women of Troy, #1)'.

Despite this, it is clear that the novel's engagement with contemporary feminist contexts is incredibly powerful. Silence of the Girls, published in the context of #MeToo, reframes sexual violence through the victim's perspective rather than the perpetrators. The Greek camp is presented as a 'rape camp' and by focusing on the survivor's physical and psychological reality, she performs a 'demythologization of epic memory'[6]. Pat Barker also acknowledges that the traumas Briseis endures are 'historically undisrupted and shared traumas' that echo modern genocidal rape in Bosnia and Rwanda. This aligns ancient violence with modern wartime rape and presents trauma as continuous across history. This parallel is developed further when the Greek leader Nestor commands the women to 'forget' their past lives and Briseis realises that her duty is to 'remember.' In King's view, her refusal perhaps mirrors modern testimonies, such as those given at the 1997 UN tribunal on Rwanda, which led to the first conviction of rape as a crime of genocide[22]. This allows Briseis to preserve her agency within a system that oppresses her while reinforcing Barker's critique of both ancient and modern societal structures that endorse sexual violence.

Ultimately, this trend of retelling the stories of marginalised ancient women creates a literary movement that mirrors the dynamics of #MeToo. Just as the modern movement 'mobilized rapidly' as it 'went viral in over 85 nations' through an overwhelming amount of shared personal experiences[23], the retellings also bring together a plethora of classically silenced voices. This parallel suggests that the pervasive nature of #MeToo has created a culture in which these retellings can obtain mass popularity. Therefore, the success of Silence of the Girls can be put down to not only Barker's writing, but to its alignment with a wider feminist movement and modern atrocities. In this sense, we have been provided with an ample opportunity to re-politicize sexism; to prove that these stories are not irrelevant but essential in a modern context[24].

Madeline Miller's Circe also serves as a representative of contemporary feminist concerns regarding the position of the 'single woman' as well as the 'domesticated woman' in society. Traditional family structures have often been placed into the private sphere and protected from state intrusion[25]. However, feminist critics argue that 'the personal is political' and that the inequality of women within familial dynamics is in contradiction to wider social equality. In Circe, Circe's marginalisation begins in the private sphere of her family; supporting the idea that gender inequality in society largely

[22] 'The Cases | United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda'.
[23] Harvard International Review, 'The #MeToo Movement'.
[24] Rogers, 'Why Myth Matters'.
[25] Satz, *Feminist Perspectives on Reproduction and the Family*.

stems from power dynamics in the home. Circe subverts these traditional family structures by rejecting marriage and becomes a feminist alternative to male control through her exile. Miller's narrative choice here addresses what scholars' identify as the 'neglected subject' of the 'single woman' in feminism[26]. This concern is often overlooked in feminist theory, although single women remain heavily affected by social expectations and media pressure in modern society to couple. Circe, then, could reflect this, exposing the experience of women who exist outside of heteronormative relationships and are therefore associated with ideas of 'vulnerability' or corruption[27].

The success of Circe is perhaps also linked to its exploration of female isolation and power outside of the patriarchy. Miller notes that she intended to explore what it means to be 'othered' and how a woman can build her own identity alone, when she is independent from a system that objectifies her[14]. This aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's argument in 'The Second Sex'[28] which states that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,' expressing how women are not born inferior but 'socialized into that status'. De Beauvoir separates sex (the biological facts of the body) from gender (the cultural associations that the body earns). Historically, women have been condemned to 'dream through the dreams of men', which meant defining their value according to masculine ideals. However, Djihane Chabane argues that Circe's progression into her own power represents a rejection of this 'otherness' and a search for her own 'transcendence'. Her participation in witchcraft is portrayed as a 'technology of the self'; a transformative set of acts that allows her to undertake a agency that is entirely her own. Unlike the other Gods who possess 'excellences already bursting from their fingertips', Circe's sorceress-like power is earned through 'day upon patient day' of 'muddied skirts' and error[10]. By creating this unique, feminine dream and version of power through her witchcraft, she removes herself from the typical masculine heroic journey and finds self-acceptance in isolation from men.

The limitations and dangers of the trend

Whilst some specific limitations of the chosen novels have been examined, it is also important to consider the wider limitations of the trend itself. Beyond the literary techniques and contemporary relevance, the popularity of these retellings could be shaped by more problematic factors. In particular, we should consider the placing of these novels within the category of what Finn McRedmond calls 'marketable feminism'[29]. This is where historical narratives are radically adapted 'for the sake of

[26] Sarwar and Fatima, 'Madeline Miller's Circe'.
[27] Gilchrist, '"It's Not Who I Want to Be!"'
[28] Beauvoir and Rowbotham, *The Second Sex*.
[29] McRedmond, 'The Ancient Greeks Will Never Be Feminists'.

political correctness'. Of course, it is important to acknowledge the right-wing stance of McRedmond throughout this article; however, he perhaps raises a compelling argument regarding consumer engagement with these revisions. The retellings are intended to be progressive but are by no means uncomfortable or disruptive in modern society. As a consequence, they may participate in a form of 'safe feminism' that serves as a proxy for actual political action. This 'consumer laziness' allows readers to feel they are engaging in a feminist dialogue without actually challenging wider societal structures. It may be inferred that the revisions also participate, to an extent, in 'femvertising,' a term coined by 'SheKnowsMedia' to describe the alignment of brands with feminist ideologies to drive consumption[30]. As a result, the language of empowerment may become diluted when they are 'mass-produced by companies with questionable ethics' and feminism risks becoming an 'aesthetic'.

Furthermore, it can be asserted that the readership of these novels is often limited to women, an issue that is perhaps exacerbated by the way these books are marketed. Cover design, especially, works as a signal for the genre and target audience of the novel. In a similar way to how 'chick lit' uses bold pinks, feminist revisions often utilize 'jaunty and bright' colour schemes to attract a female audience[29]. This "his 'n' hers" publishing model makes selection easier for shoppers but also could pigeonhole the genre as non-serious entertainment[31]. The covers of 'The Silence of the Girls' may exemplify this. The first US edition shows an aesthetically appealing image of a woman's body draped in silks, marketing the novel through light classical aesthetics that feel 'safe' for consumption. Of course, this absence of a face and visually appealing body may be purposeful; to demonstrate a silenced woman's 'figure' that is a representation of every woman. However, it is possible that the novel's violent resistance against war-time rape risks being softened by its cover. More broadly, it is obviously problematic that the message that these authors are trying to convey is only reaching a largely female audience. The stereotype that feminism is a 'women's issue' is consequently strengthened and social change limited.

Some scholars also express their concern regarding how successfully these novels can truly deconstruct patriarchal narratives without drawing from or romanticizing the original narratives. Critics such as Purkiss warn that retellings may simply replicate the language and structures of the original rather than being a full 'structural overhaul'[32]. This potentially strengthens the original myth's power and inadvertently endorses misogyny. Despite this issue, Frances Babbage concludes her PhD thesis on 'revisioning

[30] HASSL, 'Branding Feminism'.
[31] 'Working Papers on the Web: Chick Lit, Gormley'.
[32] Larrington, *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*.

myth in feminist theatre'[33] by arguing that the real problem of feminist revisions occurs when adaptations rewrite 'too boldly' so that they almost avoid the problems that the original myths raise. Babbage uses the example of various theatrical adaptations of 'Medea', where some revisions choose to remove the plot point where Medea kills her own children in order to redeem her character. These adaptations can be unsatisfying and, arguably, 'more effective work' is done by versions that don't attempt to avoid the problems that the classical myths represent. Hence, it can be assumed from the critical division on this subject that authors of feminist retellings of ancient myth face a careful balancing act. If the act of revising is not completed diligently enough then the retelling risks either being misinterpreted or being more surface-level than intended.

Finally, another significant limitation of this trend is its failure to address more divisive issues, such as race. The vast majority of popular feminist retellings are based on Graeco-Roman sources, meaning that there is a large portion of ancient, silenced women whose stories aren't being told. These novels often present a 'universal female struggle' that only remains within a white, Eurocentric context and ignores the experiences of women of colour[34]. Mariela Brown also suggests that this narrow focus may also risk reinforcing the existing elitism and Eurocentrism within Classical studies. In this context, an insight from Emma Herdman, the editor of Circe, is particularly apt: she argues that for the trend to retain its impact it must 'continue to diversify'[35]. Without popular authors, who have larger readerships, writing more inclusive narratives the trend risks functioning as 'marketable feminism' instead of an impactful movement.

Despite the limitations and risks surrounding the trend, these concerns are perhaps less relevant in comparison to what Kylie Rogers argues is the 'necessity' of feminist retellings[24]. Harriet Macmillan also argues that these revisions are 'pragmatic', and there simply to avoid the perpetuation of classical misogyny in the modern sphere[5]. Donna Zuckerburg, in her book 'Not All Dead White Men'[1], looks at how the classical world and mythology are being aggressively interpreted by far-right online communities such as the 'Red Pill' movement. Zuckerburg states that these groups romanticise the myths that detail abuse of women and treat them as 'aspirational'; hoping for a system where women's 'behaviour and decisions' are controlled by men – similar to the ancient world where women 'lived under the guidance of kyrios or paterfamilias'. Therefore, Zuckerburg makes it clear that feminist interpretations become essential in overshadowing and challenging these misogynistic readings and she concludes by

[33] Babbage, 'Re-Visioning Myth'.
[34] Brown, 'Women in Greek Mythology Should Know Their Place! – Debating the Necessity of Feminist Revisionist Mythology in Contemporary Literature.'
[35] Shaffi, 'Two Sides to a Story'.

stating that feminist classics are 'more exciting and necessary than ever' because they challenge the belief that 'progressive politics and appreciation of the ancient world cannot co-exist'. Despite Zuckerburg's research, it is necessary to acknowledge that this specific branch of the Red Pill community remains relatively small, perhaps limiting its influence in the modern world. However, I believe that their advocation for such vile acts is so disturbing that it offers a dark vision of the future of the Classics. Since understanding the ancient world and mythology is still such an essential part of modern culture, feminist interpretations remain incredibly important.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the popularity of contemporary feminist retellings of Ancient Graeco-Roman myth can be largely put down to their ability to deconstruct and then reconstruct original narrative through engagement with contemporary feminist concerns, such as 'rape-culture' and the often neglected subject of the 'single-woman' in modern society as well as by using imaginative linguistic and narrative techniques. However, I believe that the public response to these novels is perhaps less important than examining the limitations of the trend and strategising how the trend might progress. This project has acknowledged limitations such as 'marketable feminism', 'Eurocentrism' as well as danger that adaptation may inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal structures. However, as Rogers and Zuckerburg argue, these revisions still remain essential since they challenge misogynistic interpretations of the classical world. Additionally, it is obvious that the trend must continue in order to develop and ultimately transcend these limitations. Perhaps expanding the trend to include myths from a range of cultures would allow these revisions to become more impactful on a global scale.

Any work of this length and nature has to limit the scope that it addresses. By purely focusing on novels referencing Graeco-Roman mythology, this paper perhaps exacerbates the Eurocentrism that I criticise. Further research and criticism into the feminist retellings from other cultures that do exist is therefore an obvious path for future work in this area. Additionally, this paper assumes (with some justification) that the readership of these novels is predominantly female; however this is uncertain due to a lack of readership statistics. Related to this, future research could focus more on the marketing strategies behind contemporary feminist retellings. This could be particularly helpful as an approach to developing ways to grow the readership of these novels and allow feminist retellings to function as a real cultural shift rather than a commercially motivated trend.

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