

LITT2900

Vilde Traagstad

Spring 2019

NTNU – The Department of Language and Literature

Ancient Greek Myths as Material for Modern Literary Fiction

An Exploration of the Heroines of Margaret Atwood's Novel *The Penelopiad*
and Sara Stridsberg's Tragedy *Medealand*.

we had no voice
we had no name
we had no choice
we had no face
one face the same

we took the blame
it was not fair
but now we're here
we're all here too
the same as you

(Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 2006, p. 195)

Table of contents

Introduction	3
<i>A small statement before we begin.....</i>	<i>4</i>
What is mythology?	4
Ancient Greek literature.....	5
A female perspective on the Greek myths.....	6
<i>The Penelopiad</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Medealand.....</i>	<i>9</i>
The Greek myths in contemporary literature.....	10
Conclusion	12
Translations from <i>Medealand</i>.....	13
Bibliography.....	14

Introduction

The realm of Ancient Greece has always been a fascination to me. Greek gods, urn paintings, myths and literature have shaped our society throughout history, and still plays a big factor in our own time and culture. I find this very interesting, since there is no denying that there is a long time between the time of the belief in the Olympian Gods and the Information Age that we are in now. Despite this though, there are some great similarities and themes that are consistent throughout history, and some of them are to be explored in this thesis.

Literature as we know it in Western history has its origin in ancient Greece, which is a great source when it comes to myths of gods and heroes. These myths are a big part of our literary inheritance, and they have served as a great inspiration for authors through all ages. As an avid reader of fantasy literature and books about mythology, I have come across a phenomenon of contemporary literature that builds on the Greek myths, with timeless themes and a power to move and engage that have made me interested in exploring it further. This is the reason why I have decided to dig deeper into the myths of ancient Greece in this thesis and get closer to an understanding of how these myths can help to problematize our contemporary society through literary fiction.

I want to base this thesis on examples of the novel *The Penelopiad* (2006) by Margaret Atwood and the tragedy *Medealand* (2009) by Sara Stridsberg. I have chosen these literary works because of their focus on emphasizing female figures of ancient Greece. I will place *The Penelopiad* and *Medealand* in a feminist context which I believe will serve well as an example of a debate within our contemporary society. Because of this, I want to ask:

How can ancient Greek myths serve as material for debating issues within our own contemporary society through modern literary fiction with a feminist perspective?

I will start this thesis by looking at some historical perspectives on ancient Greece and its mythology and literature to gain an overview over its history. After this, I want to set the focus on a female perspective of the Greek myths before I explore *The Penelopiad* and *Medealand*. This will lead to a discussion surrounding this thesis' main question on how ancient Greek myths is being examined and used to problematize feminist issues in our own society. At the end of the thesis, I will give my conclusion to the topic in question, hopefully having shed light to some new angles on the subject matter.

A small statement before we begin

Before I go any further, I will like to shed light on the fact that the tragedy *Medealand* that I use in this text, is not translated into English. I have chosen to translate a few of the lines that I want to implement because I believe an exclusion of them will make the thesis lack a relationship with the text. The lines that I have chosen to translate is to be found in Norwegian at the end of my thesis.

What is mythology?

Before digging into the subjects of ancient myths and heroines, it will be useful to say something about what myths and mythology really are, and why they have been, and to some extent still are, an important part of a culture. Myth can be described as a story told orally about heroes and gods. Mythology then, is the knowledge about these myths and the collections of them, often belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition – such as ancient Greece – or as a set of stories or beliefs about a particular person or situation, often exaggerated or fictitious (Lothe, Refsum & Solberg, 2015, p. 147 – 148).

All societies have stories with no author which are told through generations. These stories are often about figures and subjects which are central to the culture of those societies. Some of these stories function as explanations of how the world was created or how nature and society are built up, but many of them are also histories that gets one's imagination going. These stories are what is called myths. The Greeks used the word *mythos* about any story, but now scientists often use the term "myth" for stories that existed in "historical" consciousness which often were the subject for religious cults. Tales of great people on the other hand, are called legends, folklore or fairytales, depending on the degree of historical truth within the story. The average man in ancient Greece understood myths as a part of historical reality, no matter which gods, heroes or supernatural phenomena the stories were about, which is why such distinctions did not matter to them (Mejer and Skafte Jensen, 1985, p. 158 – 159). I think the fact that people in ancient Greece understood myths as part of historical reality is interesting to this thesis, since this gave the myths a great authority in the matter they explored. Although modern-day versions of myths do not have this authority, I believe that the importance myths and legends played in ancient times still is a factor when encountering mythical material – both in writing and reading – because myths are so often being used to explore dilemmas and controversy in society.

Ancient Greek literature

To become able to understand the connections and historical differences between contemporary literature and the literature of Ancient Greek, I will like to give a short introduction to a part of ancient Greek literary history that will be relevant to this thesis. I have chosen to include the information I find useful in light of the thesis and leave out elements that does not serve a purpose in the text, which means that this is not a complete overview. The ancient Greek realm existed between around 700 BC to 30 BC, and I will put an emphasis on what is called the Archaic period around 700 BC to 480 BC – the age that epic poetry was introduced – and around 400 BC in the Classical period – when tragedy and comedy were at their height of popularity (Lothe et.al., 2015, p. 10).

In ancient Greece, myths and everyday life went hand in hand, and the literature that has survived from this period is a testament to this. As is seen in this text, myths were also the most central element of ancient Greek literature, being in the center of the Greeks' belief and worldview. Stories and storytelling were a big part of the culture of ancient Greece, and as mentioned above, stories usually wandered through generations and were thus supposed to be *told*, not *read*. At around 750-700 BC, *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* were allegedly produced in their written form, marking the transition from oral storytelling to the stories being documented in writing for the first time. It is therefore from this time and place that literature in the Western World came to exist. Despite stories being written down, they were still supposed to be performed orally, as the writing process was probably meant for documentation only (Lothe et.al., 2015, p. 10). Luckily, a great part of ancient Greek literature still exists today so we can enjoy it, study it and get inspired by it – just as this text is a witness to.

The novel *The Penelopiad* and the tragedy *Medealand* which I base this text on, are rooted in the myths of Penelope and Medea. Myths are written down in a variety of versions, but most famously concerning these two are probably Homer's epic poem *the Odyssey* and Euripides' tragedy *Medea*. As in the contemporary versions of these myths by Atwood and Stridsberg, *the Odyssey* and *Medea* were also different genres – epic poetry and the drama genre tragedy. In ancient Greek literature, different genres had different themes and verse forms; epic poems such as *the Odyssey* were concerned with extraordinary tales of great heroes in great battles, telling tales of bravery and honor, while tragedies such as *Medea* tell the tale of highborn heroes who go through a tragic downfall where destiny often plays a great part in their unavoidable suffering, leading the audience through fear and compassion to gain *catharsis*, an emotional

cleansing (Haarberg, Selboe & Aarseth, 2007, p. 28 – 42). Both epic poetry and tragedy are thus genres rooted in the world of Greek myths.

A female perspective on the Greek myths

After this introduction to the mythology and literature of ancient Greece, I now want to devote time to address a feminist perspective on the Greek myths and this perspective's function and purpose in my thesis.

“Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into the history – by her own movement. The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological with the cultural” (Hélène Cixous, 2017, p. 940).

My thesis is not about women that write or why they do so, but I believe that this quote from the essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* portrays a mood which is fitting in this context. Miriam Leonard and Vanda Zajko are in the opinion that this essay by Cixous revitalized the world of myths, and that this new world she is talking about really is the old mythical world (2006, p. 3). Our canon is full of male writers, but the female versions of stories must often be described by the women themselves so as to get them right, and to get them heard.

I have chosen to use fiction written by Margaret Atwood and Sara Stridsberg in this thesis, and I have done so because they are both female authors with a focus on strong female figures. I will argue that we can see a trend when it comes to the use of ancient Greek mythical women in 21st century literature, and the two works I am using in this thesis are just two of many examples of the focus women of ancient Greece have been given these past years.

“Instead of creating new genealogies, many feminists have chosen to revivify ancient narratives to arm contemporary struggles. [...] These myths are after all not only the products of an androcentric society, they can also be seen to justify its most basic patriarchal assumptions. The transformation of normative stories into potent tales of resistance has sometimes been a controversial endeavor for feminists” (Zajko and Leonard, 2006, p. 2).

The myths of ancient Greece are mostly concerned with male heroes and great battles such as the Trojan war. However, female figures are always there, in the outskirts of the main events, often mentioned in relation to male gazes or as care takers of their home and children while their husbands are away fighting, being the main focus of the narrative. Now, in our present-

day society, this picture of the ancient mythical woman is put to question. Women of ancient Greece are less visible in the historical and archeological context than women from later periods, and it can be argued that as a result of women being the absent presence of the ancient world, myths become a haven of plentitude where women can behave and thrive in provocative and interesting ways (Zajko, 2008, p. 5). This is exactly what I believe that Penelope and Medea are doing in Atwood and Stridsberg's versions of their myths. Their characters' focus points and settings are very different from each other, but the same nerve is visible in both works; a female voice does want to be heard. What these female voices consists of, as well as the extent of its relevance to this thesis, are the object of my further discussion.

The Penelopiad

The Penelopiad is a novel written in 2006 by Canadian author Margaret Atwood. The work is centered around the mythical character Penelope and tells her version of her husband Odysseus' long absence, a ten years long journey home from fighting in the Trojan war. Because of this long absence, many thought Odysseus dead, and Penelope and her son Telemachus struggle to keep out suitors wanting to marry Penelope. In the end they successfully ward them off.

While Homer's *the Odyssey* focuses on the struggle Odysseus has in returning home to Penelope, *The Penelopiad* focuses on Penelope's many thoughts and reflections. They concern her marriage to Odysseus, her jealousy towards her attractive cousin Helen of Troy, the difficulty of raising their son alone, her struggles in managing the house alone, holding all the suitors out when everyone thought Odysseus was dead, and Odysseus' reasons for hanging all of her 12 maids after slaughtering the suitors. Penelope's thoughts and struggles are many, fragmented and manifolded, not concentrated on a subject, but rather an outburst of sorrows and thoughts that she has had to keep inside her for a long time. Because of this, I think *The Penelopiad* could be seen as centered around struggles that are timeless and relevant in all ages and societies.

Atwood has written *The Penelopiad* from a contemporary perspective where Penelope is in the Underworld, looking back at her time on earth. This makes the past and present float together, and in the novel, Penelope comments on great historical turning points and the differences in faith and belief between her time on earth and now, where she is not partaking in the earthly happenings any longer. *The Penelopiad* also contains a variety of different writing styles, alternating Penelope's main voice with idylls about Telemachus' birth and chorus lines about

the struggle of the 12 hanged maids. Atwood thus plays with different genres from ancient Greece in this novel, leaving the story based on its original literary world even though there are modern twists to it. Because of this, I believe *The Penelopiad* could be said to be a fragmentation of pieces that can shape and portray a universal female struggle, anchored in an adaptation of one of the world's most famous stories of male heroism.

“Now that I'm dead I know everything. This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true. I know only a few factoids that I didn't know before. Death is much too high a price to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity, needless to say” (Atwood, 2005, p. 1).

These are the first sentences of *The Penelopiad*. As we can see, it is early established that it is Penelope's thoughts and emotions that we get to follow in this novel. Compared to literature in ancient Greece, this is a somewhat new way to see things, as the inner self as a focus came with the rise of the novel as we know it today. I believe this focus on the inner thoughts and emotions are coherent with the use of a female figure and an exploration of someone striving to be stronger than society sees you. In *the Odyssey* Penelope is only seen as a passive character, but in *The Penelopiad* she is definitely more in charge – not only because the focus of the novel is on her and her thoughts and feelings, but because we see a version of the myth where Penelope is the brain behind the success of keeping out the suitors.

I would argue that with Penelope's thoughts being so fragmented, Atwood tries to raise a voice from the Underworld that could speak to a variety of women with a variety of struggles, but with the emphasis on being heard, seen and understood in terms of women's own bravery and struggles that are often overlooked. We also get an opportunity to understand how it can be equally difficult to stay strong when you need to be at home when the one you love are away fighting. Among these themes though, Penelope frequently comes back to her feelings towards her cousin Helen. She is jealous of her beauty, saying Penelope herself is much smarter but without the looks. Women are often portrayed as beautiful and seductive in literature – and Penelope feels she is neither. Penelope is brave, strong-minded and fierce – but she is still a woman, and women are not supposed to be seen like that.

With *The Penelopiad* being based on the well-known mythological tales of Odysseus, we are already provided with all the background information necessary to be able to compare the differences between how Penelope is portrayed in literature from ancient Greece and now in contemporary literature. The big difference between *the Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad* is the

point of view – and this is what it is all about; telling the story from a new angle, making it possible for the reader to see Penelope and other female characters in a new light.

Medealand

The tragedy *Medealand* by Swedish author Sara Stridsberg is dated 2009 and uses the ancient myth of Medea to shed light on women's situation in a society where they still have to struggle to gain rights against the government and a more powerful male society.

THE GODDESS

The verdict is: Medea is to be banished. She has to leave the country immediately. A police escort to the border if she does not go voluntarily. Sleeping pills and straightjacket if necessary to make the travel easier. The banished is likely to make resistance. So does the most of them.

MEDEA

What have I done?

THE GODDESS

That is confidential

MEDEA

Do I not get to know what my own crime is?

THE GODDESS

No.

(Stridsberg, 2012, p. 17).

The ancient myth of Medea concerns the story of how Medea killed her children because her former husband, Jason, married another woman, king Creon's daughter. When Jason abandoned Medea, he left her in a difficult position which led to her murdering her children and Jason's new wife for vengeance before escaping to Athens. Everything about *Medealand* points to the fact that the position Medea was left in from ancient times is still the same. In Stridsberg's version of the myth, Medea still has to struggle with the unfairness of her husband's abandonment for another woman, with securing herself and her children, and ending up with having to leave the country.

The great difference between the ancient myth of Medea and Stridsberg's *Medealand* is that the latter is set in our own present-day society, with Medea seeking help at an asylum. There

meets a nurse, a character from Euripides' tragedy, renamed "the Goddess" in *Medealand*, hinting to the overarching power that people in ancient times believed the gods had over them. In naming the [psychiatric] nurse "the Goddess", Stridsberg thus uses material from ancient Greek literature to illustrate how much power this nurse has over her – she can help Medea being released from her Medealand or leave her there and refuse her help at the asylum.

THE MOTHER:

And you have to bow. Only that. You have to bend your neck, and you have to enjoy doing so. Enjoy it and understand why you are doing it. Meanwhile you can think of something else, and when no one sees you, you can rage and be mad, but you have to learn to bow for the world when it sees you. No person can escape this, no woman. Not even you, my dear Medea (Stridsberg, 2012, p. 6).

As this line shows, the message in Stridsberg's *Medea* is pretty clear; as a woman, you have to bow your head and accept the injustice being done to you. In *Medealand*, Medea kills, drinks and dreams of freedom, but when she after a while manages to escape, she sees that there is nowhere she can go. No one wants to help her, society does not want women like her. Medea is forever stuck in her Medealand. *Medealand* as a title can in this way be understood to represent a kind of state or banishing site; the tale of Stridsberg's *Medea* can happen anywhere in the world, women like Medea are always wrong for society – any society – and these women are thus always stuck in their own Medealand, a wasteland with nowhere to seek refuge (Sem-Sandberg, 2012, p. 125, 130).

The Greek myths in contemporary literature

As shown in this thesis, *The Penelopiad* and *Medealand* are two very different examples of how Greek myths can be used in problematizing present-day issues. In the myths, Penelope is a woman waiting for her husband to come home, while Medea on the other hand, is the protagonist of her own tragedy, being the brave unconventional woman that defies the "rules" concerning what it is to be a woman. However, both of these texts address ways in which women wishes to be heard: Penelope directs the focus on how she as a clever woman struggles to see her own personal value publicly acknowledged and how women are always treated as blameworthy, and Medea is voicing struggles that society needs to take into action – that were relatively the same 2400 years ago.

In ancient Greece, tragedy often had the function of a court because the tragic heroes always were at crossroads of ambiguous ethical dilemmas. Therefore society raised questions about

itself in a dialogue between heroic figures confronting opposing dilemmas, meaning that drama played a big role in the development of society (Vernant, 1991, p. 363 – 364, 368). I think that this is a large part of the reason why we still enquire ancient myths – their themes are universal and often ambiguous, not fronting a specific truth. This is also what I believe make the ancient Greek myths so inspirational to later authors – they invite us to reflect over our own opinions and takes part of a debate, being relevant to all times, cultures and societies.

The realm of myths can help expose the roots that has led to society being shaped like it is today, and I believe this is exactly what Atwood and Stridsberg's literature is unveiling (Zajko, 2008, p. 6). Women have been the victim of misogyny and patriarchal societies through all ages, and it is only recently that this started to shift towards an understanding of equality between men and women, which is why I think the female figures of the myths are so relevant today. In the ancient Greek myths, we find women that are hidden away, portrayed as a man's belonging, but also strong, independent heroines. Just like in our present-day society, there is not one correct truth in the myths, but a wide specter of women with as wide a specter of fates, ready to be debated through new versions of their mythical material.

“For feminists, the rewriting of myths denotes participation in these historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators. When feminists envisage that struggle, the narrative from a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a 'negative' female role-model becomes a positive one” (Zajko, 2008, p. 26).

I believe that the fact that *The Penelopiad* and *Medealand* has its origins in the myths are what opens up for criticism concerning issues in our society and invites us to debate them. The basis for critique is already there as a part of our cultural understanding, and it is these underlying presumptions for knowledge that is challenged when themes from mythical stories are adapted questioned.

As I have shown, *The Penelopiad* and *Medealand* are very different both in their choice of heroines and themes. However, I believe it is important to take into consideration the fact that *The Penelopiad* and *Medealand* also are written in different genres. *The Penelopiad* is a novel containing different themes and writing styles to convey thoughts, emotions and reflections of a known heroine of ancient Greek myths. *Medealand* on the other hand, is a tragedy, a play. *Medealand* is thus meant for an audience to come witness the action on stage. What this audience will see is a woman murdering her children and being denied help for her mental

issues because she is a foreigner. I believe this will leave an entirely different mark in people than reading about Penelope's jealousy towards her cousin Helen of Troy. My point in stating this here, right at the end of the thesis, is to zoom out from the narrow field it is to look at two mythical heroines and look at their literary intention in a greater perspective: there are many different ways of exploring mythical characters, and Atwood and Stridsberg has done it in entirely different ways, while still laying emphasis on the female struggle where destiny no longer is to be blamed.

Conclusion

The point of this thesis has been to discuss how ancient myths can be adapted in modern literature with the wish to discuss and explore issues within contemporary society. Using Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and *Medealand* by Sara Stridsberg has given my text a feminist view point, showing Penelope and Medea as being two both equally different and equally strong heroines. My wish has been to show how ancient myths are still important in our society and how contemporary literature has made use of these myths in portraying struggles we have to face in our own time and culture.

I believe we have an interest in exploring the lives and minds of ancient mythical women because we experience a lack in progress concerning how women were portrayed in ancient times and how we want women to be portrayed today. We have a wish for change, and we believe the world of ancient myths can help us to gain an improvement. Although Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad* and Stridsberg's tragedy *Medealand* are very different both in form and content, they share a foundation in the Greek myths, using their female figures to exploit and problematize unfairness within a known content. The literature that has been preserved from ancient Greece has made us able to study and use these myths as a framework for stories throughout history, and our contemporary literature is no exception. In this thesis I hope to have shown how myths of ancient Greek culture are some of the places where authors seek inspiration and how such an inspiration is deployed. *The Penelopiad* and *Medealand* are just two of many literary works that has explored the myths of ancient Greece, and I believe many more will do so in the times to come. I cannot wait to read them and see which societal debates I will get to explore through the many mythical creatures and heroines from the ancient Greek treasure chest.

Translations from *Medealand*

MOREN

Og du må bøye deg. Det er bare det. Du må bøye nakken, og du må like å gjøre det. Nyte det og forstå hvorfor du gjør det. Imens kan du tenke på noe annet, og når ingen ser deg kan du rase og tvile, men du må lære deg å bøye deg for verden når den ser deg. Det kommer ikke noe meneske fra, ingen kvinne. Ikke engang du, min kjære Medea (Stridsberg, 2012, p. 6).

GUDINNEN

Dommen lyder: Medea utvises. Hun må forlate landet med umiddelbar virkning. Politieskorte til grensen hvis hun ikke drar frivillig. Sovemiddel og tvangstrøye hvis det trengs for å gjøre reisen lettere. Den utviste kommer trolig til å gjøre motstand. Det gjør de aller fleste.

MEDEA

Hva har jeg gjort?

GUDINNEN

Hemmelighetsstempet.

MEDEA

Får jeg ikke vite hva som er min egen forbrytelse?

GUDINNEN

Nei.

(Stridsberg, 2012, p. 17)

Bibliography

Atwood, M. (2006). *The Penelopiad*. Edinburgh, New York, Melbourne: Canongate

Cixou, H. (2017). The Laugh of the Medusa. In Rivkin, J. and Ryan, M. (Ed.), *Literary Theory. An anthology* (p. 940 – 954). (3. edition). Wiley Blackwell.

Haarberg, J., Selboe, T., Aarset, H.E. (2007). *Verdenslitteratur. Den vestlige tradisjonen*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Leonard, M & Zajko, V. (2006). Introduction. In Leonard, M. and Zajko, V. (Ed.), *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*. Oxford University Press.

Lothe, J., Refsum, C., Solberg, U. (2015). *Litteraturvitenskapelig leksikon* (2. edition). Oslo: Kunnskapsforlaget.

Mejer, J. & Jensen, S. S. (1985). Athen I klassisk tid. In Hertel, H. (Ed.), *Verdens litteraturhistorie* (p. 147 – 201). Oslo: Gyldendal norsk forlag.

Sem-Sandberg, S. (2012). Etterord av Steve Sem-Sandberg. In Stridsberg, S., *Medealand* (p. 123 – 131). Oslo: Aschehoug.

Stridsberg, S. (2012). *Medealand*. Oslo: Aschehoug

Vernant, J.P. (1991) Den greske tragedien. Tolkningsproblem. In Kittang, A., Linneberg, A., Melberg, A. & Skei, H.H. (Ed.), *Moderne litteraturteori. En antologi* (p. 358 – 373). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget

Zajko, V. (2008). Women and Greek Myth. In Woodard, R.D (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* (p. 387 – 406). Cambridge University Press.