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The Reemergence of Greek Mythology in Contemporary Fiction: An Explorative Case Study

"In a way, it's nice to know that there are Greek gods out there, because you have somebody to blame when things go wrong." (Riordan The Lightning Thief *231).*

Introduction

Though works like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are at the top of every list for literature involving Greek mythology, they are quickly being outnumbered by newer, more modern adaptations. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in Greek mythology, specifically as individual characters, myths, or events find their way into the fiction genre. In 2005, Margaret Atwood published *The Penelopiad*, a novella in which Atwood rewrites the ancient myth of Odysseus from Penelope (his wife)'s perspective. The same year, Rick Riordan published *Percy Jackson & The Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, the first of five installments of the *Percy Jackson* series that would eventually be followed by multiple spin-off novel series; these books imagine a modern world in which Greek gods still rule, and inherently still produce offspring with mortals: demi-gods like protagonist Percy. Since then, more novels have been written, published, and popularized featuring Greek mythological characters, origins, inspirations, or settings. Madeline Miller's *Song of Achilles* and *Circe* have recently swept the internet by storm, praised for their unique retellings that prominently feature LGBTQ+ and female characters. Natalie Haynes has followed suit, publishing a host of novels like *A Thousand Ships* that turn a Greek myth into a fiction bestseller. The novels, while mostly classifiable as

retellings, have accrued massive followings and popularity — some even getting opted for movie or TV show adaptations to match their literary appeal. And yet, the question lingers: aren't they just retelling stories we have already heard?

The short answer is yes, they are retelling classical Greek myths that have been preserved through history, epics, and novels. This paper is not going to compare the retellings to source material in order to determine how "accurate" of a retelling it actually is. For the purposes of this paper, the term "retelling(s)" will be used to refer to these novels, as well as any contemporary works that use Greek mythology as their framing device. The much more complicated answer to the aforementioned question, the one that this paper will attempt to address, is that there is something unique about each of these works that provide originality to their source material. The first component to that question is mythology; what makes mythology so interesting, engaging, and appealing to modern authors and audiences? The second component is the novels themselves; in regards to functioning as retellings, what makes these novels so popular with modern audiences, especially in the teen, young adult (YA) and new adult (NA) age ranges? This paper will attempt to answer those questions, ultimately arguing that the resurgence of Greek mythology in contemporary fiction and its popularity is because of the inherent malleability of myths and the authoritative choices that modernize the classical myths, including the inclusion of LGBTQ+ representation that most scholarship has ignored. This paper will choose three novels as "case studies" in order to answer this question and will apply theoretical frameworks to each novel to determine two factors: 1) the revelation of socio-cultural and political values through the author's modernizing efforts and 2) the success of the retelling in its appeal as both an adaptation and an original work. This exploration is significant because it will reveal the power of mythology, as well as writing as a whole, in demonstrating socio-political values as well as

highlight the lack of scholarship surrounding queer theory in greek mythology and contemporary fiction.

Literature Review

While there is an abundant production of fiction novels that incorporate Greek mythology, the academic field surrounding this topic is rather limited. *Song of Achilles, A Thousand Ships,* and the *Percy Jackson* series (including its accompanying series), are just three of these projects that undertake the retelling of Greek mythology in a contemporary novel setting. Miller's *Song of Achilles*, published in 2011, takes influence from Homer's *Iliad* in the retelling of the hero of Achilles and the Trojan War; however, it is narrated by Patroclus, Achilles' close companion, who is also Achilles' lover in Miller's adaptation. *A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes was published in 2019 and rewrites the Trojan War — also pulling from the *Iliad* — but through a variety of female voices who were minor characters in the Homeric epic. Lastly, the *Percy Jackson* series follows Percy and his friends, all "demi-gods," on their adventures as they battle classic mythological monsters in order to ultimately save the world (and the gods) from the uprising of the Titans, all in a contemporary setting. These three novels (with inclusion of specific books within the *Percy Jackson* series) will serve as case studies within this project in order to dissect and discuss how myths are interacting within contemporary fiction and to what effect this produces.

With the relatively recent reemergence of ancient myths in modern retellings, especially in the fiction genre, scholars are playing catch-up in terms of the critical and analytical discussion surrounding this topic. However, several scholars have undertaken the discussion of these contemporary novels, building upon popular scholarship that has established the function of myth as a timeless narrative framework. Lorna Hardwick's "Myth, Creativity and Repressions

in Modern Literature: Refigurations from Ancient Greek Myth" theorizes that it is the malleability of myth that allows it to be frequently adapted across genre, time, and medium (Hardwick 11). Hardwick also selects specific texts to function as case studies— most similarly being Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, which won't be discussed concretely in this paper, but is frequently cited by scholars in similar explorations. Through this project Hardwick hoped to determine how modern retellings adapt ancient myths as well as deploy repressive strategies in this re-imagining to make the adaptations more readable, accessible, and appropriate for modern audiences (Hardwick 11). Hardwick also contributed to A*ncient Greek Myth in World Fiction Since 1989,* a collection of essays written by Hardwick and other scholars that address and discuss the inclusion of mythology in global fiction as it pertains to various themes and issues. This collection argues that the inclusion of Greek mythology in novels can be dated to the very birth of the novel itself in the 18th century, primarily in the Greek tragedy genre, but shifted to producing references in fiction-specific novels (attributed to Greek drama and epics) after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 (McConnell and Hall 5). Though this provides a concrete date to refer to as "contemporary" in the sub-genre of ancient Greek-related contemporary fiction, the specific novels used in this paper were intentionally drawn from publications in the past 20 years in order to draw conclusions about extremely specific audiences. Nevertheless, this collection is incredibly important in how we understand the scope of literature in this sub-genre, as well as the scope of literary discussion about the topic itself.

As some scholars were working to establish the elasticity of myth and its other properties that make it a prime vehicle for retellings, others were drawing conclusions about specific novels themselves. Maria Antonietta Struzziero wrote "A New Voice for an Ancient Story: Speaking from the Margins of Homer's *Iliad* in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*" with the purpose

of examining how Miller employs hypertextuality and transfocalization to provide anti-war

social commentary in her revision of the epic poem, in which she also revisits the relationship

between Achilles and Patroclus and rewrites it to be a love story rather than a friendship

(Struzziero 133). For the purposes of this paper, transfocalization is defined as the strategy

through which authors shift perspective or focus of a narrative to a different character, point of

view, or period in order to reveal or exaggerate a specific argument; Struzziero echoes Gerard

Genette's theory of hypertextuality, saying "By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a

text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the

hypotext), upon which it is grafted" (qtd in Struzziero 134). It is worth noting, as Struzziero

does, that essentially every work is in some sense a hypertext, but this paper will focus itself on

the exaggeration of this theory: retellings. This framework of narration — transfoculization —

can be more accurately defined as minor-character elaboration, a niche genre identified by

Jeremy Rosen in "An Insatiable Market for Minor Characters: Genre in the Contemporary

Literary Marketplace." This genre encompasses the inherent hypertextuality of retelling a story

from a different, minor character's perspective, which is the entire point of the genre (Rosen

147). Another perspective of hypertextuality is not focused on the character perspective, but

rather on the subject of adaptations and hypertexuality as plagiarism. Alexander Leighton's

"Re-Discovering Mythology: Adaptation and Appropriation in the Percy Jackson and the

Olympians Saga" discusses the *Percy Jackson* series within the scope of how adaptation

functions as a work of originality *and* a retelling of some source material, specifically how

Riordan's series borrows from, appropriates, and adapts classic mythology to create his own,

original contemporary work (Leighton 60). Additionally, Leighton's argues that in order to

qualify a successful adaptation, it must hold value for two audiences: knowing and unknowing

(qtd in Leighton 68).The former, "knowing," refers to " readers who have encountered and have read the originary pre-text being adapted," whereas "unknowing" readers are those who "have as yet not fully encountered the pre-text itself" (Leighton 68). In the terms of retellings, Leighton notes that both audiences may be aware that the retelling is a hypertext, but the distinction lies in whether they have fully encountered the hypotext or not (Leighton 68). Leighton's ultimate goal is to determine whether Riordan's work is in fact merely an adaptation that retells the same story, or whether it can be judged as an original work.

Most scholars have agreed that the realm of scholarship surrounding myth adaptations is still in development, and yet the adaptations themselves continue to be published, earning popular reception. Common themes in recent scholarship also acknowledge the value of how adaptations bring a new perspective to old stories, ultimately creating a new work that is accessible and engaging to readers. However, there are key areas of these novels, and the topic at large, that haven't earned much attention from scholars. In particular, scholarship specific to LGBTQ+ characters and themes in retellings were few and far between, and often featured as one aspect of research articles rather than the main theme. Both Riordan and Miller feature queer characters in their novels, with *Song of Achilles* prominently foregrounding a queer romantic relationship between Patroclus and Achilles and *Percy Jackson* featuring multiple, minor queer characters with queer storylines. The question arises: are authors including queer characters and storylines to simply "check" a diversity or representation box? Or is there a deeper reason to these choices? This question is especially applicable to Miller and *Song of Achilles*; because it is a novel set in Ancient Greece, historical accuracy and sexuality must be examined in order to produce an answer to this question. *Sexuality Greek and Roman Culture* by Marilyn Skinner will prove especially useful in proposing answers to these questions about ancient culture. Skinner

discusses how "sexuality" as we know it didn't exist in ancient culture, but rather was a

hierarchical power dynamic that was more about performing gender roles (Skinner 3). While

ancient history may help answer the question as it pertains to Miller, Riordan's novels are set in a

contemporary setting. There's no clear scholarship on Riordan's inclusion of LGBTQ+

characters, which is further proof that this area of research — LGBTQ+ themes in contemporary

fiction, and more specifically in Greek mythology — has yet to be explored.

Why Mythology?

Undeniably, the medium of myth is one of the central reasons for the resurgence of

popularity in the genre of Greek mythology and contemporary fiction. These authors chose

mythology, Greek mythology in particular, as the vessel for their retellings because mythology

has the inherent ability to mold, shift, and adapt across time periods and cultures. The adaptation

and rewriting of myths isn't unique to contemporary work either, as Hardwick notes that myths

were often reworked and varied in Greek and Roman culture too: "Different versions of

particular myths moved in and out of prominence. Refigurations of myth signaled shifts and

conflicts in ways of looking at the world" (Hardwick 12). It's clear that the trend of retelling

myths to fit a specific culture or historical period is not unique to one specific culture, and rather

reveals the elasticity of myth itself in addition to the power that stories hold in society. It is

important to note that the majority of myths in contemporary American media and literature do

stem from Hellenistic or Roman roots. Hardwick writes "Greek and Roman myth has functioned

as an ever-present but malleable and even protean source of narratives and iconic figures, as a

touchstone for comparisons, allegories and analogies, and as a nexus between the distant and the

familiar and between perspectives on the past and the present" (Hardwick 11). Thus, myth not

only provides specific opportunities to rework individual stories across time and cultures, but has

also supplied modern culture with a host of characters, tropes, and archetypes that inform many of our contemporary stories today. For example, Achilles represents the traditional hero archetype that many modern heroes are based on, and is incredibly similar to *another* Greek and Roman hero, Hercules (or Heracles), who has earned his own fair share of adaptations, retellings, and Disney movies. The hero archetype extends to the overall hero plot trope that basically follows the model of: hero possesses some immortal characteristics that inherently separate them from others, which leads to a flurry of adventures that ultimately aims to save one or more damsels and — by extension — the world, and then the hero is rewarded for their efforts with simultaneous glory and "getting the girl." This should sound familiar, as this basic plot formula has been reworked, remolded, and disguised across literature, movies, TV series, and other contemporary media stories. Thus, Hardwick is correct in her claim that myth serves as a cultural touchstone for figures, analogies, and narratives (Hardwick 11).

Despite being a cultural touchstone for adaptations, it follows that as time periods and cultures appropriate myths, the narratives change (whether intentionally or unintentionally) to fit the broader cultural context. The retellings then can serve as socio-cultural markers, as Hardwick notes: "Ancient selection and rearrangement from myth serves to map fields of conflict and change in antiquity…In their turn, modern authors deploy allusions and analogues in order to turn the lens on repressions in their own cultural histories and reflect on these" (Hardwick 14). The theme of malleability of myth across binaries extends to the theory of myth as well, especially concerning the trend of reworking myths and how those reworkings represent socio-cultural values and commentary. In some ways, these changes are unintentional; Atwood prefaces *The Penelopiad* with "the play you hold in your hands is an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo" (qtd in Hardwick 14). As myths are reworked and *those*

retellings are reworked and so on, it is only natural that unintentional changes occur alongside cultural factors, values, and trends. However, intentional changes also occur, which more clearly signal socio-cultural markers of the retelling's period; Hardwick identifies these changes as repression, which ultimately refers to what material from the source material— or as Hardwick defines it, "foundation myth" — is being left out in each retelling in order to appropriate and focus the purpose of the retelling (Hardwick 18). McConnell and Hall corroborate Hardwick's theory with an emphasis on contemporary retellings, writing "As the world sought to reconfigure itself in a new way, Greek epic could be appropriated, adapted and renewed; once claimed in these ways, it offered a path which writers could choose to either tread or consciously veer away from" (McConnell and Hall 5). For example, following WWII, the Cold War, and general unrest in the period following, writers sought to create narratives that provided social commentary while also distancing themselves from their opinions. Myths provided this exact vehicle. Thus, current retellings can be read from this analytical lens in order to produce some conclusions about how the novel functions in a larger, socio-cultural, political, and historical context.

Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

Miller's decorated novel, *Song of Achilles,* experienced several waves of resurging popularity and presents multiple creative changes to its foundational hypotext. While the novel is acclaimed for its imaginative retelling of the Trojan War, using hypertextuality and transfocalization to categorize it in the minor-character elaboration genre, it is also recognized for its somewhat controversial foregrounding of a romantic relationship between Patroclus and Achilles. Though the narrative retelling focuses on the Trojan War as its setting, Miller zooms in on the hero Achilles through the perspective of Patroclus as a protagonist, from the moment

Patroclus and Achilles meet, to the hero's fated death. So what does the adjusted perspective and transfocalization reveal?

Struzziero argues that Miller's hypertext has two main objectives, "first, she questions and deconstructs the hierarchy and morality of the epic…Second, she rethinks the gender dynamics of the source text, and flouts its categorization of gender roles and construction of masculinity and sexuality resting on the traditional phallocentric paradigms of patriarchal society" (Struzziero 134). The former is achieved through the transfocalization of the text by placing Patroclus as a narrator, protagonist, and moral compass, while the latter is communicated through her inclusion of a romantic relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, which is barely mentioned in the hypotext but proves extremely relevant to modern readers (Struzziero 134). It is revealed in the novel that Achilles is prophesized to die in the Trojan War, simultaneously achieving eternal glory, but only after he kills Hector — son of the Trojan King. Patroclus frequently implores Achilles to avoid the war, to not kill Hector, to which Achilles often replies "'Well, why should I kill [Hector]? He's done nothing to me.' For the first time then, [Patroclus] felt a kind of hope" (Miller 161). Patroclus is the moral voice for both readers and Achilles, imposing an anti-war commentary on a war-focused hypertext. This extends past his obvious desire for Achilles to live, but also to the morality of war-times and rules and its effect on women. Patroclus says "I could barely watch these girls as they stumbled into camp to be parceled off. I sent Achilles out to ask for them, to seek as many as he could, and the men teased him about his voraciousness, his endless priapism. 'Didn't even know you liked girls,' Diomedes joked" (Miller 219). Patroclus uses Achilles' military dominance to establish a safe haven for captured women, meaning Miller is simultaneously inverting gender expectations and superimposing anti-war commentary on the hypotext. Thus, Hardwick's theory that retellings can

provide insight into socio-political values is confirmed by Miller's anti-war commentary and moral deconstruction of the epic hypotext.

Furthermore, this theory can also be confirmed by Miller's reworking of gender and sexuality in *Song of Achilles* — the second objective of the novel as stated by Struzziero. Miller's original inspiration for the novel was Achilles' reaction to Patroclus' death in the *Iliad*, which caused Miller to question the nature of their relationship and therefore led to the homoerotic depiction of their relationship in the novel, which thus opens up the possibility for critical discourse about gender and sexuality in both hypertext and hypotext (Struzziero 136). Miller's diversion from the hypotext extends to her inclusion of specific scenes of cross-dressing, in which Thetis — Achilles' sea nymph mother — hides Achilles away on the island of Scyros, disguised as one of the daughters of King Lycomedes, in an effort to delay Achilles' fate of joining the war in Troy (Miller 123). Patroclus observes Achilles in this state, saying "He was holding the earrings up to his ears now, turning them this way and that, pursing his lips, playing at girlishness. It amused him…" (Miller 152). In this case, Achilles — who is so often portrayed as the hypermasculine hero — is expressing femininity in a way that is safe, allowed, and encouraged. Achilles is demonstrating the performance of gender, Judith Butler's gender theory, which asserts that gender is not a biological assignment but rather something we perform and act out based on our clothing, personality and other traits (Struzziero 134). This bubble of free gender expression, however, does not last long; soon, Odysseus and others show up to Scyros to retrieve Achilles and urge him to enter the war at Troy — they go so far as to threaten exposing Achilles' cross-dressing to the world: "It was one thing to wear a dress out of necessity, another thing for the world to know of it. Our people reserved their ugliest names for men who acted like women; lives were lost over such insults" (Miller 154). Miller's effective insertion of Butler's

gender theory through Patroclus, our moral protagonist, and Achilles, our masculine hero who indeed flips gender norms frequently, results in open, critical, dialogue of queer theory in history.

The way that gender and sexuality was viewed in ancient culture is extremely different from how we view it today. Gender in ancient times was distinctly binary; those thought of as androgynous or "heraphrodites" were often forced into one gender role or the other and mostly thought of in a negative sense — this appears, however, as to mostly apply to men dressing as women (Skinner 8). This notion is expressed in Achilles' cross dressing episode, which resulted in a threat to reveal his period of androgyny. As Skinner notes, the modern conception of "sexuality" also did not exist in Ancient Greek or Roman culture (Skinner 3). Rather, this term was most closely resembled by the notion of sexual urges, which they attributed to "the matters of Aphrodite" (Skinner 3-4). Of course, this term varied by culture, as some referred to the goddess as Venus, or her son Cupid/Eros (Skinner 4). Thus, it is clear that sexuality, as we define it today, did *not* exist in Ancient culture; which leads to the question of how Patroclus and Achilles' relationship operates in the application of queer theory. Though sexuality was not given its identification in ancient times, it was not uncommon or unheard of to have gay or queer relationships — they simply operated as acting upon sexual urges as a form of intersection between power and gender dynamics. Skinner explains that sexuality was modeled after something called "the penetration model"; this means that "Greeks conceptualized any act of sexual congress involving at least one adult male as a dominance–submission relationship in which the adult male was expected to assume the "active" role of penetrator; conversely, the person penetrated, whether woman, boy, or other adult male, was automatically reduced to "passive" female status" (qtd in Skinner 7). Thus, sexuality is concretely tied to gender roles rather than any form of preference. This aligns with Miller's writing, as Patroclus notes: "As

Odysseus said, many boys took each other for lovers. But such things were given up as they grew older, unless it was with slaves or hired boys. Our men liked conquest; they did not trust a man who was conquered himself" (Miller 166). Sexuality in Ancient culture was reduced to stereotypical gender roles as stated in the "penetration model." Though Achilles was often the hypermasculine, "*Aristos Achaion"* (Best of the Greeks)*,* his homosexual identity and relationship would've resulted in a diminished masculinity (italics in original writing Miller 181).

Thus, Miller's *Song of Achilles* acts as a vehicle for critical dialogue around gender and sexuality in both the hypotext and the hypertext. Socio-political values of both periods can be derived from literature, as theorized by Hardwick; this applies to both the anti-war commentary that Miller installs via the transfocalization of Patroclus' moral character and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ themes that push toward progressive sexual politics. Additionally, Leighton's theory of what qualifies a successful adaptation (one that holds value as both an adaptation *and* as its own original work) requires that the retelling be enjoyable for two audiences: knowing and unknowing (qtd in Leighton 68). Thus, is *Song of Achilles* a successful adaptation? First, through its presentation of modern socio-political themes in an ancient context, it is clear that Miller's work has some value separate from its original hypotext. Second, Miller's use of transfocalization to enter the minor-character elaboration genre and provide an original, critical reading of the hypotext asserts that *Song of Achilles* holds value of its own right. Lastly, this novel can be thoroughly enjoyed for knowing readers, who will undoubtedly pick up on specific hints or smaller details that may be lost on unknowing readers; and yet, the text can also be enjoyed by unknowing readers because the novel is ultimately a tragic queer romance set against the backdrop of the Trojan War.

***A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes**

While *Song of Achilles* more closely resembles a romance novel than a retelling of the *Iliad*, Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* could indeed be considered a rewriting of the epic. Haynes' novel frames the *Iliad*, specifically the Trojan War, through the voices of women that were either minor characters or unnamed in Greek epic, literature, and history. There is a noticeable lack of scholarship on Haynes' novel, most likely due to its recent publication date. Haynes' work could also be classified under the niche minor-character elaboration genre, though it is indeed *many* minor characters that she places in the foreground rather than one protagonist/narrator. In fact, the entire novel is framed through Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, as she sings for an epic poet, presumed to be Homer; Calliope opens the novel doubting the very nature of retellings, saying "Every conflict joined, every war fought, every city besieged, every town sacked, every village destroyed. Every impossible journey, every shipwreck, every homecoming: these stories have all been told, and countless times. Can he really believe he has something new to say?" (Haynes 1). That is the central question in this project, as well as in every author's mind as they undertake a re-telling project: are they saying anything new, and if so…what is it? In *Song of Achilles*, it was Miller's moral anti-war commentary and inclusion of a homosexual relationship. In Hayne's *A Thousand Ships*, it is the chorus of female voices that have been written out of history; as Calliope states: "I'm not offering [Homer] the story of one woman during the Trojan War, I'm offering him the story of all the women in the war" (Haynes 40). Thus, in this section I will examine the novel in comparison to *Song of Achilles* in order to determine whether or not it (1), indeed provides new or original content in terms of female characters (2) can produce socio-historical conclusions about the era of both its setting and publication, and (3) if it is successful for both knowing and unknowing audiences.

In many ways, *A Thousand Ships* can be a supplemental reading to the *Iliad* as it provides the female voices that are neglected in the hypotexts. This very need for this type of literature, one that inserts the perspectives of forgotten characters hundreds of years later, can provide some clarity surrounding feminism (or the lackthereof) in Ancient Greece. Again, this paper will not attempt to compare hypertexts with hypotexts to determine the accuracy of the retellings. Rather, because *Song of Achilles* and *A Thousand Ships* are so similar in their setting and selection of source material, it follows that a comparison may reveal many similarities as well as differences in their objectives as retellings. While Miller's objectives seemed to be socio-political commentary, Haynes seems to lean more towards providing a voice for women and highlighting the discrepancies between men and women in history that continues today. Though Haynes alternates female protagonists every chapter, two in particular make appearances in both *Song of Achilles* and *A Thousand Ships*, though in different ways: Briseis and Penthesilea.

Briseis, unlike Penthesilea and other female characters, plays a noticeable role in both novels, though her role differs in each novel. Stuzziero notes that "In the *Iliad*, Briseis is a woman of royal birth, widowed and captured by Achilles; she becomes his war prisoner and concubine, a slave subjected to the force and will of her Greek captor" (Stuzziero 145). Despite being featured, she remains nameless in the epic, identified as the "daughter of Brises," and only speaks when mourning Patroclus (Struzziero 145). In *Song of Achilles*, Miller rewrites her character to be the first of many women that Patroclus rescues from sexual enslavement, in order to both highlight Patroclus' morality and the injustice the women faced;

> In the third week a girl stood on the dais amidst the swords and woven rugs and gold. She was beautiful, her skin a deep brown, her hair black and gleaming…The men gathered eagerly…I do not know what came over me then. But I seized Achilles' arm, and spoke into his ear… 'Take her as your prize. Before Agamemnon does. Please.' (Miller 214)

Whereas Bresies is rewritten more prominently, she is still portrayed from Patroclus' perspective and serves as a background character to demonstrate Patroclus' moral character and mission.

In *A Thousand Ships*, Briseis gets multiple chapters, both from her perspective and from the perspective of women around her; she's protective of the other women who were captured, and even gives a younger girl a powdered sleep draught that she can use on her captor/owner to deter him from raping her (Haynes 80). When Briseis is picked by Achilles, it is not to protect her from sexual enslavement, but because Patroclus expressed desire for her; "She did not weep when Patroclus took her to his bed, even though the memory of her husband was still so raw that she could sense his presence, hovering behind her, refraining from judgement. Her husband had always been a kind man. And so would Patroclus have been, in other circumstances" (Haynes 100). Noticeably, Haynes does not so much as hint at a homosexual relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, but rather keeps the focus on the men's wrongdoings in order to highlight the suffering of women like Bresies. These "other circumstances" that Haynes writes about could be considered *Song of Achilles*, in which Patroclus *is* the moral voice; however, in this novel he is the perpetrator of sexual enslavement. Whereas in the *Iliad* and *Song of Achilles*, Bresies is told to have mourned Patroclus' death as his close companion, Haynes constructs a deeper, more consistent narrative for this scene; "The following evening, when Patroclus' body was returned…While Achilles raged with grief, she washed Patroclus, and laid him out in his finest clothes. She was able to do for this man, her captor and her owner, what she had not been permitted to do for her husband" (Haynes 101). Haynes consistently focuses on Bresies' losses — her family, her freedom, and her culture — that are all but erased in other narratives. Therefore, Haynes goal in her writing is not to rewrite history or change women's stories, but to

narrate the undertones that went unmentioned and significantly affect the "hero's story" that's

been constructed.

While Bresies originally was a strong feature in both epic and Miller's novel, Penthesilea

is barely mentioned in both former and latter, but prominently rewritten in *A Thousand Ships*. An

Amazon princess and fierce warrior, she's given less than half a page in *Song of Achilles* when

she takes on Achilles in battle following Patroclus' death:

> Next come the horsewomen, breasts exposed, their skin glistening like oiled wood…At their front
>
> is a single figure on a chestnut horse, hair loose, Anatolian eyes dark and curving and fierce —
>
> chips of stone that move restlessly over the army before her. Penthesilea. She wears a cape, and it
>
> is this that undoes her — that allows her to be pulled, limbs light and poised as a cat, from her
>
> horse. She tumbles with easy grace, and one of her hands flashes for her spear tied to her saddle.
>
> She crouches in the dirt, bracing it. A face looms over her, grim darkened, dulled. It wears no
>
> armour at all any more, exposing all its skin to points and punctures. It is turned now, in hope, in
>
> wistfulness, towards her. She stabs, and Achilles' body dodges the deadly point, impossibly lithe,
>
> endlessly agile…He makes a sound of grief. He had hoped, because she has killed so many.
>
> Because from her horse she seemed so like him, so quick and graceful, so relentless. But she is
>
> not. A single thrust crashes her to the ground, leaves her chest torn up like a field beneath the
>
> plough. (Miller 335)

Penthesilea's miniscule feature is simply to narrate her death and to further emphasize both

Achilles' prowess and his desire to join Patroclus in death. Her own skill and ability is

mentioned but ultimately disproved with her dismounting, mishit, and quick death at the hands of

Achilles. However, Hayne's version complicates this narrative. Her chapter places Penthesilea in

a journey of crisis; following the accidental murder of her own sister, Penthesilea is riddled with

guilt and desperate for death. Upon hearing the rumors of Achilles she travels to Troy and

pledges that she will kill Achilles or die trying (Haynes 49). Haynes' retelling of the fight is

longer and more complex, climaxing in:

> And so one moment he was hundreds of feet from Pentheilea, and the next he was beside her with
>
> his sword buried in her neck…Pentheilea's head slumped back and her helmet fell to the ground.
>
> And only then did the greatest warrior alive realize that he had killed a woman. He felt a sudden
>
> wrench of shame. Not because he had never killed a woman before…This woman was his mirror
>
> image, just as Patroclus had once been… He wondered if anyone else had ever died saying the
>
> words, 'Thank you.' (Haynes 55-6)

This excerpt places Pentheilea as Achilles' near equivalent in battle, as well as poses an

interesting narrative when read in combination with the passage from *Song of Achilles*. The two,

read in tandem, present two warriors, one male, one female, both riddled with grief and hoping

for death at the hands of the other…and yet only one prevails. Haynes had to take specific

creative liberties with this character, as noted in the novel's Afterword: "Penthesilea has suffered

badly at the hands of history…She was a mighty warrior and had a major role in a lost epic

poem, from perhaps the eighth century BCE, called *Aethiopis*. Only a few lines of this poem

survive" (Haynes 342). Haynes creative choices with this character were to invert the gender

dynamics of the "hero" mold, presenting a mirror image of Achilles in both skill and motivation.

Through these two characters and their retellings through Haynes' work, it is clear that

the role of women in war, history, and Greek epics have been vastly underexplored. Bresies

demonstrates the women who were misrepresented in historical epic, while Pentheilea represents

the women who were barely mentioned at all. It is important to note that Haynes is not claiming

that her interpretation of the female characters in the novel is more accurate to source material in

any way. As she writes in her Afterword, "The inspiration for this novel comes from across the

ancient world, in both time and place. Some of it was literary, some was archaeological. Some

chapters are entirely my own invention, and some borrow from source material which you might already know" (Haynes 341). However, the result is a fascinating supplement to the hypotext that is thus successful for both knowing and unknowing audiences. Haynes has created a narrative that can be enjoyed for both audiences, as well as reveals the socio-political and socio-historical contexts surrounding gender in ancient history. It also reveals current gender context, as the call for female representation in historical works becomes more and more common. Haynes meets this call through her novel, thus confirming both Hardwick's theory of mythology and Leighton's theory of successful adaptations.

Percy Jackson & The Olympians by Rick Riordan

Whereas Miller and Haynes chose to rewrite and retell mythology in its original setting, Riordan takes a completely different approach to Greek mythology, setting it in a contemporary world with modern characters. The first installment of the series, *Percy Jackson & The Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, was published in 2005, while the fifth and final novel of the original series was published in 2009. The series was so successful it was followed by an additional series, *The Heroes of Olympus* (2010-2014) which included original and new characters from Greek and Roman mythology. The original series was also adapted into two films, which were received negatively because of their deviations from the plot; Disney+ recently announced a TV series adaptation that will more closely follow the novels. In each of the novels, "the principal character Percy (short for Perseus) Jackson, a demi-god son of Poseidon, is sent on a quest with his friends, episodically fulfilling a prophecy which culminates in the re-emergence of Kronos, Titan father of Zeus, Hades and Poseidon, from the infernal pits of Tartarus, and a war fought for the fate of the earth and the future of humankind" (Leighton 62). The entire franchise has obviously earned success with YA, Teen, and NA fans — three age

groups that are the most unlikely to be familiar with source material like the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. In evaluating the series for socio-political analysis, I will focus on the modern aspects rather than historical before moving onto the analysis of overall adaptation success.

The origin of the series itself provides some insight into the socio-political commentary that Riordan is using myths to make. Leighton states that Riordan's son, diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia, felt "othered in the classroom, [and] gave him the idea of re-imagining the mythological narratives from the perspective of adolescents who, by their nature are in a state of 'in-between', neither fitting into the world of childhood nor adulthood. Only the class on mythology was accessible to Riordan's son in school – nothing else held his attention (Leighton 63). In addition to the othering of being in between a godly world and a human one — which the term demi-god literally encompasses — most of the demi-god characters in the novels have dyslexia, ADHD, or both. When Percy first meets Annabeth, daughter of Athena, she explains "The letters float off the page when you read, right? That's because your mind is hardwired for ancient Greek. And the ADHD—you're impulsive, can't sit still in the classroom. That's your battlefield reflexes. In a real fight, they'd keep you alive. As for the attention problems, that's because you see too much, Percy, not too little. Your senses are better than a regular mortal's" (Riordan 125). Riordan is challenging societal values by inverting the marginalization and stigma of learning disabilities in his creative decision to make the diagnoses an inherent part of the characters' godly sides. Thus, using the theory Hardwick presents, we can discern that this is a concern in contemporary society from Riordan's viewpoint.

Riordan also includes several LGBTQ+ characters in his series; though this can be problematized because of the delay in his inclusion and a potential lack of well-rounded representation. Nico DiAngelo first appears in *The Titan's Curse*, the third novel in the *Percy*

Jackson series. However, Nico doesn't come out as gay until *The House of Hades*, the fourth novel in the second series, *Heroes of Olympus* (Riordan 388). Even when he does come out, he never actually says the word gay, simply admits to having a crush on another male character, and implying that he was gay (Riordan 388). At the end of the next novel, *The Blood of Olympus* (fifth novel in *Heroes of Olympus*), Nico begins dating another male character, Will, and yet his sexuality isn't actually confirmed until Riordan himself confirmed this on his official website (Riordan). Thus, though Riordan includes queer characters in his novel, Nico is the only one (and Will by extension — whose main involvement is as Nico's love interest and general demi-god) who truly obtains anything remotely close to well-rounded coming out story. Though "coming out" isn't a necessary part of all queer storylines, Nico's sexuality seems like a later inclusion, an afterthought, added to simply add diversity to the cast.

The other notably queer character is Piper, who first appears in *The Lost Hero* (first novel of *Heroes of Olympus*), dates a male character for the next five consecutive books of the *Heroes of Olympus* series, with no indication of queerness. In *The Burning Maze* (the third novel in Riordan's third series, *The Trials of Apollo*) that Riordan begins to hint at Piper's sexuality (Riordan). Following this, Piper begins a more traditional internal struggle with her sexuality, ultimately resulting in her breaking up with her boyfriend and — two novels later — with a girlfriend of her own (Riordan). Through these two characters, it is clear that Riordan values queer representation in his socio-political commentary; however, this inclusion is not without fault, as it seems almost "too little, too late" to conveniently pick two characters to bear this representation. This is not meant to condemn Riordan in any way, but rather is an exploration to demonstrate the treatment of LGBTQ+ representation in retellings. Both of Riordan's authorial choices, to invert the marginalization of learning disabilities and to include queer characters, are

an effort to modernize ancient mythology; Leighton argues that it is one of the factors that makes it more engaging to modern audiences, writing "...this movement brings the events of the narrative closer to the audience's frame of reference in temporal, geographical and cultural terms" (Leighton 63).

To address the questions of "What do retellings offer to make the story somewhat original?" and "Why are these retellings so popular?" — in relation to the *Percy Jackson* series, it is clear that Riordan provides a new opportunity for younger audiences to interact with classic mythology. Riordan presents not a retelling of any single story, but rather an original work of fiction that is overall informed by ancient mythology *and* weaves classic mythological stories together in a contemporary society. As Leighton writes Percy's character is named for "the mythological hero, Perseus. Indeed, variously in the novels, Percy experiences Riordan's re-imagined visions of contemporary analogues of the hero journeys and adventurous experiences of Odysseus, Achilles, Theseus, Bellerophon, Jason and Hercules…" (Leighton 62). Not only does Percy take on these hero's journeys, but also that of his namesake; one of Percy's first mythological fights takes place against Medusa (Riordan 251). In ancient myth, Medusa was killed by Perseus:

> Wearing a cap of darkness which made him invisible, he found the Gorgons asleep and by averting his gaze and only looking at their reflections in Athena's polished-bronze shield he succeeded in cutting off Medusa's head…Perseus was then able to use Medusa's head to turn to stone the enemy who had sent him on the mission. (Hardwick 15)

In the novel, Annabeth owns the cap of darkness, a blue Yankees cap that makes the wearer invisible, and Percy cuts off Medusa's head by looking at her reflection in a glass ball; Annabeth, daughter of Athena, remarks "A polished shield would be better" (Riordan 250-1). Then, Percy "packages Medusa's decapitated head and snail-mails it, using Hermes Overnight Express, to the

current location of Mount Olympus: the 600th floor of the Empire State Building in New York"

(Leighton 65-6). This single example alone showcases the crossover between myth and reality in

the series; Riordan cleverly weaves source material from classic mythology into the

contemporary world, even placing Mount Olympus at the Empire State Building and adapting

the foundation myth to fit his characters, setting, and motives.

       The effect of this adaptation is ultimately an opportunity to reintroduce younger

audiences to source material through an engaging narrative that is entertaining for what Leighton

has defined as both "knowing" and "unknowing" audiences. First, each of Riordan's novels

details "a series of micro-narratives, scenes of iconic episodes, often indexical of the originary

hero tales, each of which will be instantly recognisable to readers familiar with Greek

mythology" (Leighton 63). Thus, those who are already familiar with Greek mythology would

immediately recognize the characters like Medusa, and would more than likely pick up on things

like Annabeth's comment about the shield and be able to predict how the heroes should proceed

with the fight. This may raise the question of how enjoyable adaptations can be, if some readers

already know the story. Leighton counters: "it is certainly true that much of the enjoyment of

reading adaptations stems from the recognition of ways in which a text has either been adapted

temporally or appropriated stylistically, and recognising the subversive power thereof…" there is

still ample enjoyment and reward from reading adaptations *as* adaptations (Leighton 67). Thus,

adaptations, specifically *Percy Jackson*, are successful for knowing audiences. As for unknowing

audiences, Riordan is specifically catering to a YA or teen audience, which means that it is more

than likely that the readers have *not* encountered classic Greek mythology in its original,

foundation or source form. If we consider that "the root narratives, themselves often re-workings

of older orally transmitted stories, are not necessarily the first to be read by contemporary

audiences, particularly where such audiences may be adolescents" then we can treat hypertexts such as *Percy Jackson* as both holding value as an adaptation and as a work of its own value (Leighton 61). Further, if Riordan is the first interaction with classical greek mythology that an unknowing reader has, it is likely the subject on the whole will spark their interest, and thus "they are invited to re-examine their original reading of an adapted text, and wilfully seek out the informing text and experience the reading joy of adaptation backwards" (Leighton 71). Therefore, Riordan is creating a successful adaptation for both knowing and unknowing audiences, the effect of which is a narrative that restores value to ancient mythology *and* allows an opportunity for audiences to rediscover mythology. By placing ancient mythology in a contemporary context that is a relatable frame of reference for his audience, Riordan is even inviting unknowing readers to consume the series, while imparting some of his socio-political values onto the text.

Conclusion

Now that each case study has been treated with the intended theoretical framework, we can return to the original questions that this paper posed: First, aren't these novels just retellings? Second, what makes mythology so interesting, engaging, and appealing to modern authors and audiences? Third, what makes these novels so popular with modern audiences, especially in the teen, young adult (YA) and new adult (NA) age ranges? To address the first question, I argue that each of these novels adds something of value to the original work, whether it's socio-political commentary or authorial creative choices that delineate from the foundation myth. Leighton writes:

> The danger always exists, when entering into an exploration of an author's adaptation and
> appropriation of an earlier work, of becoming embroiled and entangled in discussions of originary
> value…While these arguments are not always without cause or merit, what they often fail to

acknowledge is the value of the adaptation itself; an adaptation does not have to be secondary in

value, nor indeed, second in terms of chronology as far as reception is concerned. (Leighton 60-1)

Thus, *yes* the adaptations are just retellings, but that does not subtract from its overall value;

rather, it adds a layer to the work, offering value as both a hypertext and an original work of its

own. As discussed, the inherent properties of myth involve elasticity, malleability, and the ability

to signify cultural markers in each of the eras it is reproduced in. Therefore, contemporary fiction

novels that incorporate Greek mythology are retellings, but are also much more than that, as each

case study has revealed.

This also applies to the second question, of what makes myth itself so engaging to

readers. As Hardwick noted, mythology and the cultural touchstones, allegories, and tropes it has

produced make it the ideal vehicle for communicating socio-political and cultural themes and

values, and in the modernized communication of these values, it is bringing it closer to the

reader's point of reference. Thus, mythology and its ability to be modernized in multiple forms

and mediums, as the case studies show, still hold value for modern readers without losing their

overall appeal. The final question, what makes these specific novels so popular with younger,

modern readers, is answered by a combination of the reasoning above. It is the ability of

retellings to reintroduce ancient material to young audiences in an engaging way in combination

with the relatability of myth that make these novels "successful." Additionally, the author have

made multiple creative choices, like female, queer, and disability representation, that play a part

in the popularity of this genre. The two audience model that Leighton presents (knowing and

unknowing) describe the niche audience that these novels are targeted for; thus, by creating a

work that is enjoyable for — and even marketed toward — a group that hasn't encountered the

source material, modern readers can enjoy fiction novels while still interacting with ancient

mythology. Further, the works are enjoyable for groups who *have* interacted with source

material, who exist on the NA side of the targeted demographic, and this two-fold appeal is likely a factor of their popularity.

This project has sought to answer the aforementioned questions for multiple reasons; first, to determine socio-political factors and trends throughout history and literature. Second, to highlight and attempt to partially fill the gap of scholarship on queer literature, more specifically, queer literature that also incorporates Greek mythology. Each case study novel reveals specific socio-political and cultural markers that the authors felt are relevant to today's society; Miller's was anti-war commentary and queer represenation, Haynes was the silencing of women's voices in history and literature, and Riordan was the marginalization of learning disabilities in children. Mythology, inherently, has been a vehicle to discuss why things happen the way they do, and how society reacted to these events. Thus, by the authors inclusion of these themes in their mythological fiction, it becomes clear that these areas are on the cusp of change in our modern society. Mythology tends to use prophecies and fate to warn of the future; here, these novels are our prophecies to realize where change needs to take place, and to execute that.

Secondly, this paper has revealed the lack of scholarship surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in both Greek mythology and in contemporary retellings. One of the common themes shared by the authors of the case study novels was queer representation. This extends to not only contemporary fiction, but scholarship surrounding that fiction. Further research could explore other novels that include queer representation or elements and cross-exmaine it with queer theory to produce more conclusive results of this exploration. It is also important to note that this lack of representation is rapidly evolving, as more and more queer authors create content in this niche and the socio-political battle for LGBTQ+ rights goes on. It is likely that as time progresses, this gap will be filled, yet scholars will also need to explore this intersection in order

to flesh out the currently sparse literary scope. Further research in this area could also produce compelling conclusions about the value that the publishing industry places on specific themes and values, and how the role of the industry influences the types of books that are consumed; for example, do queer, Greek mythology retellings exist in manuscript form, but were vetoed by publishers? This area of exploration and research could contribute to the overall intersection of queer representation in contemporary fiction.

At the very least, this paper accomplished one thing: it highlighted the emergence of a new genre, the genre of Greek mythology in Contemporary Fiction. This genre of retellings has captured the hearts of many readers, authors, and publishers, and will undoubtedly continue to grow in years following. So, as Calliope asks in *A Thousand Ships*: "Can he really believe he has something new to say?" (Haynes 1). That's the question the genre will continuously ask of its creators, and to which authors will respond — yes.

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