
Rewriting Myth: Feminist Reinterpretations in Modern Retellings of Classical Literature

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Abstract:

Classical mythology has long served as a foundational narrative structure within Western literature, often framing women through reductive patriarchal archetypes—witches, monsters, obedient wives, or tragic victims. In recent decades, however, feminist writers and scholars have increasingly engaged in a radical reinterpretation of these myths, transforming them into acts of narrative resistance. This study explores how contemporary feminist retellings of classical myths reconfigure ancient narratives to reclaim female voice, agency, and subjectivity. Focusing on literary texts such as Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls*, and Natalie Haynes’s *Stone Blind*, the research analyzes how mythic women—once silenced—are reimagined through strategies of narrative focalization, intertextual revision, and trauma representation. These novels, far from merely offering alternative perspectives, challenge the ideological scaffolding of classical texts and expose the gendered violence embedded within them. Additionally, the paper examines feminist reinterpretations across visual media, including Japanese manga, modern dance, and graphic novels, to highlight how cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches extend the scope of mythic subversion. The analysis is grounded in feminist literary theory, ecofeminism, and intersectionality, revealing how these retellings participate in broader cultural movements such as #MeToo and decolonial critique. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that feminist myth-making is not just a literary act but a political one—redefining myth as a dynamic site of resistance, memory, and reimagination.

Keywords: Feminist retellings, classical mythology, narrative resistance, female agency, mythopoeia

Introduction

For millennia, classical myths have functioned as cultural touchstones, shaping the collective consciousness of the Western literary and philosophical tradition. Figures such as Medea, Circe, Antigone, and Penelope have echoed through time as embodiments of femininity framed within patriarchal ideologies—cast as either monstrous, tragic, obedient,

or

silenced. These narratives, originating in patriarchal contexts, have perpetuated structural inequalities by scripting women's roles through rigid binaries: the nurturer or the destroyer, the virgin or the whore, the goddess or the witch.

Yet in the 21st century, a wave of feminist writers is radically reclaiming these myths. Their retellings are not nostalgic repetitions of ancient narratives but acts of resistance—bold reimaginings that expose and dismantle the very power structures that produced them. Feminist rewritings reclaim female agency, voice, and subjectivity, often through strategies that question, subvert, or directly challenge canonical mythic tropes. These texts do not seek to merely revise the past but to repurpose it for political, ideological, and emotional ends. The myth becomes a battlefield—one where silenced women finally speak. Buket Akgün (2019) explores how modern Japanese manga appropriates classical female figures such as witches and monsters, “moe-ifying” them to challenge patriarchal demonization. In manga like *Berserk* and *Soul Eater*, characters inspired by Circe, the Gorgons, and Arachne are no longer vilified but re-envisioned as complex, powerful agents. Akgün argues that this “canonisation of the monstrous female” enables new interpretive spaces where femininity becomes subversive and generative rather than deviant (Akgün, 2019).

This strategy of subversion is echoed in Ana González-Rivas Fernández's (2022) analysis of *Lamia*, a graphic novel by Rayco Pulido. The myth of *Lamia*, traditionally depicted as a monstrous child-devouring woman, is reinterpreted as a tragic tale of maternal grief and patriarchal trauma. Pulido's narrative, shaped through visual and textual innovation, portrays *Lamia* not as a monster, but as a victim of systemic violence. As González-Rivas Fernández (2022) contends, the comic “translates the rage of the mythic woman into a visual language of political resistance” (p. 365).

Nicole Best (2018) similarly addresses mythic rewriting in speculative fiction, arguing that Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* reclaims Euripidean narratives to critique patriarchal militarism and envision feminist utopias. Through deliberate intertextual engagement with plays such as *The Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Tepper transforms classical myth into a feminist strategy of social critique. Best notes that such narratives do not merely “write back” to antiquity but “disarm the canon” itself—reorienting its ideological core toward egalitarian futures.

This interpretive insurgency is not limited to fiction. In her study of modern goddess cults, Helene P. Foley (1994) reflects on how feminist spirituality reclaims ancient goddesses as symbols of female power, arguing that while these movements often romanticize the past, they nonetheless signal a cultural desire to reconnect with matriarchal origins and ritualistic womanhood. She warns, however, against uncritical idealization of ancient sources, noting that “contemporary goddess worship often misreads or mythologizes classical antiquity for ideological ends” (Foley, 1994, p. 195).

The act of mythic reclamation is deeply entwined with feminist concerns about language, power, and historical erasure. Frederick C. Corey (1990), analyzing Martha Graham's reinterpretations of Medea, Jocasta, and Clytemnestra, shows how feminist choreographers reanimate these characters through modern dance. Graham's work does not merely revise the plot—it restructures the grammar of myth through movement, embodying feminist resistance in a medium where the female body is both subject and instrument.

An ecofeminist reading adds further dimension to these critiques. Uddin, Rafid, & Rahmatullah (2024) apply Karen Warren's ecofeminist theory to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, analyzing how characters like Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel represent hierarchical binaries that connect environmental exploitation to patriarchal dominance. Caliban, in this reading, is not merely a savage but a symbol of symbiotic relation to nature, while Miranda's silence highlights the gendered silencing that underpins colonial and ecological violence. Meanwhile, the cultural pervasiveness of these narratives in children's literature signals the need for early ideological intervention. In *Our Mythical Childhood*, Katarzyna Marciniak (2016) explores how myths, even when written for children, embed gender norms and cultural hierarchies. Her work reveals how retellings aimed at young readers can either perpetuate or challenge classical ideologies. The stories we tell our children, she argues, shape not only individual identities but collective futures.

Finally, early feminist critiques of classical myth reach back centuries. Richard (1991) shows how proto-feminists of the Renaissance, faced with misogynistic interpretations of Genesis, sought to reinterpret the creation myth to argue for women's moral and intellectual equality. These reinterpretations reveal that feminist resistance to patriarchal narrative forms is not new, but part of a long-standing tradition of dissent against theological and literary misogyny.

This paper seeks to extend this tradition by analyzing contemporary feminist retellings of classical myths as ideological interventions. Drawing on feminist literary theory, intertextual analysis, and myth criticism, it asks: How do modern authors reconfigure mythic narratives to restore female voice and agency? What narrative strategies allow these writers to subvert the canonical past? And how do these retellings reflect broader cultural debates about gender, power, and identity in a post-#MeToo era?

By examining works such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, and Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind*, this study explores how modern feminist authors are not merely rewriting myths—they are rewriting the cultural memory of womanhood itself. In doing so, they transform ancient archetypes into vessels of resistance, voice, and vision.

Literature Review

Feminist Reinterpretation of Myth: Theory, Narrative, and Cultural Resistance

The mythological canon of the classical world—dominated by patriarchal voices and structures—has historically portrayed female figures in reductionist terms: as witches,

seductresses, martyrs, or mere vehicles for male heroism. In response to this long-standing marginalization, feminist scholars, writers, and artists have embarked on a decades-long endeavor to revise, subvert, and reclaim these myths. The result is a dynamic body of work that interrogates not only the past but the political implications of storytelling itself. This literature review maps the major scholarly trajectories and creative practices that shape feminist reinterpretations of myth across text, image, performance, and education.

2.2 Classical Myth and the Feminist Project: A Historical Context

Early feminist literary criticism began by pointing out the absence or distortion of female voices in canonical myth. Foley (1994), in her foundational study of goddess cults, challenges both classical and contemporary idealizations of the feminine divine. While acknowledging the empowering potential of goddess myths, she cautions against romanticized re-readings that obscure the oppressive socio-political contexts in which these stories were formed. Foley's insight remains crucial: rewriting myth must be both ideologically aware and historically situated.

Harvey (1991) expands this line of critique into proto-feminist readings of Judeo-Christian myths, particularly the creation myth. He shows how early English feminists sought to reinterpret Genesis to reclaim Eve as a figure of resistance rather than sin, setting a historical precedent for the kind of mythic revisions undertaken by later feminist thinkers and artists. These readings set the groundwork for a broader feminist engagement with mythology as a space for ideological contestation.

2.3 Narrative Reclamation and Literary Rewriting

Recent feminist novelists have developed a sophisticated method of mythic rewriting: one that foregrounds the psychological interiority, trauma, and autonomy of mythological women. Madeline Miller's *Circe* and *The Song of Achilles*, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, and Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind* are not merely retellings—they are acts of reclamation. Iurillo (2025) argues that these works fundamentally reshape myth by replacing "epic distance" with intimate narration, bringing the silenced voices of mythic women to the center of the narrative.

Similarly, Nizar and Indu (2025) explore how Miller's *Circe* and Haynes's *Stone Blind* function as feminist correctives to masculinist myth-making. Medusa is not a monster, but a victim of divine violence. Circe is no longer a peripheral witch, but a complex, exiled subject undergoing transformation. These narratives employ interior monologue, focalization, and revisionist temporality as techniques of feminist critique, challenging the authority of classical sources.

Best (2018) adds to this by analyzing how feminist science fiction retools ancient myths for future-oriented social critique. Sheri Tepper's (1988) *The Gate to Women's Country*, for instance, reimagines the Iphigenia myth to construct a matriarchal society that questions war, patriarchy, and history itself. Here, myth is not just rewritten but recontextualized, serving as a critical scaffold for utopian speculation.

2.4 Visual and Performance-Based Reimaginings

Feminist reinterpretations of myth also thrive in visual and performative media. Corey (1990) examines Martha Graham's myth-inspired choreographies, revealing how movement can be a feminist semiotic system. By reimagining Jocasta, Clytemnestra, and Medea not as victims but as narrators of their own bodily histories, Graham uses modern dance to create a corporeal counter-narrative to classical textual dominance.

In graphic literature, González-Rivas Fernández (2022) focuses on Rayco Pulido's *Lamia*, a noir comic that uses the *Lamia* myth as a metaphor for patriarchal violence and political repression in Francoist Spain. The reinterpretation of the monstrous woman becomes a visual symbol of resistance, reclaiming both myth and memory.

Akgün (2019) brings these ideas into Japanese manga, exploring how mythological figures like Medusa and Circe are "moe-ified" in visual culture. Her analysis identifies both regressive and progressive tendencies: while these figures are often sexualized for consumption, they are also depicted as powerful and autonomous, challenging traditional roles through the very aesthetic used to commodify them.

2.5 Film and the Global Feminist Gaze

The intersection of feminism, myth, and cinema is especially potent in contemporary superhero narratives. Martínez-Varela (2025), analyzing *Wonder Woman* (2017), introduces the concept of *destranslatio imperii*—a reversal of the imperial logic embedded in classical and medieval myth. By situating the Amazons as both ancient and politically progressive, the film allegorizes feminist resistance to global capitalist patriarchy. Through this lens, *Wonder Woman* becomes more than a hero; she is an iconic rearticulation of the Amazon myth, decolonized and democratized for a global audience.

2.6 Archetypes, Postfeminism, and Theoretical Shifts

Archetypal feminism, once grounded in Jungian theory, has been radically transformed. Wagner (1986) critiques traditional archetypes as essentialist and instead advocates for a processual understanding of feminine identity, shaped by cultural, social, and historical forces. Lilith, for example, no longer functions as a static archetype of rebellion but as a dynamic symbol shifting across generations and media.

Tink and Lauwrens (2022) build on this by studying Lilith's portrayal in postfeminist media economies. Their analysis of *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* illustrates how Lilith is commodified as an edgy icon of feminist liberation while remaining tethered to patriarchal aesthetics. This duality reflects larger tensions within pop-cultural feminist myth-making.

2.7 Pedagogy and Cultural Transmission

The teaching of myth is also a contested space. Nguyen (2008) and Jensen & Ratcliffe (2017) emphasize that educational frameworks often reinforce traditional gender roles unless deliberately challenged. However, integrating feminist retellings into the curriculum can cultivate critical myth literacy, allowing students to understand how narratives shape gendered expectations and cultural memory.

Marciniak (2016) shows the pedagogical power of myth in shaping ethical development. She suggests that exposing children to feminist reinterpretations from an early age can disrupt

the reproduction of gender hierarchies, offering inclusive, empowering alternatives to traditional myths.

2.8 Intersectional and Ecofeminist Extensions

Finally, recent work has emphasized the intersection of feminism with ecology, race, and postcolonialism. Uddin, Rafid, and Rahmatullah (2024) offer an ecofeminist critique of *The Tempest*, drawing connections between the exploitation of nature and the domination of female bodies. Their Warrenian reading frames patriarchal myth as a narrative tool of dualistic oppression—against both women and the Earth.

This is echoed in broader discussions of myth's use in colonial and imperial narratives, which Martinez-Varela (2025) critiques through her reading of *Wonder Woman's* neomedieval aesthetics and its attempt to subvert Western civilizational logic.

Across literature, comics, dance, pedagogy, and film, the feminist reimagining of myth reveals a global, interdisciplinary, and intersectional project. These rewritings are not only artistic but political—acts of narrative insurgency that challenge the authority of patriarchal canons. Myth is no longer a closed tradition; it is a dynamic space of feminist articulation, critique, and possibility.

Discussion

3.1 Feminist Mythopoeia, Narrative Voice, and Subversion

The retelling of classical myths by contemporary feminist authors represents a radical narrative act: one that challenges not only the content of canonical stories but the very structures through which history, gender, and power are constructed. The texts under examination—*Circe* (Miller), *The Silence of the Girls* (Barker), and *Stone Blind* (Haynes)—embody a shared political impulse: to retrieve, reframe, and reclaim the mythological woman. However, each novel approaches this project through different feminist lenses: interiority and exile (*Circe*), trauma and voice (*The Silence of the Girls*), and deconstruction of monstrosity (*Stone Blind*).

3.2 Circe and the Power of Exile and Voice

In *Circe* (2018), Madeline Miller reimagines the eponymous witch of *The Odyssey* not as a seductress or sorceress, but as a complex subject defined by transformation, exile, and voice. The novel is structured as a first-person confessional, granting Circe full narrative control—an authority she never possessed in Homer's epic. As Iurillo (2025) notes, Miller's Circe is "an author of herself," engaging in a recursive act of mythic self-inscription. This reflexivity is radical: where Homer silences, Miller amplifies.

Circe's exile is recoded as liberation. Removed from Olympian society and placed on Aiaia, she discovers the potency of her own voice and craft. Scholars like Foley (1994) have stressed that exile in myth traditionally signals punishment for female disobedience; Miller reconfigures it as a space of female sovereignty. Moreover, her relationships with other women—such as Medea and Scylla—are not romanticized but contextualized within the broader framework of feminist solidarity and betrayal under patriarchy.

This strategy aligns with what Wagner (1986) calls the "archetypal reclamation of the witch"—an attempt to reinterpret female figures previously vilified as threats to masculine

order. Through Circe, Miller executes a double intervention: she reclaims the witch archetype and recasts the narrative gaze, turning it inward, reflective, and defiantly female.

3.4 The Silence of the Girls: Trauma, War, and Counter-Voices

Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) enters the Trojan War not from Achilles's perspective, but from Briseis's—a war prize and concubine. Here, Barker performs what Best (2018) terms a “demythologization of epic memory” by narrating the cost of war on the female body. Barker's feminist strategy is one of counter-epic: she dismantles the heroic mythos by focusing on trauma, pain, and silence. As Tink and Lauwrens (2022) argue in their broader media critique, such feminist narratives expose how patriarchal storytelling often “commodifies women's pain for masculine glory.”

Barker denies Briseis the trope of empowerment through romantic attachment or magical resistance. Instead, she renders her agency through narrative realism and unflinching interiority. Briseis does not fight with a sword or spell, but with memory and survival. This minimalist resistance, often expressed in unsaid words or subtle observation, becomes a form of epistemic defiance—challenging the authority of Homeric authorship itself.

Scholars like Foley (1994) and Jensen & Ratcliffe (2017) show how such retellings challenge the epic as a masculinist form. By focusing on the aftermath of rape, loss, and captivity, Barker (2018) demands that the reader confront the human cost of classical grandeur. In doing so, she reorients myth away from gods and warriors and toward the lived interiority of silenced women.

3.5 Stone Blind and the Deconstruction of Monstrosity

Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind* (2022) addresses one of the most enduringly vilified female figures in myth: Medusa. Her transformation from mortal to monster, from victim to icon, encapsulates the central concern of feminist mythopoeia—how myth creates monstrosity to contain female power. As Nizar and Indu (2025) note, Haynes unearths the humanity buried beneath centuries of allegorical demonization.

Medusa's story is told not from a single voice but a chorus of perspectives, echoing the ancient Greek tragic tradition. This polyvocal structure fractures narrative authority and insists on complexity. Medusa is raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple, punished by the goddess, and turned into a monster whose gaze petrifies. Haynes refuses to mystify these events: her Medusa is tragic, misunderstood, and ultimately silenced—not by her power, but by the narratives that frame her (Haynes, 2022).

González-Rivas Fernández (2022) and Martínez-Varela (2025) stress that the figure of Medusa has been historically tied to both feminist rebellion and patriarchal containment. Haynes joins a long line of feminists—from Hélène Cixous to Silvia Federici—who see Medusa not as a threat, but as a symbol of violated power. *Stone Blind* thus functions not as a reinterpretation but as a narrative exorcism, purging centuries of ideological distortion.

3.6 Comparative Themes: Voice, Agency, and Resistance

While each novel employs different strategies, they converge on three thematic axes: voice, agency, and resistance. In *Circe*, voice becomes power. In *The Silence of the Girls*,

silence is politicized. In *Stone Blind*, voice is dispersed, fragmented, and tragic. Together, they demonstrate that feminist retellings are not about inserting women into old myths, but about rebuilding the mythic architecture itself.

These novels also share a metatextual awareness. They acknowledge their Homeric origins while simultaneously dismantling them. This reflexivity is evident in Miller's invocation of poetic tradition, Barker's intertextual references to the *Iliad*, and Haynes's meta-commentary on narrative form. As Iurillo (2025) observes, such texts function as "mythopoetic palimpsests"—layered narratives that rewrite and overwrite the mythic past.

3.7 Beyond the Page: Visual, Ecological, and Cultural Dimensions

The textual strategies used in these novels mirror developments in feminist cultural critique across media. Corey (1990) and Akgün (2019) highlight the embodied and visual politics of mythic retellings—in dance, comics, and manga—where feminist aesthetics challenge patriarchal form. Uddin, Rafid, and Rahmatullah (2024) extend this into ecofeminist terrain, arguing that classical myths not only subjugate women but naturalize the domination of nature. In this light, Medusa becomes a symbol not just of female rage, but ecological retribution.

Martinez-Varela's (2025) reading of *Wonder Woman* further shows how myths persist in contemporary geopolitics, with feminist adaptations offering decolonial possibilities for reclaiming narrative agency across cultures and generations.

The discussion of *Circe*, *The Silence of the Girls*, and *Stone Blind* reveals that feminist mythopoeia is neither nostalgic nor merely revisionist—it is revolutionary. These texts interrogate the foundations of Western storytelling and rebuild them from the voices once excluded. They center the female gaze, claim narrative space, and transform myth from a tool of patriarchy into a chorus of feminist resistance.

Conclusion

In reclaiming myth, feminist writers are not merely rewriting old stories—they are re-authoring history, identity, and imagination. Through novels such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, and Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind*, the voices of mythic women once reduced to symbols, monsters, or silence are being restored with emotional depth, narrative agency, and ideological purpose. These rewritings offer more than alternative perspectives—they challenge the patriarchal scaffolding of the original myths, revealing the gendered violence, silencing, and moral hierarchies embedded within them. This study has demonstrated how feminist authors engage in mythopoeic resistance by centering female subjectivity, reimagining trauma and monstrosity, and destabilizing traditional narrative structures. Miller's use of first-person voice in *Circe* allows for a profound act of self-definition; Barker's focus on Briseis in *The Silence of the Girls* critiques the glorification of war by exposing its human cost on women; and Haynes's *Stone Blind* deconstructs the figure of Medusa as a misunderstood victim, indicting the structures that produce "monsters" from violated bodies.

Critically, these texts do not offer simplistic reversals of gender roles or heroic fantasies of revenge. Rather, they cultivate nuance, ambiguity, and reflective engagement

with the ethical dilemmas of power, storytelling, and memory. In this, they mirror the work of feminist scholars, artists, and educators who have long challenged the narratives that shape gender and identity. The novels discussed align with broader feminist movements that seek not only to reinterpret but to reclaim: to take back what was stolen, suppressed, or distorted, and to infuse it with new cultural and political significance.

Furthermore, these feminist retellings resonate within a larger cultural matrix of gender justice, decolonial resistance, and ecological awareness. As seen in ecofeminist and postfeminist critiques, myth is not only a literary form—it is a symbolic battlefield, where ideologies are constructed, contested, and transformed.

Ultimately, the feminist rewriting of classical myths offers more than cultural commentary—it proposes a literary methodology of resistance, a re-enchantment of ancient tales through contemporary ethics. These stories remind us that mythology, far from being fixed or ancient, is an evolving, living medium capable of bearing witness to silenced histories and imagining liberatory futures.

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