Spring 2023

# A Choice to Make: The Portrayal of Female Characters' Agency and Emotion in Madeline Miller's Circe and Anaïs Mitchell's Hadestown

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# A Choice to Make: The Portrayal of Female Characters' Agency and Emotion in Madeline Miller's *Circe* and Anaïs Mitchell's *Hadestown*

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ENG 492: Senior Paper Research

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10 February 2023

*To my mom, Sandy, for placing* Circe *in my hands one summer day with an immediacy that inspired my instant and wholehearted fascination.*

*To Kati, for singing* Hadestown *to me in our dorm room, thus gifting me with a renewed love of mythology and its retellings.*

*To Dr. Aaron Housholder, a cultivator of important questions and crucial ponderings, for trudging alongside me through the complexity of these characters and their stories with an excitement that strengthened and supported my own.*

**Content Warning:** This essay, like the texts it examines, discusses rape. Rape is an unfortunately common occurrence in Greek mythology, and it affects all the female characters discussed in this essay to varying degrees. Discussions of this nature are handled honestly, although not graphically, in this essay.

Introduction

The nature and nuance of womanhood is a long-examined topic in literature, which only continues to develop as various barriers and societal expectations placed on women are questioned. Media and literature occupy considerable space in these conversations amid the call for a more complex representation of female characters. This call seeks to examine the social and literary roots that have shaped inaccurate portrayals of women and, in turn, rectify the resulting inequities. In ancient mythology, even the least familiar reader knows generally what to expect—stories detailing the trials, actions, and lives of heroes, with little or no exploration of the myth's female characters. Female characters are frequently overcome and dismissed in these stories, directly reflecting the perceptions of women in their societies of origin.

Perhaps the most foundational progenitor to Western literature is that of Greek mythology, which is an undeniable forebearer of many foundational tropes, story arcs, and stereotypes. Therefore, the dehumanization and objectification of women in these myths cannot be disregarded as a key element of their construction. In her article "Women in Greek Myth," classical scholar Mary Lefkowitz comments, "The notions…that a man should be active and aggressive, a woman passive and subject to control by the men in her family, are expressed in virtually every Greek myth, even the ones in which the women seek to gain control of their own lives" (207). The construction of these tropes relies heavily on the cultural dehumanization and objectification of women. It is important to note, however, that due to the impressive breadth of Greek mythology—particularly in terms of varied translation and authorship—generalizations of any kind must be made carefully, as single myths only represent part of a character's larger story. However, as Lefkowitz states, these generalizations have their foundation in the vast majority of

mythological portrayals of women and therefore are often reflective of the normative traits allotted to women.

Thus, while each myth has its own complexity, female characters are often pawns in larger games; rarely are they the game masters themselves. They are kidnapped, raped, or traded by their fathers with no consideration of their own desires or hopes. Even when it comes to human heroes, posterity recognizes the names of Hercules, Jason, Odysseus, and Perseus, who hold legacies far different from those like Pandora, Medusa, and Helen of Troy. This is, in part, because the narrative perspective is rarely centered on female characters and their experiences. Due to this narrative distance, female characters are often identified by little other than their beauty or their foolishness, filling the smaller roles of lovers, villainesses, or emotionally flat plot devices. A few characters are indeed the exception to this passive portrayal—they are powerful and feared, but in order to be viewed as such they are painted as masculine, because these are supposedly not traits concurrent with femininity. Despite these minimizations, as Gilbert Highet writes in his book *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, "Our modern world is in many ways a continuation of the world of Greece and Rome…. Other influences joined to make us what we are; but the Greco-Roman strain was one of the strongest and richest" (1). Even Encyclopædia Britannica Kids acknowledges this crucial connection: "The myths of ancient Greece have remained unrivaled in the Western world as sources of imaginative and appealing ideas for art and literature. Painters, sculptors, poets, and other writers from ancient times to the present have been inspired by Greek mythology. They discovered that the stories' themes were still significant and relevant for the people of their time." Therefore, at all ages, we cannot dismiss or erase the role mythology plays in Western

literature as a whole, and thus should not ignore the resulting implications of inaccurate and monolithic portrayals of women.

From this crossroads has emerged an adapted genre of literature in which classic myths are retold and, in the retelling, a long-ignored voice is provided to female characters who are traditionally sidelined. This essay will examine two such stories, Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* and Anaïs Mitchell's folk-opera musical *Hadestown*, that seek to develop female characters more complexly and authentically than their original mythological counterparts. These authors are certainly not the first to retell these stories, but, as the collected lectures of Joseph Campbell—comparative mythologist and originator of the Monomyth—says, "mythology is what men have said and have experienced, and now women have to tell us from their point of view what the possibilities of the feminine future are" (263). Both *Circe* and *Hadestown* live up to Campbell's call, engaging in a complex unraveling of these characters in order to rework ancient stories from their perspective, further developing and exploring the roles of women in the world.

Mitchell and Miller engage in a refiguring of these characters, firstly in terms of their agency. Agency is "the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power" (Merriam-Webster), which is perhaps one of the core differentiators between male and female characters in mythology. In general, male characters' behaviors are active: embarking on adventures, slaying monsters, and completing trials, while female characters' actions are passive: being kidnapped, imprisoned, and married against their will. Furthermore, as Pandora's story falsely teaches, feminine agency results only in more trouble for others. Something to note is that agency includes the *feeling* that one has the ability to act, not simply the ability itself. James W. Moore, professor of psychology at Goldsmiths University of London, writes, "When we make

voluntary actions we tend not to feel as though they simply happen to us, instead we feel as though we are in charge. The sense of agency refers to this feeling of being in the driving seat when it comes to our actions" (1). All people have an inherent ability to act, but agency focuses on the characters' ability to act freely within their context, in whichever ways they choose, independent from the oppression or constraints of outside forces. Within mythological female characters, there are differences among goddesses in terms of agency, as lesser goddesses are afforded less lenience than those with higher status. Both Circe and Persephone are considered to be lesser goddesses—the nymph Circe is a descendant of the overthrown Titans, and Persephone is a non-Olympian goddess—and thus reflect a more human experience with agency. These modern retellings seek to acknowledge the historical female struggle for agency and examine women who exert agency within a worldview that does not expect or encourage them to do so. In both retellings, the female characters actively seek their own freedom while wrestling with the complex nature of agency that is complicated by relational and cultural constraints.

The second key refigured element in these retellings is that of emotional complexity. Mythological women fall into two general categories in terms of emotional expression: over-emotionalism and hysteria or stereotypically masculine revenge. The former is exemplified by the hyper-sensitive nymphs who, when overcome with too much emotion, fade away permanently into trees, flowers, and other plants. The latter is reflected by Athena who, while not alone in the masculinized category, frequently reacts in a vengeful way, enacting a spiteful, physically aggressive expression of her emotions. In mythology there is rarely, if ever, a middle ground between these two extremes. This middle ground is what modern adapters seek to establish by portraying depth and complexity of character in a way that is realistic and genuine. This middle ground is not a tidy coexistence of the two, but often results in an extraordinarily

complex and varied emotional expression that encapsulates both extremes. It contains every shade of emotion, developed around the character themselves, influenced by their motivations, and adapted for their circumstances.

While these two refigurings are distinct, they are also undeniably connected. The genuine expression of emotion is only made possible by the ability to exert agency and only when one truly feels that ability can emotions be expressed most genuinely. It is the refiguring of these two elements that lies at the center of this paper. The reconstruction of female characters in *Circe* and *Hadestown* induces a holistic change—not necessarily in the facts of the characters, but rather in their nature and position within their myths. The long-form nature of these texts allows for this depth of character to be established, as the reader is exposed to the characters over significant time and diverse situations. As Harvard professor Maria Tatar says in her book *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*, "Suddenly we are given a new perspective, and we discover that stories operate with kaleidoscopic dynamism, changing dramatically when given one small twist. What we will see…is that when women begin to write, the story changes" (xvii).

The novel *Circe* retells the banishment and exile of the witch Circe, her love affair with the hero Odysseus, and her place in the hierarchy of the gods from her perspective, rather than as a side-character in *The Odyssey*. *Circe* extrapolates upon the experiences of the traditionally villainous enchantress, providing humanizing context and motivation behind her seemingly callous actions. Circe is best known for turning wandering men into pigs but, in Miller's novel, her reasons are much more complex than the pure spite portrayed in original mythology. Not only is this element of the story further developed, but Miller also explores Circe's other mythological involvements, leaving ample room for exploration of a previously one-note character.

While the written word has more opportunity for development purely based upon its length, spoken and performed literature has the additional ability to express development through physical and sonic elements, which are equally poignant. *Hadestown*, the 2019 Tony Award winner for Best Musical, likewise explores astounding complexity in the characters of Persephone and Eurydice as they grapple with their roles in an unfamiliar world. Hadestown is set in an industrialization-born dystopia, where the god of the Underworld, Hades, comes early to take Persephone back to the Underworld, resulting in increasingly short bouts of fair weather and devastatingly long winters. This seasonal dissonance dissolves all agricultural abundance, resulting in abounding poverty and environmental chaos. Persephone, goddess of spring, has reached her breaking point with the manipulations and power-lust of her husband, Hades. Eurydice is a human, forced into nomadic survival by the disintegration of earthly stability, who is jaded by desperation and hopelessness. As these women grapple with their respective realities, they come into conflict with societal expectations of them as women in male-dominated societies, eventually learning to exert their agency and harness their emotions despite these systems for the betterment of themselves and those around them.

## Agency in *Hadestown*

When it comes to Anaïs Mitchell's Persephone, slight changes in her narrative were necessary to create a cohesive version of this story. In most sources for her original mythology, Persephone is kidnapped by Hades, who "raped her with Zeus's consent" (Jiménez San Cristóbal), after which she is tricked into spending six months of the year in the Underworld for the rest of eternity. Perhaps one of the key signals that Persephone is denied her agency in this brief overview is that she makes no independent decisions—her father Zeus decides what

happens to her, her forced spouse tricks her into spending eternity with him, and she is separated from her mother and her purpose as a goddess of flora and fauna. Her agency is, simply, nonexistent. In *Hadestown*, however, Persephone falls in love with Hades of her own accord. Mitchell's version of this story removes the initial violence of this relationship and restores agency to Persephone in whom she chooses to love. However, there are remaining oppressive elements of Hades's character that create many of the same tensions as the original myths. Much of Hades's possessive character is revealed in the song "Chant Reprise," where he advises the young lover Orpheus to "*Hang* a chain around her throat / Made of many-karat gold / *Shackle her* from wrist to wrist / With sterling silver bracelets / *Fill her* pockets full of stones / Precious ones, diamonds / *Bind her* with a golden band…" (Mitchell 188, emphasis added)[1] in order to control and confine Eurydice. This theme of repression permeates Hades's dialogue in the beginning of the musical, not only in his relationship with Persephone but also in his obsession with control and industry. Thus, Mitchell does not erase the possessive and oppressive behaviors of Hades, but instead she tempers them for her audience and for her purposes in the story, thus restoring a much greater degree of initial agency to Persephone.

As the goddess of spring, Persephone is frequently portrayed as gracefully wandering through fields of flowers "happily plucking bunches of violets or pure white lilies…" (Ovid, Book 5, line 393). She is also traditionally associated with the images of her mother Demeter: grain, fruit, and growth (Buxton 69). Even on the occasions when she is portrayed as the formidable Queen of the Underworld, Hades's influence and control over her are always looming in the background, as all her authority in the Underworld comes through him. Most often, Persephone is representative of the traditional, passive role of goddesses—she is unwillingly tied

[1] For the entirety of this paper, the cited lyrics are from Anaïs Mitchell's book *Working on a Song: The Lyrics of Hadestown* and appear with the corresponding formatting. Similarly, the analysis is based primarily on the Original Broadway Cast Recording.

to the Underworld and, no matter what she does, her freedom is always conditional, and her agency is always impeded.

However, in Mitchell's characterization, Persephone is anything but traditionally feminine. While one would expect Persephone to be a typical leading-lady soprano, Amber Gray—the actress who portrays Persephone in the original Broadway cast—is a gravely, gritty, and distinctly nonfeminine alto who first appears on stage in a garish chartreuse dress. Her character is not a passively obedient wife but, rather, she is someone willing to fight for the love she once had, even when it has mutated beyond recognition. When Hades is not present, she is gutsy and loud, and many of these songs reveal a crucial alteration in demeanor from the original myths. When describing Hadestown, she sings:

> ***Persephone***
> Down there it's a buncha stiffs!
> Brother, I'll be bored to death
> Gonna have to import some stuff
> Just to entertain myself
> Give me morphine in the tin!
> Give me a crate of the fruit of the vine
> Takes a lot of medicine
> To make it through the wintertime (Mitchell 79)

Her delivery, while a catchy performance, thinly veils her hatred of what her life has become and how trapped she feels by her circumstances. At the beginning of the play, Persephone rarely speaks when Hades is present, demonstrating that she has grown too weary to object to his behavior. Even Orpheus comments: "Lady Persephone's blinded / By a river of wine / Living in an oblivion" (103). She doesn't play the part of the quiet wife out of pure submission, but only out of numbness and frustration. No longer portrayed as an innocent, passive goddess,

Persephone is not afraid to express her discontentment and anger in the safety of Hades's absence.

Despite her despondency, Persephone exercises considerable agency "when the foreman turns his back" (136). On one of Persephone's short trips to earth, she brings everything they are wanting—wine, food, and fair weather. Even though she knows that Hades will soon return to take her away, she still strives to bring those above the things that they crave in her absence. It is in active defiance—"In spite of her man" (58)—that Persephone does this, and that active defiance signals to the audience that her agency may be encumbered by her husband, but it is far from being erased.

Persephone's dissemination of hope is not exclusive to the living, however. The song "Our Lady of the Underground" is set when Persephone returns to Hadestown, bringing with her earthly nostalgia for the dead souls who are enslaved by Hades. She empathizes with their exhaustion, saying:

> ***Persephone***
> I don't know about you, boys . . .
> But if you're like me, then hanging around
> This old manhole is bringing you down
> Six feet under getting under your skin
> Cabin fever is a-setting in
> You're stir-crazy! Stuck in a rut!
> You could use a little pick-me-up
> I can give you what it is you crave
> A little something from the good old days
> Hey, I got the wind right here in a jar
> I got the rain on tap at the bar
> I got sunshine up on the shelf (143)

Persephone brings them reminders of the things they loved while they were alive and gives them a reprieve from their constant labor. Her rebellion is quiet and secretive, happening only when Hades is preoccupied, but she seeks to bring joy to others even in the midst of her own sorrows. Through these small actions of rebellion, she maintains a pocket of agency for herself amid an atmosphere of rigorous and stifling control.

Persephone spends the majority of the musical as a behind-the-scenes hero until she is confronted with a situation that stirs her deeply enough for her to stand in overt opposition to her husband. In "How Long?" Persephone confronts Hades about his restrictive regime, to which he dismissively responds, "Have a drink, why don't you?" to which she responds "No / I've had enough" (181). This response marks an essential turning point not only in their marital relationship, but more importantly in Persephone's character. Mitchell provides insight on this moment, describing its pivotal nature: "Persephone's response, *No—I've had enough*, seemed to set up the confrontation with Hades as a moment of newfound sobriety for her. She's fully awake" (186). This transformation marks Persephone's ownership of her agency in the presence of her husband, which enables her to make a public appeal on behalf of Orpheus and Eurydice. Until this moment, she has drowned herself in alcohol, drugs, and apathy in order to cope with the realities of her deteriorated life, but she now reclaims her agency by setting aside her coping mechanisms in order to stand up to the injustices of her husband.

Not only does she stand up to him, but she does so standing upon the authority she has as his wife, not by seeking to overpower him. Hades's response to her objection begins with "Just as long as Hades is king," while Persephone's reply begins with "Just as long as I am your wife" with the last word projected strongly (182-83). She is taking back the authority that is hers as his partner and is reminding Hades that he has no grounds upon which to look down on her. When

they fell in love, he saw her as an equal and, in this moment, she is reminding him of the commitment they made and how he has not regarded their marriage as highly as his power.

Hades is reminded of his forgotten love for Persephone and is swayed to reexamine his posture toward others and begins rebuilding his relationship with Persephone. Once Hades comes to recognize his cruel treatment of those around him, an equilibrium is restored to their relationship. Hades lets go of his need to control his wife, and she is able to fully step into who she is, as well as her role in the functioning of the world. As she leaves to return to earth, this time for the proper duration, she says to Hades, "Wait for me" to which he responds, "I will" (230). This marks a restoration of Persephone and Hades's love, where they develop a partnership, rather than just a coexistence. Persephone is expressing her desire to restore their love, but she is also creating a new precedent: she will be the one who comes back when it is time, and he can no longer come get her. He must wait for her, not the other way around.

Just as there were necessary alterations to the mythological character of Persephone, Eurydice's story is also altered in *Hadestown.* "Any Way the Wind Blows" is the audience's first introduction to Eurydice, where she is portrayed as a rough-edged pessimist who believes that she is better off without any attachments or relationships. This is in stark contrast to her traditional mythological portrayal, where she is seen as a "victim…of the underworld" (Kerényi 282) who acts as a tragic means for Orpheus's story rather than as an active agent in the story herself. Throughout the original myth, she speaks rarely, only in moments when it is necessary. *Hadestown*, in contrast, focuses significantly on Eurydice's experiences, providing the audience with personal insight into her death, time in the Underworld, and tragic second death. The story does not shift entirely to her perspective, as *Circe* does, but rather splits the perspective between

her and Orpheus, providing a far more balanced picture of what occurs by giving voice to Eurydice's experiences.

From the beginning of the musical, Eurydice exemplifies many more dominant and traditionally masculine traits than the male protagonist, Orpheus, does. She takes up space on stage, speaks rudely and aggressively to those who bother her, and she refuses all offers of help from others. She seems to have total control over her agency and complete comfort in exercising it. As the story unfolds, however, the audience is quickly made aware that these are walls she is putting up out of survival instinct. Eurydice sings, "People turn on you just like the wind / Everybody is a fair-weather friend / In the end you're better off alone" (Mitchell 22). She has learned that no one is to be trusted, and so she exhibits the characteristics of independence that feign confidence and security, many of which are frequently associated with male characters.

While Eurydice frequently appears to exercise agency, she often fails to recognize her own abilities. Throughout Act 1, there is repeated emphasis on Eurydice's feelings of helplessness in a world that is slowly descending into complete desolation. The Fates remind her that "there ain't a thing that you can do / When the weather takes a turn on you / 'Cept for hurry up and hit the road" (21). Even in "Wedding Song," which marks an important turning point in demeanor for Eurydice, she is preoccupied with how Orpheus's ideals can work with "Times being what they are / Hard and getting harder all the time" (40). Even when she decides to go with Hades to the Underworld, she feels as though she is given no choice but to give in to her hunger. Even though she still makes these decisions herself, they are tainted and manipulated by her circumstances to such a degree that she does not recognize the freedom she has to make a choice herself.

Two of Eurydice's strongest exhibitions of her agency are her decision to stay with Orpheus and her later decision to go with Hades to Hadestown. The former holds crucial significance, since staying turns against her every instinct. Eurydice is initially skeptical of Orpheus's vision of the future, but soon becomes persuaded by his optimism and chooses, "in spite of herself" (71), to stay with him. Up until this point, Eurydice is constantly on the move, attempting to outrun the poverty and natural disasters that are consuming their world. At this moment, Eurydice makes a decision against her instincts, out of love for Orpheus. It is her first choice that defies the voices and realities saying to do otherwise—by choosing Orpheus, she chooses to fight against them rather than run from them. Although this decision ultimately leads to her starvation and death, she is standing her ground against the brutal realities, believing in the power of Orpheus's song and their love to protect her. In examining agency, it does not matter whether the outcomes are positive or negative, but whether agency is freely exercised, which, in this case, it is.

Later, her route to the Underworld undergoes a crucial reinvention. In the original myth, Eurydice is killed by a chance encounter with a venomous snake. Mitchell's Eurydice, however, makes the active decision to join Hades in the Underworld. Hades offers Eurydice "A ticket to the underworld" (116), where he says she will find reprieve from her hunger and misery. In the original myth, she is killed by mere chance, but in *Hadestown* she is the one who makes choices about her fate, for better or worse.

Despite this being an active decision, Eurydice feels it to be unavoidable. As she contemplates Hades's offer, she sings:

> ***Eurydice***
> Orpheus, my heart is yours
> Always was, and will be

It's my gut I can't ignore
Orpheus, I'm hungry
Oh, my heart it aches to stay
But the flesh will have its way
Oh, the way is dark and long
I'm already gone…I'm gone (120)

Even though it is her choice, and therefore a signal of her agency, she feels forced—she believes herself to be "already gone." This is not empowered agency, but agency enacted out of desperation, twisted by an expert manipulator. This decision adds necessary complexity to Mitchell's approach to agency—not only do female characters have agency to make choices that benefit them or protect them, but also to experience the side of agency that allows for mistakes and misguided decisions.

When Eurydice arrives in Hadestown, her agency takes a considerable hit. Upon entering Hadestown, all individuality is removed to create optimal, obedient workers. The workers are stripped of their names, their eyes, and their memories in order to standardize them. Eurydice panics, and asks:

***Eurydice***
What do you mean, I'll look like that?

***Fates***
That's what it looks like to forget

***Eurydice***
Forget what?

***Fates***
Who you are
And everything that came before

***Eurydice***
I have to go

***Fates***
Go where?

***Eurydice***
Go back

***Fates***
Oh—and where is that?
So—what was your name again?
You've already forgotten . . . (151-52)

By removing all the individuality of his workers, Hades also erases all of their agency. Like the rest, Eurydice begins transitioning to an empty shell who is doomed to become another mindless cog in Hades's industrial machine. In "Flowers" she sings, "Is anybody listening? / I open my mouth and nothing comes out" (159), demonstrating how she is quite literally losing her ability to use her voice and express her agency. On stage, the costuming and choreography reflect the same transformation. Eurydice emerges from Hades's office after signing "her life away" (152) wearing the same working overalls as all the other souls. All elements of her past costume are gone, leaving her appearance exactly like the rest of the ensemble. When she joins the workers on the factory floor, she immediately falls into their choreography, which mirrors striking rocks

with pickaxes. For the next few songs, she flits in and out of their movements as she fights against the loss of her individuality.

In the rest of the play, Orpheus takes a more central role than Eurydice. However, the nature of having a male character making decisions does not necessarily detract from the ability of female characters to do likewise. For their journey out of Hadestown, Eurydice is placed in a position where she must trust another to lead her along the right path. At the beginning of the play, she would never have given up her independence to someone else. Now, after her recognition that actions can be taken out of conscious choice rather than necessity, she has matured to a level where an expression of agency can be found in the passing of decision-making to another. Her agency is now, for the first time, enacted out of genuine intention. She chooses to place her trust in Orpheus, and it is in that choosing that her character transforms. At every turn, Orpheus is the one doubting, and Eurydice is the one trusting unfailingly. Orpheus asks a plethora of doubting questions:

> ***Orpheus***
> Who am I to think that she would follow me
> Into the cold and dark again?
> ……
> Who am I against him?
> Who am I?
> Why would he let me win?
> Why would he let her go?
> Who am I to think that he wouldn't deceive me
> Just to make me leave alone? (237-38)

Hades puts the pressured role on Orpheus, because he is the one more likely to break, which, in turn, reflects on Eurydice's mastery of her agency. While not explicitly discussed, Eurydice's

control over her agency is a threat to Hades's plot, and so he places her in a position where she is not in direct control.

The characterization of Orpheus creates an important contrast to Eurydice's actions. He is portrayed as a naive and optimistic character who trusts in everyone despite their cataclysmic surroundings. At their first introduction, one could argue that Mitchell has merely swapped the gender roles to create a false sense of gender equality. However, while it is true that Orpheus travels to the Underworld to rescue Eurydice in traditional heroic fashion, he is also the one who becomes ravaged by doubt and fear which ultimately results in her eternal death. From the second song onward, both characters are incredibly complex—both exhibit a softness of heart, a desire to be loved, a desperation to protect and be protected, and the agency to make decisions for themselves, even if those decisions are ultimately destructive.

Agency in *Circe*

While *Hadestown* changes the myth's setting, Madeline Miller sets *Circe* intentionally within a traditional mythological framework. The initial chapters of *Circe* detail the roles of women within the broader society of gods and goddesses. Chapter 1 paints a picture of Circe's parents and her young childhood, where she constantly sees her mother, the sea nymph Perse, paraded as an object before her father, the Titan Helios, god of the sun. Perse is given to Helios by her father, with the words, "She is yours if you want her" (Miller 4), which immediately sets up the societal objectification of women among the gods. While Perse exercises agency and denies Helios's sexual advances until he marries her, she does so because it is the only way she can obtain any power whatsoever. In the world of the gods, she cannot have any authority unless she finds a husband who will bring her some by association. However, Perse is a nymph and

therefore even more of a sexual object than other beings, and thus she must weaponize her sexuality in exchange for power and position. Even as his wife, she must entice Helios into noticing her. Miller writes that Perse "turned before him slowly, showing the lushness of her figure as if she were roasting on a spit" (7). Miller's language is direct, providing no wiggle room around what cultural view of women she is establishing: while women can work behind the scenes for their purposes, they are never endowed with agency of their own. Miller casts the gods' culture as one where women, not only human women but many goddesses as well, are commodities rather than equals. Not only is Miller painting a picture of the culture of the gods, but she is establishing this culture before the eyes of a young Circe who will soon struggle to navigate it.

In her young childhood, Circe is described as being in her "customary place at [her] father's feet" (17), hanging on his every word and action. She is absorbed with his power and, while she chooses to be at his feet, she knows no other spot to place herself. She is the runt of the family, with a human voice, streaky hair, and barely glowing yellow eyes. Her siblings reflect Helios's glowing gold features, but she exhibits only a glimpse of her father's divinity. Thus, she is bullied mercilessly by her two older siblings and, as a result, she willingly adopts what they say to be true about her, since she feels no agency to expand beyond those spoken bounds.

Miller's Circe, however, does not remain in this state of passivity for long. The Titan Prometheus, who disobeyed Zeus's commands and brought fire to humans, is brought to Helios's realm to be tortured as an example of what happens to those who betray Zeus and the Olympians' authority. All the gods gather together in anticipation and excitement because "you cannot know how frightened gods are of pain. There is nothing more foreign to them, and so nothing they ache more deeply to see" (17). The punishment lasts for a long while and, when the

gods grow tired of watching, they wander back to their pleasures and banquets. Even the Fury, the one punishing Prometheus, wanders off to join them. Thus, Circe finds herself alone with the god, unable to dismiss his pain. Instead of ignoring him as the rest of her relatives do, she offers to bring him nectar, the drink of the gods, in order to restore some of his strength to him. Helping a traitor in this way would likewise incriminate her, but she makes a conscious decision to act in spite of her fears; therein lies her first act of agency. She says, "I trembled with all I had done, which was more than I had ever done in my life" (23).

Circe does not keep further acts of her agency secret, however. She falls in love with a simple human fisherman, Glaucos, whom she transforms into a god in order to spend eternity with him. Upon rising to power beyond his expectations, Glaucos quickly becomes vain and dismissive of Circe, favoring the attentions of the more beautiful nymphs, particularly a nymph named Scylla. Circe becomes overwhelmed with jealousy and hatred, transforming Scylla into a terrible sea monster, which Circe describes as her "truest form" (70). Circe has recognized her ability to imprint the world with her own desires, and, regardless of how she accomplishes this, both of these actions demonstrate her early acts of agency.

When all hope of regaining Glaucos's love is gone, Circe becomes desperate to no longer hide on the sidelines, and she confesses to her father, in front of all her relatives at dinner, that it was she who transformed both Glaucos and Scylla. While seemingly foolish, Circe's agency takes the form of acting in a way entirely counter to her surrounding culture. She thinks, "I was not like them. *Are you not?* The voice was my uncle's, resonant and deep. *Then you must think, Circe. What would they not do?*" (61). When she confesses, her father laughs at the thought of his useless daughter being capable of something so powerful, but when he learns that she and her siblings are witches, she is exiled permanently as an example of what happens to those who turn

against their own kind. By acting against the gods' norms, Circe is, in a sense, owning and shaping her own reality, if only through rebellion.

While her exile was intended to be a punishment that would contain her magic and thus prohibit her agency, it actually further enables her development. Within the first few seasons on her island of Aiaia, Circe realizes that, "For a hundred generations, I had walked the world drowsy and dull, idle and at my ease. I left no prints, I did no deeds…. Then I learned that I could bend the world to my will, as a bow is bent for an arrow" (84). She has always been told what she is—frail, weak, meaningless—rather than ever discovering what she is for herself. In her exile, she is, for the first time, allowed the opportunity to exercise her power. She says, "I did what I liked, the moment that I thought of it" (154). She uses her new-found freedom to explore her abilities as a witch to practice exercising her agency.

When Odysseus lands on Aiaia in Book 10 of *The Odyssey*, he is met with a different Circe than the one Miller portrays. There are many elements of Homer's text that Miller maintains, but she makes a few crucial alterations to the scene. *The Odyssey* does not deny Circe her power, as she is described as "the beautiful, dreadful goddess Circe" (Homer, Book 10, line 136). After Circe has turned part of the crew into pigs, Odysseus arrives to rescue them. The following interaction is where Miller creates her largest divergence from the original text, which has significant repercussions on Circe's characterization. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus outsmarts Circe's attempts to drug him and draws his sword on her. Homer writes that, "she screamed and ducked beneath the sword, and grasped / my knees and wailing asked me, / Who are you?" (lines 323-25), which paints Circe as a coward who is fearful of how Odysseus might harm her. In Miller's version, this scene is entirely turned on its head. Circe and Odysseus initially maintain a casual conversation, until Circe notices that Odysseus has not had anything to eat or drink, which

are the means she uses to cast spells on the men who come to her island. Odysseus expresses a desire to settle their affairs with reason, although he rests his hand on his sword to indicate that he is capable of handling things with brute force, if necessary. To this, Circe responds, "Weapons do not frighten me, nor the sight of my own blood" (Miller 202). Odysseus does not try to overpower her, but rather waits—"I knew what he wanted. He did not storm or beg, only waited for my decision" (209). He clearly sees her agency and recognizes it as worth respecting.

This reaction is the antithesis of Circe's reaction in *The Odyssey*, and the implications are massive, not only for Circe as a character but for her relationship with Odysseus as well. Miller's Circe is an equal match for Odysseus, while Homer's is far more cowardly. Despite these alterations, Miller still addresses the portrayal of Circe in *The Odyssey* when she writes, "Later, years later, I would hear a song made of our first meeting…. I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep" (Miller 206). Through this inclusion, Miller acknowledges the typical portrayal of Circe and uses it to create a distinct contrast to the reality in her novel. Miller reminds the reader that a story is greatly dependent on the perspective from which it is told—especially when it comes to female characters.

At the end of the novel, Circe has a crucial confrontation with her father, Helios, where she finally stands up to him on legitimate grounds of her power and authority, rather than on childish imitations of the same. She calls him to her island and makes an ultimatum for her freedom. Helios responds:

> "You dare to threaten me?"

> "I do…. For I will see you torn down, Father, before I will be jailed for your convenience any longer…. You know I have stood against Athena. I have walked the blackest deeps. You cannot guess what spells I have cast, what poisons I have gathered to protect myself against you, how your power may rebound upon your head. Who knows what is in me? Will you find out?" (360-61)

Before her exile, she and Helios have a parallel conversation, where she contradicts him with no authority on her side except what she believes. Helios sneers:

> "You dare contradict me? You who cannot light a single flame, or call one drop of water? Worst of my children, faded and broken, whom I cannot pay a husband to take. Since you were born, I pitied you and allowed you license, and yet you grew disobedient and proud. Will you make me hate you more?" (63)

The former interaction, which occurs at the end of the novel, is a restoration and repetition of this prior conversation, where Circe has now learned to own her agency to such a degree that she feels able to stand up to the final, looming figure standing in her way of her true independence. Her agency now stands on her own hard-earned power, and Helios cannot refute it.

## Sexual Agency in *Hadestown* and *Circe*

Another significant element of female characters' agency is their role within sexually intimate settings. Madeline Miller, by nature of being a novelist, has significantly more freedom when it comes to her descriptions than Anaïs Mitchell does in live theater. The genre constraints for *Hadestown* do not prohibit the development of sexual traits in the characters, but they must inherently be expressed in a more subtle way so as to align with conventions of appropriate on-stage dynamics for the desired audience.

Thus, Mitchell uses a more artistic expression of her characters' sexual development, articulated primarily through dance. While not detectable in the cast recording, there is an on-stage expression of sexual intimacy during the song "All I've Ever Known." In the case of *Hadestown*, sexual intimacy is used more to accelerate Orpheus and Eurydice's relational timeline and connectedness than to develop sexuality as an overt theme. The two are clearly portrayed as partners in the dance, if not with Eurydice taking more of a leading role.

While this is the only expression of sex in the play, it is Mitchell's exclusion of sexual scenes in the play that forms one of her most potent reworkings. As discussed earlier in this section, Mitchell has intentionally excised the scenes of rape from the story, either removing them entirely or reshaping them to her purposes. Most significant is Persephone's marriage to Hades. Unlike her mythological counterpart, she is not enticed and tricked into marriage with Hades but rather makes an active decision out of love. She is not sexually bartered by her father into the arms of Hades, but she is afforded the inherent dignity of choice. These are essential reworkings of Persephone's character, especially for a play set in an altered setting. This not only transforms the way that Greek mythology handles the sexual nature of women—an approach that frequently denies women agency of any kind—but it also provides a crucial narrative shift in the relationships of the characters.

Madeline Miller, however, does not have the same genre constraints as Mitchell, and thus there is more material regarding sex and sexuality in *Circe*. Throughout the novel, Circe engages in multiple sexual relationships, which all produce varying effects on her as a character. The first of these interactions is with the god Hermes, as Circe is beginning to claim ownership of her new-found agency on Aiaia. When approaching her relationship with Hermes, she decides to separate herself from the usual way lesser goddesses are treated by greater gods, and she is

instead an active decision-maker who refuses to have anything forced upon her. She says, “He would have of me only what I wanted to give” (94), demonstrating a very intentionally grounded self-concept based on her inherent value and ability to choose, which is strictly counter to typical portrayals.

When her exile is broken for a short journey to Crete, Circe encounters the inventor Daedalus, and she enters into a brief relationship in which she is on equal standing with him. In her relationship with Hermes, he is constantly in need of something to convince him to stay, while Daedalus simply seeks to provide comfort in a place that is entirely set against Circe. Even though Circe is a goddess and Daedalus is a human, he is the greatest inventor of his time and Crete’s greatest treasure, and so the two find themselves on an even footing. The interactions are brief, but they further develop Circe’s sexuality and ownership of her own decision-making abilities.

Miller establishes these concepts very concretely, but *Circe*, by nature of being set in a mythologically accurate way, cannot be entirely devoid of the realities of women in mythology. To do otherwise would be inaccurate and dismissive of the reality that women—both mythological and modern—experience. When Circe begins to interact with humans coming to her island, she is quickly confronted with the cruelty that can be directed at a single, seemingly defenseless woman. In her first interaction with humans on Aiaia, a group of sailors arrive and, when she provides them shelter and food, they slowly begin changing their attitude toward her as their respect for her hospitality dwindles. They begin by calling her “goddess” and “lady” (184), but quickly shift to phrases like “sweet” (185), which pique Circe’s caution. She assumes that she is imagining these changes. However, once they ask questions about her husband, her brother, or her father and realize that she is invariably alone on her island, they jump at the

opportunity to take advantage of her. Although Miller decides to include something as brutal as rape in her novel, it serves a particular and significant importance in the development of Circe's agency. The sailors' actions remove some of the agency she has found thus far in her exile by stripping her of her bodily autonomy and authority as sole owner of the island. In tandem, it acts as a reminder that, although there is agency in her exile, she is still under the conditional authority of those above her and around her, and the agency that she has gained in her exile will never be recognized by the outside world. It is true to her and her alone. This is not a discredit to her agency, but rather an accurate reflection of the world in which she operates.

While the instances of rape are removed from *Hadestown* to restore and reshape the female character's agency, they are added into Miller's story to do the same. While this initially may seem counterintuitive, Miller's goal is to create an accurate mythological setting and portray one woman's struggles against it, while Mitchell is modernizing and transforming her setting into a wholly new interpretation. The two authors share a goal, but their methods are significantly shaped by the purposes that drive their works.

And yet, Miller makes a distinction between the general experiences of women in mythology and Circe's: Circe is not powerless at the hands of her rapists as many women are in mythology. Miller does not remove any ounce of the cruelty of the rapists. Circe herself recognizes, with notable disdain, that "I am only a nymph after all, for nothing is more common among us than this" (188). However, while the sailors' actions are brutal, Circe is eventually able to speak her words of power and enact justice on the men who sought to harm her. In following with what she is most known for mythologically, she turns the rapists into pigs, acting as a reflection of the contemptible nature of their behavior. This is a contrast from her mythological roots, where her reasons for turning men into pigs are relatively unexplained; they seem to arise

out of spite or villainy rather than out of self-preservation. While she does eventually fall into a habit of turning most men who step foot on her island into pigs, she always waits to speak words of power until they begin to advance on her. This backstory invented by Miller adds depth and complexity to an otherwise one-note, unnecessarily cruel character.

When Odysseus comes to her island, this pattern begins to shift yet again. Circe has spent a lot of time enacting vengeance, a cycle which Odysseus breaks. Her eventual relationship with him results in a restoration of a healthier perspective on sexuality, rather than one that is primarily combative. In their relationship, they are on an equal standing without any integration of force or manipulation. This brings her sexual agency through a full circle, where she has wrestled with the removal of it by others and with the work she must do as a woman in this setting to maintain it.

Emotion in *Hadestown*

The second main refigured component of these characters is the portrayal of their emotional complexity. Many of the underlying emotions experienced by these characters are the same in both the original and adapted versions—anger, jealousy, love, sadness, joy—but it is the differing ways in which they are portrayed and experienced that holds the most significant value. There is often a rhetorical difference between ancient and modern literature—many myths approach emotion from a "tell, don't show" approach, which paints the characters less deeply than the more complex "show, don't tell" method favored by modern authors. The ancient method portrays emotions solely in an outward capacity. Characters weep and faint, but little insight is provided into the internal emotions that produce such strong outward reactions. Thus, the emotional responses can come across as comical and burlesque, especially for female

characters, although there are clearly considerable depths of emotion that are unaddressed by ancient authors.

In modern adaptations, especially when it comes to female characters whose secondary roles minimize their emotional complexity still further, authors seek to develop a more realistic portrayal of emotions within a character's mind. To achieve this, authors describe multiple concurrent emotions that commingle to create a multi-dimensional emotional experience, rather than a flat, single-note emotion. Nevertheless, each of the three characters—Persephone, Eurydice, and Circe—examined in this paper has a primary emotion that is developed strongly over the course of their stories: love, hope, and anger respectively.

In Greek myths, as Lefkowitz comments, "Both men and women can be victims of passion, but women are portrayed as being more readily susceptible to the effects of passion (even) than men" and are thus seen as less complex due to this supposed frailty (169). Modern authors address the historic problem of simplistic female emotions by reimagining the original situations and how characters would have reacted internally as well as externally. Even if the outward reactions of the characters remain the same as the original myth, the emotions themselves are described in a vivid and labyrinthine way that creates a new depth of feeling, restoring essential complexity to the characters.

Because *Hadestown* is a musical, there are some genre constraints on how the inner workings of the characters' minds are explored. In a novel like *Circe*, the author has the ability to deeply explore the internal processes of the main character since the story is seen through their eyes. In order to enhance this element in a musical, Mitchell provided characters with frequent soliloquies and monologues that allow the characters to explore the inner workings of their

emotions. She also cleverly crafted the characters of the Fates, who are "always singing in the back of your mind" (Mitchell 11), to aid in expressing the thoughts of the characters.

The character of Persephone shows significant emotional complexity as she wrestles with simultaneously loving and despising her husband. He has become someone she no longer recognizes, but she clings to her last threads of hope that he will return to who he once was. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* details the "Rape of Proserpina" (the Roman name for Persephone)[2] which describes the abduction and forced marriage of Persephone to Hades. Ovid writes, "In panic, Proserpina desperately cried for her mother / and friends, more often her mother. Her dress has been torn at the top, / and all the flowers she had picked fell out of her loosened tunic, / which only serves to increase her distress, poor innocent girl!" (Book 5, lines 397-400). While Persephone's fearful reaction is justified, there is little depth of emotion beyond fear—her physical description mirrors her situation, but her emotional state remains relatively unexplored. Similarly, when she returns from the Underworld to bring spring and summer, "her heart is so light and her face is so happy…she is glowing with radiant smiles…" (lines 568-70). In the original mythology, Persephone has a range of emotions, but the emotions are singular and separated from additional concurrent emotions. Persephone is scared or glad, but those emotions—or any others—never occur at the same time.

In Mitchell's portrayal, however, Persephone is never without multi-emotional complexity. When she comes to the overworld for a short summer, she comes with joy that barely masks years of frustration and pain. She chooses alcohol and drugs as her method for ignoring the intense emotional battle in which she finds herself. She sings, "Let's not talk about

[2] "Romans adopted many aspects of Greek culture, adapting them very slightly to suit their own needs. For example, many of the gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman culture share similar characteristics" (National Geographic). Since the Greek pantheon predated the Roman pantheon, there are few changes in gods/goddesses and their characteristics due to this inspiration, thus the stories of Persephone and Proserpina are interchangeable.

hard times! / Pour the wine! / It's summertime!" (Mitchell 57). Here, her forced emotions of delight thinly veil the intensity of feeling that would cause her to turn to such substances for solace. The very nature of masking emotions gives staggering insight into the potency of the emotions themselves. However, her joy is not disingenuous—by returning to earth she is fulfilling the most basic parts of her nature as the goddess of spring—but it is mixed with the knowledge that she will soon be taken away again.

Unlike her mythological self, Mitchell's Persephone is not silent about her distaste for her husband's behavior. In "Chant," Hades is attempting to show her all the "improvements" he's made since she's been gone which make Hadestown even more hellish. She responds:

> ***Persephone***
> Every year it's getting worse
> Hadestown, hell on earth!
> Did you think I'd be impressed
> With this neon necropolis?
> Lover, what have you become?
> Coal cars and oil drums
> Warehouse walls and factory floors
> I don't know you anymore
> And in the meantime up above
> The harvest dies and people starve
> Oceans rise and overflow
> It ain't right and it ain't natural (105)

However, these words are not expressed as harshly as they sound on paper. She begins with an incredulous exclamation—"Did you think I'd be impressed / With this neon necropolis?" (105)—but her tone quickly shifts to a tender despondency. There is an intensity of sadness mingled with her frustration, with the final line being produced in a flare of anger. Even within

these few lines, a mere thirty seconds of stage-time, Persephone exhibits multiple emotions about a single topic, constructing an emotional experience that demonstrates a kind of anger that is driven by, and that also battles with, love.

Even though Hades and Persephone's conflict is a secondary element to the story, their emotional tension permeates any scene they share. This comes to a breaking point in "How Long?" where Persephone stands her ground on behalf of Orpheus and Eurydice, exercising her emotions as well as her agency, which we have explored previously. She makes an emotional appeal to Hades—"He has the kind of love for her / That you and I once had" (181)—but he, in traditional form, attacks her emotionalism as a weakness. He sings, "You and your pity don't fit in my bed / You just burn like a fire in the pit of my bed / And I turn like a bird on a spit in my bed / How long, how long, how long?" (182). While Hades maintains the same tone of disdain for the majority of the song, Persephone's vocal elements shift and morph—one moment she is gentle, another she is exasperated, another she is irate. Her leaps are not those of hysteria, but those of complex emotional compositions of her simultaneous love and hatred for Hades and the current coldness of his heart. She is finally loosing her pent-up emotions, breaking the distinct silence that she has held in his presence for the majority of the play.

After "How Long?" Persephone no longer holds her silence. She begins expressing her internal conflict in the following songs, further exploring her constant tension of love and hatred. Frequently, authors omit some elements of a Broadway musical from the cast recordings in order to preserve a bit of secrecy about the in-person performance. One such subtraction occurs in what is arguably the climax of the play, "Chant Reprise," which holds crucial significance for the character of Persephone. The addition was cut from the initial Broadway performances and the cast recording, but soon found its way into later performances. Persephone has been caught in a

constant pull between hatred of her current life and hope in the restoration of her love, and the audience sees the moment when she chooses to believe in hope. Her verse parallels the one that Hades has just sung to Orpheus, telling him that he must emotionally imprison a woman in order to keep her. Persephone's verse doesn't dignify Hades with a response, but is, rather, directed to Eurydice to encourage her. She sings:

> ***Persephone (to Eurydice)***
> When I was a young girl like you
> This old world was younger too
> We set it spinning hand in hand
> Me and a young man
> Now you see what he's become
> Hades, with his heart of stone
> I forgot was true love was
> And then I heard your Orpheus
>
> Take it from a woman of my age
> There is nothing love can't change
> Even where the bricks are stacked
> Love is blooming through the cracks
> Even when the light is gone
> Love is reaching for the sun
> It was love that spun the world
> When I was a young girl (195)[3]

At the beginning of the play, Persephone appears to hate her husband and her life and seems to have no hope of returning to the love they had. This section, however, tells a different story than the front she puts on. She believes that "even when the bricks are stacked"—alluding

[3] This section is written with slashes in *Working on a Song: The Lyrics of Hadestown* since it is included in the "Notes on 'Chant Reprise'" section. It is cited here as though it was written in the full text because it is included in performances as a normal part of the song.

both to Hades's literal wall and her feelings of imprisonment—"love is blooming through the cracks" (195). This does not erase her frustration, but rather reveals the strongest emotion she has carried with her the whole story long; it is her love that ultimately defines her character, not her hatred of their current untenable situation.

Eurydice's interactions with emotion create a similar dichotomy as Persephone's, although they more often flip back and forth between extremes, rather than having two extremes existing simultaneously. Until she falls in love with Orpheus, Eurydice's focus is self-preservation against the violence of an indifferent world. In order to survive, she has become resigned to the "ways of the world" (24), but that resignation is a route through which to cope with the disastrous nature of her surroundings. In the beginning scenes of the play, she has an overwhelmingly negative perspective not only on her circumstances but also on other people, clearly developed from previous experiences. She sings, "People turn on you just like the wind / Everybody is a fair-weather friend / In the end you're better off alone" (22). With no beacon of light to evoke a sense of hope, Eurydice is consumed by hopelessness. However, upon meeting Orpheus, small glimpses of hope quickly appear in her hardened heart, revealing that it has been something she has been craving beneath her mask of resilience.

Throughout the musical, Eurydice adopts emotional extremes until she eventually settles into a more well-rounded emotional state. "All I've Ever Known" clearly narrates her first change in emotion, where Eurydice makes the emotional transition from her aggressive individualism to desiring the hope present in a shared life with Orpheus. She sings:

> ***Eurydice***
> I was alone so long
> I didn't even know that I was lonely
> Out in the cold so long

I didn't even know that I was cold
Turn my collar to the wind
This is how it's always been
All I've ever known is how to hold my own
All I've ever known is how to hold my own
But now I want to hold you, too
You take me in your arms
And suddenly there's sunlight all around me
Everything bright and warm
And shining like it never did before
And for a moment I forget
Just how dark and cold it gets (71)

Her hope for the future is far higher than it has been thus far, and she falls completely into that hope with a sense of abandon.

Her hopefulness does not last, however. When Persephone is taken back to the Underworld too early, Orpheus throws himself into his songwriting and, in his fixation, does not notice Eurydice's cries for help. She clings to her hope in his song, but this hope is slowly chipped away. "Hey, Little Songbird" details how Hades weaponizes Eurydice's proclivity for hopelessness to drive her away from Orpheus and toward life in the Underworld. He sings:

***Hades***
Hey, little songbird, let me guess
He's some kind of poet, and he's penniless
Give him your hand, he'll give you his hand-to-mouth
He'll write you a poem when the power is out
Hey, why not fly south for the winter?
Hey, little songbird, look all around you
See how the vipers and vultures surround you
And they'll take you down, they'll pick you clean

If you stick around such a desperate scene
See, people get mean when the chips are down… (112-13)

Hades's taunts spin Hadestown as a more hopeful place than earth, exploiting Eurydice's inner emotional battle. In Orpheus's absence and under the manipulative sway of Hades, her feelings of hopelessness from the beginning of the play return and begin to conflict with the hope she has recently clung to.

The Fates take up the mantle of Eurydice's inner battle, acting as the panicked thoughts that bombard Eurydice while she tries to make a decision. On stage, the Fates circle around Eurydice, pushing her around the stage, and cornering her at every opportunity, just as her thoughts do. They sing:

***Fates***
Life ain't easy, life ain't fair
A girl's gotta fight for a rightful share
What you gonna do when the chips are down?
……
Help yourself, to hell with the rest
Even the one who loves you best
……
Ain't nobody but yourself to trust
……
Aim for the heart, shoot to kill
If you don't do it then the other one will
……
Cast your eyes to heaven
You get a knife in the back! (116-17)

The song ends with Eurydice kneeling with her hands over her ears trying to block out their verbal assault. All their promptings prey on her hopelessness and, separated from Orpheus who

anchors her hope, she decides that “the flesh will have its way” (120) and she descends to Hadestown.

The curtain is pulled back on Hades’s deception about Hadestown as respite by the Fates’ “deliciously vicious” (156) exposé in “Way Down Hadestown Reprise.” Eurydice’s sense of self begins quickly deteriorating, and “Flowers” acts as her funeral song, where she has seen the fullness of what she chose and can do nothing to reverse her decision. She sings, “Dreams are sweet until they're not / Men are kind until they aren't / Flowers bloom until they rot / And fall apart” (159). Not only have Eurydice’s hopes for a better life been dashed, but her hope in Orpheus is slowly slipping away as she begins to feel the effects of Hadestown—forgetting who she is “and everything that came before” (151).

When Orpheus unexpectedly arrives in Hadestown, Eurydice is confronted with the collision of her two realities—her love of Orpheus and her eternal contract with Hades. She cannot escape the effects of Hadestown, but Orpheus’s hope is infectious; over the course of “If It’s True,” the other workers abandon their work in response to his song and even Persephone is able to recognize the cruelty of her husband and join the chorus of hope.

The collective rebellion of his workers and his wife strike a chord with Hades, and Orpheus’s song puts the world, and consequently Hades and Persephone’s relationship, “back into tune” (209). Hades gives them a way out, but only if they can trust each other and themselves. Eurydice’s hope soars again, as she finally realizes:

> ***Eurydice***
> I don’t need gold, don’t need silver
> Just bread when I’m hungry, fire when I’m cold
> I don’t need a ring for my finger
> Just need a steady hand to hold
> Don’t promise me fair sky above

Don't promise me kind road below
Just walk beside me, love
Any way the wind blows (213)

This is a distinct difference from the song's parallel in "All I've Ever Known" where she sings, "Say that you'll hold me forever / Say that the wind won't change on us / Say that we'll stay with each other / And it will always be like this" (72). This final revelation allows Eurydice's optimism to stand in tandem with her pragmatism, resulting in a hopeful reality rather than an overextended optimism. This creates a more balanced emotional state for Eurydice, where she can hold a wide array of emotions simultaneously.

In order to walk out of Hadestown, Hades sets parameters that prey on the anxieties of Orpheus and Eurydice. Hermes describes the terms of their travel:

***Hermes***
Well, you won't be hand in hand
You won't be arm-in-arm
Side by side, and all of that
*(to Orpheus)* He said you have to walk in front
And she has to walk in back
……
And if you turn around
To make sure she's coming too
Then she goes back to Hadestown
And ain't nothing you can do (225-26)

Eurydice is given no choice but to place her hope in Orpheus but, in this case, she has no trouble. Even as they walk, she sings encouragement to him as he is slowly overwhelmed by doubt. Orpheus, out of fear that he has been tricked into leaving alone, turns and sees Eurydice walking dutifully behind him. Mitchell creates a significant alteration in gender roles in terms of emotionalism, giving Orpheus the emotional break that would usually be attributed to a female

character. It is his loss of hope that jeopardizes their future together, not hers. More important, however, is Eurydice's reaction. She does not cry out or scream but speaks his name quietly before she is lowered back to Hadestown. There is a sense in her voice that she does not blame him for his mistake and does not regret placing her hope in him, although she still mourns having to be without him. This is the final step on the alternating path of her emotions, where she is devastated at her loss but still content with allowing herself to hope, no matter the consequence.

Emotion in *Circe*

While Eurydice's and Persephone's emotional interactions produce relatively clear dichotomies, *Circe*, by nature of being a longer-form novel, creates still further complexity of emotion. Circe's most marked emotion is anger, although "anger" is far too one-note of a description. In his article titled "The Angry Personality: A Representation on Six Dimensions of Anger Expression," Ephrem Fernandez describes anger as "a compound emotion" that can include verbal or physical aggression, anger reflection or deflection, impulsivity, and a range of other elements (403-12). *Circe* demonstrates this complexity, with the titular character's anger fluctuating between circumstances—sometimes she can control it and other times it controls her.

In *The Odyssey*, Circe exhibits no anger at all. Instead, she is simply a witch who turns men into pigs for seemingly no reason other than her own villainy. In Miller's novel, she must create motivations for Circe that did not exist in the original myth, and thus she chooses for Circe to wrestle with a constantly shifting and developing anger. Her anger shifts, changes, and swells throughout the novel as she seeks to navigate her circumstances. It is the intensity and intricacy of this anger that creates a new complexity in this adaptation of Circe. Miller's Circe does not travel through her anger linearly—with her initial uncontrolled outbursts developing to a

controlled calm—but she rather experiences an extensive array of anger as she progresses through the story.

The perception of anger and gender is often a slanted one. Ann Kring discusses this when she writes, "Indeed, conventional wisdom suggests that anger is a 'male' emotion: women don't get angry, and if they do, they certainly don't show it" (211).[4] Likewise in mythology, anger is a typically masculine emotion, and, when it is a characteristic of a goddess, it often appears through pettiness rather than vengeance or aggression. Thus, there is inherently a nontraditional tone to women who exert aggression openly. Athena, as this paper's masculinized scapegoat, is an example of a goddess who is vengeful and aggressive, flaunting her anger openly. For evidence of this, we need look no farther than the myth of Arachne. Arachne is a skilled weaver who boldly challenges Athena's own aptitude. The two compete in a weaving competition and, when Arachne wins, Athena turns her into a spider in her anger where she "continues to spin / her thread and practise her former art in the web of a spider" (Ovid, Book 6, lines 144-45). Athena robs Arachne of any further triumphs, even though her victory was fairly won.

Circe's anger, however, is not portrayed inside of a gendered dichotomy, but is rather presented through a gradual, non-linear development. She wrestles with how to respond to her anger and, over the course of the novel, changes her response frequently; some responses are outwardly aggressive, others are inwardly criticizing, and still others are exerted as an attempt for revenge. At the beginning of the novel, Circe experiences her first heartbreak and responds with the aggressive anger that has been modeled by the gods around her. Her context is crucial in this first instance—she has experienced only the wrath of her father and the smiting anger of her mythological reality. Circe, in turn, responds vindictively. She says, "I thought I would die of

[4] This assumption has been empirically shown to be inaccurate. Psychological studies have determined that men and women both experience anger in the same way but are rather socialized to express their anger differently. For further research, read the rest of Ann Kring's chapter "Gender and Anger" in *Gender and Emotion: Social Psychological Perspectives* and "Anger and Gender: Theory, Research, and Implications" by Bruce S. Sharkin.

such pain, which was not like the sinking numbness Aeëtes had left behind, but sharp and fierce as a blade through my chest…. All I knew was that I hated her. For I was like any dull ass who has ever loved someone who loved another. I thought: if only she were gone, it would change everything" (Miller 55). Circe directs her anger towards Scylla, who has thwarted her love, turning the beautiful nymph into a gray, twelve-legged sea monster. She takes away Scylla's consciousness, leaving nothing but an insatiable hunger. This story parallels the myth of Athena and Arachne uncannily—a goddess is outdone by a lesser being and reacts by transforming her into a hideous creature. Here, as a young goddess unfamiliar with handling her anger, Circe reacts selfishly, banishing Scylla from her previous life and creating a new, horror-filled existence for her to occupy instead.

Once she is exiled for her witchcraft, Circe's anger takes a back seat for a short time in the novel, until her sister Pasiphaë sends a ship to Aiaia, forcing Circe to come to her kingdom of Crete. She requires the sailors to sail back through Scylla's straits and thus forces Circe to come because, without Circe, more men will surely die in the return. Her anger flares at her sister's cruelty not only towards her own sailors but towards Circe herself for making her reckon with the deaths that occur at Scylla's hands. Face to face with Scylla again, her transformation is no longer evidence of Circe's budding agency, but rather of a foolish mistake that creates guilt and self-directed anger in Circe. After successfully sailing past Scylla's cave, the sailors bow at Circe's feet, praising her for their protection. She does not take their praise as a typical goddess would, but rather releases some of her self-directed anger at them. She says:

> "You fools…I am the one who made that creature. I did it for pride and vain delusion. And you thank me? Twelve of your men are dead for it, and how many thousands more to come?… I will never be free of her. She cannot be changed back, not

> now, not ever. What she is, she will remain. So get up. Get up and get to your oars, and let me not hear you speak again of your imbecile gratitude or I will make you sorry for it." (117)

Here, Circe's anger is not outwardly aggressive, although she does threaten them, but is instead self-directed. She feels the weight of the deaths caused by her foolish jealousy and holds herself accountable for the atrocity she released. Her anger brews self-hatred, and she thinks, "I wanted the sun to burn me. I wanted it to scorch me down to bone" (117). Even when she returns to Aiaia, her anger follows her and, for the first time, her exile and all she did to receive it weighs heavily on her. She tries to fall easily back into her old life, but everything is now tainted by her internalized anger. She says, "Rage and grief, thwarted desire, lust, self-pity: these are emotions gods know well. But guilt and shame, remorse, ambivalence, those are foreign countries to our kind, which must be learned stone by stone" (156).

Circe's self-loathing is interrupted by a wholly new kind of anger, perhaps the most complicated anger she experiences. After Circe is raped by the sailors, she turns the men into pigs and kills them. This anger is more justifiably aggressive than her anger toward Scylla. These men are seeking to physically, emotionally, and mentally harm her, for nothing more than bolstering their own sense of control and sexual dominance. There is no consideration of Circe as a person in this case; she is merely a vessel through which they achieve pleasure. While Scylla likewise does not care for Circe's feelings and actively taunts her, their interaction is over affection, not over bodily safety. Thus, Circe's aggression in the case of the rapists is more justified and shows a development of self-preservation in her character, adding a new shade to the development of her anger.

After she is raped, Circe's anger begins to consume her to an even greater extent. When other men come to the island, she turns the villainous ones into pigs and sends the pious few away. She says, "They were pious men, honestly lost, and I would feed them, and if there was a handsome one among them I might take him to my bed. It was not desire, not even its barest scrapings. It was a sort of rage, a knife I used upon myself. I did it to prove my skin was still my own. And did I like the answer I found?" (193). Even with the few pious groups, she develops a hunger for the violence: "I wanted the next crew to come, so I might see again their tearing flesh" (193). Here, Miller demonstrates anger that cannot be quelled by revenge—she can never erase what they have done, no matter how many sailors she turns into pigs.

As time passes, Circe's anger begins to ebb as she finds solace and restoration of her sexuality in her relationship with Odysseus. After he has left, however, Circe becomes pregnant, and everything begins to shift in her emotions. Her self-directed anger returns as her infant son Telegonus's constant tantrums cause her to doubt her maternal abilities, but her anger cycles quickly as she is confronted with larger aggressors to direct her anger at. She now has a maternal desire to protect, and her son will need that protection more than most. It is prophesied that Telegonus will kill Odysseus, Telegonus's father and Athena's favored hero. Athena arrives on Aiaia to thwart that prophecy, which causes Circe's anger to flare in a wholly new way—she would fight Athena, an Olympian who is magnitudes more powerful than she, before even considering giving up her son. She sends Athena away from her island and says, "I had said I would do anything for him, and now I would prove it and hold up the sky" (255).

By the end of the novel, Circe comes to full recognition of the consequences of her anger. In a crucial section, Circe must let her now-grown son Telegonus leave the island, thus leaving her protection. Circe says:

> I felt that old rage rising in me, the one that swore it would burn down the world before I let any harm come to him. With it, I had faced Athena and held up the sky. I had walked into the lightless deeps. There was a pleasure in it, that great hot rush through me. My mind leapt with images of destruction: the earth sent spiraling into darkness, islands drowned in the sea, my enemies transformed and crawling at my feet. But now when I sought those fantasies, my son's face would not let them take root. If I burned down the world, he would burn with it. (294)

Circe feels the familiar desire for vengeance, but this time it is her love for her son that subdues her anger, and she realizes that, by keeping him isolated, she will lose him just as effectively as if Athena were to take him. She cannot act on her anger as she once did but must set it aside in order to act out of love for her son, rather than fear of his loss.

Ultimately, the influence of Circe's refigured emotion lies in the sheer complexity of those emotions. Hers is not a linear path from aggressive anger to controlled anger, but rather a constant shifting between different responses. While detailing genuine anger in a female character would be enough subversion of mythological tropes to garner significance, Miller takes Circe's anger substantially further. Miller refuses to simplify Circe's emotions and, by examining the complexity of her anger, she demonstrates an accurate portrayal of a female character who is neither overdramatic nor unaffected by her emotions.

## Conclusion

The ability to exercise agency and experience emotion is fundamental to a character's humanity and is thus an essential part of creating an authentic character of any kind. These refigurings are therefore crucial to the extrapolation of these characters into more rounded,

complex individuals. Even within these three characters, there is significant diversity in thought, action, and experience, demonstrating how, even among characters who originate from the same culture, there is just as much complexity among these women as there is among women today.

While these alterations are crucial to the reimagining of these characters, there is still an accuracy that is maintained in the midst of their retold stories. In each retelling, there are times when agency is removed from all three characters and times when their emotions are criticized and belittled. Mitchell and Miller do not seek to create images of female perfection, with immovable agency and blazing emotions, but rather they seek to create characters that accurately reflect the deep complexity of the female experience that was denied these characters in their original myths. No longer flat, stereotypical characters, these women are elaborate, with just as many complexities as their male counterparts. Therein lies the power of these stories.

Not only are these characters given further complexity and accuracy, but their authors are likewise expressing their own abilities to shape the world around them through the art they create. While this is a relatively new approach to Greek mythology, books of this nature occupy a fast-growing genre that is especially pertinent to today's readers. In her introduction to her novel *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths*, Natalie Haynes writes:

> Every myth contains multiple timelines within itself: the time in which it is set, the time it is told, and every retelling afterwards. Myths may be the home of the miraculous, but they are also mirrors of us. Which version of a story we choose to tell, which characters we place in the foreground, which ones we allow to fade into the shadows: these reflect both the teller and the reader, as much as they show the characters of the myth. We have made space in our storytelling to rediscover women who have been lost or forgotten. They are not villains, victims, wives, and monsters: they are people. (3)

This genre is a reclaiming of narrative that places women at the forefront of mythology, giving voice to their long-ignored experiences and stories. These texts, and the many others written with the same goal in mind, merge the significance of Greek mythology and the importance of well-crafted female characters, demonstrating the power of intentionally written female characters and the necessity of their stories.

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