

The Literary Legacy of Mythology: Contemporary Retellings and Adaptations

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Abstract

Mythology has been an ever-present source of inspirations for literature, influencing literary work across time and culture. The classical myths are a recurring theme in contemporary writing, and are increasingly the subject of reinterpretation, bringing ancient narratives into the modern world and offering new lenses on problems of memory, gender, power and social justice. This study will delve into the literary heritage of mythology by examining how modern retellings and adaptations of the traditional mythic narratives manipulate and restructure these narratives, but keep their over-arching themes intact. The paper, inspired by adaptation theory, intertextuality studies, myth criticism, and comparative literary analysis, examines some of the literature produced by authors like Madeline Miller, Margaret Atwood, Neil Gaiman and Rick Riordan. The study employs a qualitative comparative methodology to examine how these writers reconstruct mythological characters, alter the narrative structures and question the traditional understandings in order to demonstrate how their literary work enables them to incorporate the values of their own time and the issues of their ideology into the text. The results show that modern interpretations are not simply remodels and re-creations of ancient myths, but rather innovative re-appropriation that creates a dialogue between the past and the present. They enhance the voice of the marginalized characters, highlight the cultural diversity and show how myths can be adapted for the modern times. Additionally, the study contends that mythology is a vital literary tradition that allows writers to address human experiences that are common to humanity and to communicate to a changing society. The study illustrates how mythological narratives are not merely past occurrences, but are still relevant today, and what this can mean for comparative literature, adaptation studies, and myth criticism as well. It proves that the mythological stories of the past continue to be relevant in the present and that they are redefining the meaning of the mythological stories for modern readers.

Keywords: Mythology; Contemporary Literature; Literary Adaptation; Comparative Literature; Intertextuality; Myth Criticism.

Introduction

Mythology has been a resource for literary expression from the earliest civilisations, influencing literary character, story and theme throughout the ages and across many cultures. Myths, whether from the Greek/Roman, Norse, Egyptian or other cultural traditions have had a tremendous influence on literature because they provide symbolic explanations for the human condition, moral values, and the human relationship with the divine. The stories have been embellished with their own interpretations, and have been adapted and reinterpreted by writers for subsequent generations. Myths are not just dead things of the past, but they have become living literature, and the way they are used varies with social, political and cultural situations (Campbell, 2008; Eliade, 1963). As they continue to appear in modern literature, they serve as a vital means for the author to examine universal themes such as issues of identity, power, justice, and human life. In the twenty-first century, the classicist's retelling of myths has been revived in the literature, due to their continued relevance in today's issues. Today, myths are not reproduced as final, but are reinterpreted to question traditional views and to discuss issues of the day, including gender issues, identity, colonialism, trauma, environmental issues, and social justice. Readers will find these retellings to be new takes on familiar stories, while maintaining the symbolic and thematic depth that have long been the hallmarks of mythology. As a result, the modern adaptations are understood as productive conversations between the past and the present and as evidence of mythology being a living literary tradition which responds to the changing values of society (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). Literary studies are increasingly focused on adaptation as an idea because it acknowledges the importance of reinterpreting literature as a creative process, as opposed to merely reproducing it. According to Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) adaptation is a change in meaning of existing texts that is both a product and a process that occurs in different historical and cultural contexts. Mythological adaptations can be found in contemporary works that retain the characters and plot of myths but offer new interpretations that appeal to readers today. These adaptations question the concept of originality that is a full break with previous texts. Rather, they show how literary creativity can also come about in a conversation with traditions, and how ancient myths can continue to be culturally and artistically relevant. The intertextuality also explains the connection between the classical mythology and modern literature. Kristeva (1980) proposes that each literary work is embedded in a network of other works from which it derives its meaning and in which it interacts with them, but does not stand alone. Mythological retellings are a good example of this; they rely on readers knowing the earlier stories and at the same time invite them to reinterpret them. When contemporary writers repurpose the classic tales of Odysseus, Circe, Medusa, Loki, and Thor with a different spins or add them to new sets of ideologies, the familiar stories take new meanings. Intertextuality thus turns the myth into a dynamic dialogue between the ancient civilizations and the modern imagination in literature. Mythology has been studied by scholars in a variety of ways, with theories which still influence literary criticism. Campbell's (2008) monomyth theory focuses on the universal elements of story that appear across different cultures and suggests that myths are the shared experience in the psychological and spiritual lives of people. In a comparable fashion, Frye (1957) joins the ranks

of others who have defined the nature of literary genres and archetypal stories in terms of their structure, arguing that most world literature shares such a symbolic framework with the mythic traditions that have shaped it. Barthes (1972), on the other hand, sees myth as an ideology that creates a meaning within culture, which reinforces social values. These approaches collectively show how mythology can exist in a variety of ways: as a story, as a symbolic code, and as a culture. These perspectives together show how the myth can operate as a story, as a symbolic code, and as a culture—the ways that are available in the service of literary study both of its artistry and its ideologies. A major feature of modern mythological writing is the work of feminist retellings that look at the classical texts in ways that disrupt the images of women that have been imbued in them. The traditional myths often marginalize or even symbolize female characters, while favouring male characters. However, the tales of these women have been retold by modern writers like Madeline Miller and Margaret Atwood, who put the women on the margins at the heart of their stories. Miller's *Circe* (2018) is a retelling of the sorceress from Homer's *Odyssey* as an autonomous figure whose journey delves into themes of self-discovery, resilience and autonomy. Likewise, in Atwood's 2005 novel *The Penelopiad*, Penelope and her twelve maids are able to challenge the validity of the heroic account and bring to light the wrongs of history. These reinterpretations are examples of the ways in which the mythology continues to evolve, including the inclusion of new voices in classical mythology that were previously silenced. The enduring popularity of mythological adaptations extends beyond feminist reinterpretations. Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* (2017) introduces ancient Scandinavian myths to modern audiences through accessible language while preserving their cultural significance. Likewise, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series (2005–2009) reimagines Greek mythology within a contemporary setting, making classical narratives relevant to younger readers. These works demonstrate that mythological adaptations are capable of engaging diverse audiences while maintaining connections to their original sources. Their widespread popularity confirms mythology's continuing influence on contemporary literary culture and its ability to transcend historical boundaries.

Comparative literature is a suitable methodological approach for the study of the change in mythology through history and cultures. Comparative analysis is used by studies to establish continuity and innovation in literary adaptations by studying the similarities and differences between classical myths and adaptations of them in modern times. This approach shows the ways in which the authors sustain the key elements of the myth and transform themes, characters, and the narration's point of view to reflect the social issues they face in the modern world. By comparison, mythology is found to be a fluid cultural system which is constantly engaging with relations between tradition and innovation, past and present, universal experience and local identity. The present study explores the literary heritage of the mythology, looking at how the classical myths are reinterpreted in the modern context in the light of the modern cultural, social and ideological concerns. The study is based on the theories of adaptation, intertextuality, myth criticism and comparative literary analysis and examines how contemporary writers make ancient myths relevant to the modern reader. The study examines selected works of modern fiction and proposes that the mythological adaptations

have been able to maintain a classical literature's cultural heritage while at the same time redefining its meaning in the context of modern literary discourse. Finally, the study shows that myth is a continuing and changing literary tradition which, with its ability to be reinterpreted, continues to be relevant in the twenty first century.

Literature Review

Mythology has always been a crucial aspect of literary studies due to its impact on the practice of storytelling, cultural identity, and artistic expression. Primordial mythology has become mythological stories, which are now universal and can continue to provide inspiration for the present or for future literature. Modern retellings of myths show that myth is not a historical artifact, but is a changing document that can reflect shifting cultural norms and social situations. The function of mythological tales has been explored by scholars in different ways, for example, from a cultural, comparative literature, adaptational, and a mythological perspective. This review is a compilation of these theories which set a framework for literary analysis of modern retellings of mythology.

Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth is one of the most influential theories on mythology, and is one of the earliest. Campbell (2008) suggests that the myths of the various civilizations have a common theme, which he calls the "hero's journey. Campbell's theory of heroism states that all heroes experience the stages of departure, initiation and return, representing universal psychological and spiritual experiences. His theory focuses on the universal nature of myth, which he believed to resonate because of its expression of basic elements of human life. Campbell's ideas have greatly affected the field of literary criticism, as his work exemplifies ways in which contemporary tales have adopted mythological patterns. His Universalist view of the text, however, has been criticized for its lack of attention to cultural differences or history; too many later scholars have gone on to provide more context-sensitive readings.

The study of mythology was further broadened by Mircea Eliade (1963) who focused on the religious and cultural aspects of myth. He saw myths as sacred stories which provided explanations for the creation of the world, social structures, and human activity. Eliade claimed that myths offer society models of reality and were a way to remember and retain the collective memory. He's still relevant because he emphasises that the mythology form an integral part of a culture's identity, a much more important role than entertainment. The theory of Eliade has continued to hold true: in the contemporary literature, these symbolic functions are also maintained and mythic tales are reinterpreted for a secular audience.

Another popular approach to the study of mythology is to use structuralist criticism. Lévi-Strauss (1963) argued that myths are structured as binary oppositions, or two contrasting elements: order/chaos, life/death, civilization/nature, and masculinity/femininity. These structural connections can be used to discover the cognitive systems that underlie the way that cultures make sense of reality. Instead of concentrating on the single myths, Lévi-Strauss studied motifs that frequently reoccur in different cultures around the world, dubbing them "structures of the supernatural. Instead of studying individual myths, Lévi-Strauss studied motifs that appear everywhere, in cultures around the world, calling them "structures of the supernatural. These

structural features are often retained in contemporary adaptations, though they may have new meanings to deal with concerns like gender equality, political authority, cultural diversity and more. With the advent of Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, mythology is once again considered as the basis of literary imagination. Frye (1957) argues that myths are the source of common symbols, character types, and plots for literature that have persisted through history. The structure of literary creativity is mythological archetypes, according to Frye, literary genres develop from mythological archetypes. He has written so much on the subject that his work has become basic to the comparative literature field because it contains the explanation of the presence of mythological element in modern fiction. Archetypes like the hero, trickster, wise mentor and transformative journey are routinely used by the contemporary author for their own purposes in contemporary social and psychological settings. Research on literary retellings has been greatly changed by adaptation research. The earlier criticism was often appraising adaptations by their fidelity to original texts, sometimes considering them as secondary or derivative works. Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) dispute this view, maintaining that adaptation is a creative process, one in which reinterpretation takes place not imitation. They describe adaptation as an "act" and a "product" whereby pre-existing stories change meaning in other contexts, both historical and cultural, and under different ideologies. It is the theory that applies in the field of mythological literature, as few authors now write the classical myths exactly as they were written. Rather, they retell old tales in a way that reflects contemporary issues, but keeps the stories recognizable to their original sources.

Intertextuality is also an important concept to understand the mythological adaptations. According to Kristeva (1980) every text is simultaneously a "dragon" and a "remainder" of previous texts, and it is in a network of relations with the previous texts. Mythological retelling is an example of this as they draw upon knowledge of classical stories and present new versions which embody popular viewpoints of the time. Intertextuality allows writers to retain the symbolic status of myth and inspire the reader to question accepted beliefs about identity, heroism, morality, and justice.

Other influential views come from Roland Barthes (1972), who restricts the definition of myth to a process of cultural communication. Barthes does not restrict the notion of mythology to the ancient texts, but instead considers it as an ideological framework which naturalizes social beliefs and political values. Semiotic analysis shows how myths contribute to the understanding of culture as ideas that are set up by people in the past and accepted as truths. The ideological assumptions of literature are challenged in the writing of literary texts today, as they offer a glimpse into marginalized viewpoints and undermine the dominant cultural narratives. Barthes' writings thus hold great significance for the study of the reinterpretation of myth in the modern era, as an analysis of social inequality and cultural stereotypes.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized feminist reinterpretations of mythology. Classical myths often privilege male heroes while representing female characters as passive figures, temptresses, or obstacles within heroic narratives. Feminist critics argue that contemporary adaptations provide opportunities to recover silenced voices and challenge patriarchal traditions embedded within ancient literature (Rich, 1972; Zajko & Leonard, 2006). Madeline Miller's *Circe*

(2018) exemplifies this approach by transforming Homer's marginal sorceress into a complex protagonist whose story explores autonomy, resilience, motherhood, and identity. Similarly, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) reimagines Penelope's experiences and foregrounds the voices of her twelve executed maids, exposing gender inequality and questioning the heroic ideals celebrated in *The Odyssey*. These works illustrate how mythology continues to evolve through inclusive reinterpretation.

Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* (2017) represents another significant model of adaptation. Unlike feminist revisions that substantially alter narrative perspectives, Gaiman modernizes language and storytelling techniques while largely preserving traditional Norse myths. Scholars argue that such adaptations increase accessibility without sacrificing cultural authenticity, allowing new generations of readers to engage with classical narratives (Sandner, 2011). Likewise, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series introduces Greek mythology within a contemporary setting, demonstrating how mythological traditions can remain relevant to younger audiences. These works illustrate that adaptation encompasses multiple creative strategies ranging from faithful retelling to radical reinterpretation.

Comparative literature provides an essential methodological framework for analyzing these diverse adaptations. Damrosch (2003) argues that literary texts gain broader significance when studied across national, linguistic, and historical boundaries. Comparative analysis enables scholars to identify similarities and differences between ancient myths and contemporary retellings, revealing how universal themes are preserved while narrative structures and ideological perspectives evolve. Hardwick (2003) similarly emphasizes that classical reception studies demonstrate how each historical period reconstructs mythology according to its own intellectual priorities. Consequently, mythological adaptations should be understood as cultural dialogues between the past and the present rather than simple reproductions of classical texts.

Despite extensive scholarship on mythology and adaptation, several limitations remain. Much existing research concentrates on individual authors, isolated myths, or specific theoretical approaches without integrating comparative literary analysis, adaptation theory, and intertextuality into a comprehensive framework. Comparative studies examining multiple contemporary authors from different cultural contexts remain relatively limited. Furthermore, many analyses focus primarily on Greek mythology while giving less attention to other mythological traditions and their interactions within contemporary literature. This study addresses these gaps by comparatively examining selected mythological retellings to demonstrate how diverse adaptation strategies preserve mythology's literary legacy while responding to contemporary cultural concerns. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the research contributes to the growing fields of comparative literature, adaptation studies, and myth criticism by illustrating the enduring relevance of mythology in modern literary discourse.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship has established that mythology remains a vital source of literary inspiration, and numerous studies have examined mythological narratives through the lenses of archetypal

criticism, structuralism, adaptation theory, feminism, and comparative literature (Campbell, 2008; Frye, 1957; Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). While these studies have significantly enhanced the understanding of myth and its influence on literature, several important research gaps remain.

First, much of the existing literature focuses on **individual mythological texts or single authors** rather than undertaking a comprehensive comparative analysis of multiple contemporary adaptations. For example, studies frequently examine Madeline Miller's *Circe* or Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* independently, emphasizing feminist reinterpretations of Greek mythology. Comparatively fewer studies investigate how different contemporary authors employ diverse adaptation strategies across various mythological traditions, such as Greek and Norse mythology, within a unified analytical framework (Hardwick, 2003).

Second, previous research often emphasizes **adaptation theory** or **intertextuality** as separate analytical approaches. Although Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) explain adaptation as a creative process and Kristeva (1980) highlights the intertextual nature of literary production, relatively few studies integrate these theoretical perspectives with comparative literary analysis. As a result, there is limited understanding of how adaptation, intertextuality, and myth criticism collectively explain the transformation of ancient myths into contemporary literary narratives.

Third, the majority of scholarly discussions remain **Western-centric**, concentrating primarily on Greek and Roman mythology while giving comparatively less attention to the interaction of different mythological traditions in modern literature. Although works such as Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* and Rick Riordan's myth-based fiction have gained considerable academic attention, comparative studies that analyze these alongside feminist retellings and other contemporary adaptations remain limited. This creates a gap in understanding how different cultural mythologies are reimagined to address similar modern concerns, including identity, gender, cultural memory, and social justice.

Another notable gap concerns the **changing functions of mythology in contemporary society**. Traditional myth criticism often views myths as sacred narratives or archetypal structures (Eliade, 1963; Campbell, 2008). However, recent literary adaptations increasingly use mythology as a medium for political critique, gender equality, environmental awareness, and cultural diversity. Existing scholarship has not sufficiently explored how these contemporary reinterpretations transform mythology from a cultural inheritance into an active instrument for social commentary. This shift requires further investigation within the broader context of twenty-first-century literary studies.

Moreover, many previous studies emphasize the **faithfulness of adaptations to their classical sources**, whereas contemporary adaptation theory argues that creative reinterpretation is more significant than textual fidelity (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). There remains limited research examining how departures from original mythological narratives generate new meanings and encourage readers to reconsider traditional concepts of heroism, morality, and identity. Understanding these creative transformations is essential for appreciating the evolving literary legacy of mythology.

Finally, there is a shortage of interdisciplinary research that combines **myth criticism, adaptation theory, intertextuality, feminist criticism, and comparative literature** into a single analytical framework. Such an integrated approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how contemporary writers preserve mythological traditions while simultaneously reshaping them to reflect modern cultural realities.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by comparatively examining selected contemporary mythological retellings through an interdisciplinary framework. It investigates how modern authors reinterpret classical myths, reconstruct marginalized voices, and employ adaptation as a creative literary strategy. In doing so, the research contributes to the fields of comparative literature, adaptation studies, and myth criticism by demonstrating that mythology remains a dynamic and evolving literary tradition whose relevance extends far beyond its ancient origins..

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates **Adaptation Theory, Intertextuality Theory, Myth Criticism**, and **Comparative Literature**. These complementary perspectives provide a comprehensive basis for examining how contemporary authors reinterpret classical myths and transform them into meaningful narratives for modern audiences. Together, these theories explain the continuity of mythological storytelling, the creative process of literary adaptation, and the evolving cultural significance of mythology in contemporary literature.

Adaptation Theory

The primary theoretical foundation of this study is **Adaptation Theory**, as developed by Linda Hutcheon and further refined by Siobhan O'Flynn. Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) define adaptation as both a creative product and a process of reinterpretation through which existing texts acquire new meanings in different historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. Rather than viewing adaptations as inferior copies of original works, they argue that adaptations are independent artistic creations that establish a dialogue with earlier texts while responding to the expectations of contemporary audiences.

Within the context of mythology, adaptation theory explains how modern authors preserve the essential themes and symbolic structures of classical myths while reconstructing characters, narratives, and settings to address contemporary concerns. Works such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, and Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* illustrate that adaptation is a process of creative transformation rather than faithful reproduction. This theory therefore provides the principal framework for analyzing how ancient myths continue to evolve in modern literature.

Intertextuality Theory

The second theoretical perspective is **Intertextuality Theory**, introduced by Julia Kristeva (1980). According to Kristeva, every literary text exists within a network of relationships with previous texts, and meaning is produced through these textual interactions rather than through isolated authorship. Literary works continuously absorb, transform, and reinterpret earlier narratives.

Intertextuality is particularly significant in mythological adaptations because contemporary retellings depend upon readers' recognition of classical myths while simultaneously encouraging new interpretations. Modern adaptations maintain connections with ancient narratives through shared characters, symbols, themes, and plot structures, yet they also challenge traditional meanings by introducing alternative viewpoints and cultural contexts. Consequently, intertextuality provides an essential framework for understanding how mythology functions as an ongoing literary conversation between the past and the present.

Myth Criticism

This study also draws upon **Myth Criticism**, particularly the contributions of Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, and Mircea Eliade. Campbell's (2008) theory of the monomyth proposes that myths across different cultures share universal narrative patterns known as the "hero's journey." These recurring structures explain why mythological stories continue to resonate across historical periods and cultural boundaries.

Similarly, Frye (1957) argues that mythology forms the structural foundation of literature by providing archetypal characters, symbols, and narrative patterns that recur throughout literary history. His archetypal criticism demonstrates that literature continually draws upon mythological traditions to construct meaning.

Eliade (1963) complements these perspectives by emphasizing mythology's cultural and religious significance. He describes myths as sacred narratives that preserve collective memory and explain the origins of societies, institutions, and human existence. Although contemporary adaptations often present myths in secular contexts, they continue to perform similar cultural functions by exploring universal questions concerning identity, morality, justice, and human experience.

Collectively, myth criticism provides the conceptual basis for understanding mythology as a timeless literary tradition whose symbolic structures remain relevant within contemporary fiction.

Comparative Literature

The fourth component of this theoretical framework is **Comparative Literature**. Comparative literary studies examine relationships among texts across cultures, languages, historical periods, and literary traditions. Damrosch (2003) argues that literary works gain broader significance when examined beyond national and temporal boundaries, allowing scholars to identify both continuity and transformation in literary traditions.

In this research, comparative literature provides the methodological framework for analyzing selected contemporary mythological adaptations alongside their classical source texts. Through comparative analysis, the study identifies similarities and differences in characterization, themes, narrative techniques, and ideological perspectives. This approach demonstrates how authors preserve the essential elements of mythology while simultaneously reshaping them to address contemporary social, political, and cultural concerns.

Conceptual Integration

These four theoretical perspectives are interconnected and collectively support the objectives of the present study. Adaptation Theory explains the creative transformation of mythological narratives;

Intertextuality Theory illustrates the textual relationships between ancient myths and contemporary literature; Myth Criticism provides insight into the symbolic and archetypal foundations of myth; and Comparative Literature offers the analytical approach for examining similarities and differences between classical and modern texts.

By integrating these theoretical approaches, this study develops a comprehensive framework for investigating how contemporary retellings preserve the literary legacy of mythology while generating new meanings for modern readers. The framework enables a critical examination of mythology as both a historical cultural tradition and a dynamic literary form that continues to evolve in response to changing social values and cultural contexts.

Comparative Analysis

Comparative literary analysis provides an effective framework for understanding how contemporary authors reinterpret classical myths while preserving their symbolic significance. Rather than reproducing ancient narratives verbatim, modern writers reshape myths to reflect contemporary concerns such as identity, gender equality, social justice, cultural diversity, and individual agency. This section comparatively analyzes selected contemporary adaptations—Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* (2017), and Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* (2005)—to examine how classical myths are transformed through adaptation and intertextuality.

One of the most striking similarities among these works is their reliance on classical mythology as the foundation of storytelling. Each author draws upon well-established mythological traditions while reconstructing them according to contemporary literary expectations. Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn (2013) argue that adaptation is not simple imitation but "repetition without replication," meaning that adapted works retain recognizable elements of the original while producing new interpretations. The selected texts exemplify this concept by preserving mythological characters, themes, and symbols while introducing modern perspectives that resonate with contemporary readers.

Madeline Miller's *Circe* offers one of the most significant reinterpretations of Greek mythology. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe appears primarily as a powerful sorceress who delays Odysseus during his journey home. Her character serves the hero's narrative rather than possessing an independent identity. Miller fundamentally alters this perspective by making Circe the narrator of her own story. Through this narrative shift, the novel explores themes of self-discovery, isolation, motherhood, and female autonomy. Circe evolves from a marginal mythological figure into a complex protagonist who challenges patriarchal expectations. The adaptation demonstrates how mythology can be reimagined to reflect contemporary discussions of gender equality and personal agency while remaining rooted in its classical origins.

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* similarly revisits Homer's *Odyssey* but adopts a different strategy of reinterpretation. Rather than celebrating Odysseus' heroic achievements, Atwood presents Penelope's account of events from the afterlife. She also gives voice to the twelve servant girls who were executed after Odysseus returned to Ithaca. Their inclusion transforms a familiar heroic

narrative into a critique of gender inequality, social hierarchy, and historical injustice. Whereas classical mythology often presents Penelope as the ideal loyal wife, Atwood portrays her as an intelligent and reflective woman who questions the moral authority of patriarchal traditions. Consequently, the adaptation shifts attention from heroic conquest to ethical responsibility and marginalized perspectives.

Although Miller and Atwood both employ feminist reinterpretation, Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* represents a different model of adaptation. Instead of radically altering traditional Norse myths, Gaiman modernizes their language and narrative style while preserving their original plots, themes, and mythological characters. Odin remains the wise ruler, Thor continues as the powerful warrior, and Loki retains his role as the unpredictable trickster. Gaiman's principal contribution lies in making ancient myths accessible to modern readers through clear prose and engaging storytelling. This approach demonstrates that adaptation does not always require ideological revision; it may also involve cultural preservation through contemporary narrative techniques. His work highlights the continuing importance of mythology as a shared cultural heritage capable of reaching new generations.

Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* illustrates another innovative form of mythological adaptation. Unlike Gaiman, who remains close to traditional narratives, Riordan relocates Greek mythology into the modern world. The Olympian gods inhabit contemporary America, and mythological creatures coexist with present-day society. Percy Jackson, the protagonist, is a modern teenager who gradually discovers his identity as the son of Poseidon. This fusion of mythology and fantasy introduces classical traditions to younger readers while exploring universal adolescent experiences such as friendship, belonging, family relationships, and personal responsibility. Riordan demonstrates that mythology remains relevant because its central themes continue to resonate across historical periods despite changing social environments.

A comparative examination of these texts reveals significant differences in narrative perspective. Classical mythology generally privileges kings, heroes, and gods, often presenting events from male-centered viewpoints. Contemporary adaptations, however, frequently shift the narrative toward marginalized voices. Miller and Atwood place female characters at the center of stories traditionally dominated by male heroes, thereby challenging patriarchal assumptions embedded within classical literature. In contrast, Gaiman largely retains the traditional narrative perspective while modernizing style, whereas Riordan introduces a new youthful protagonist who bridges ancient mythology and contemporary popular culture. These diverse approaches demonstrate that adaptation is not governed by a single method but encompasses multiple creative possibilities.

Identity emerges as another major point of comparison. Classical myths typically define identity through lineage, heroic achievements, or divine ancestry. Contemporary literature broadens this concept by emphasizing psychological growth, emotional resilience, and personal choice. In *Circe*, identity develops through independence and self-realization rather than divine power. Penelope reconstructs her identity by reclaiming control over her own narrative and challenging historical misconceptions. Percy Jackson learns to balance his mythological heritage with the realities of

modern adolescence, while Gaiman's retellings preserve traditional heroic identities to emphasize cultural continuity. These varying portrayals illustrate how modern adaptations redefine mythology to address contemporary understandings of individual identity.

Intertextuality is another defining characteristic shared by all four texts. Kristeva (1980) argues that literary works gain meaning through their relationships with earlier texts. Each adaptation depends upon readers recognizing familiar mythological narratives while simultaneously encouraging new interpretations. Readers who know the *Odyssey*, for example, recognize how Miller and Atwood transform Homer's representation of Circe and Penelope. Likewise, Gaiman's work draws upon medieval Norse sources such as the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, while Riordan incorporates well-known Greek myths into a contemporary fantasy framework. These intertextual relationships illustrate that literary meaning evolves through continuous dialogue between past and present.

The selected works also differ in their treatment of mythology's cultural function. Classical myths originally explained natural phenomena, reinforced religious beliefs, and established moral values. Contemporary adaptations maintain symbolic significance while addressing modern social concerns. Miller examines female empowerment, Atwood critiques patriarchal injustice, Riordan promotes diversity and self-acceptance, and Gaiman emphasizes cultural preservation through accessible storytelling. Together, these adaptations demonstrate that mythology continues to serve as a flexible medium for exploring universal human experiences within changing historical contexts.

Overall, the comparative analysis demonstrates that mythology remains a dynamic and evolving literary tradition rather than a static collection of ancient stories. Although each author adopts a distinct adaptation strategy, all preserve essential mythological themes while introducing innovative perspectives that engage modern readers. Through adaptation, intertextuality, and creative reinterpretation, contemporary writers ensure that mythology continues to shape literary imagination and cultural discourse. These retellings confirm that myths possess remarkable adaptability, enabling them to address the intellectual, ethical, and cultural challenges of the twenty-first century while preserving their enduring literary legacy.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that mythology continues to play a significant role in contemporary literature by serving as a flexible and evolving narrative tradition. Rather than reproducing ancient myths in their original form, contemporary authors reinterpret classical narratives to address modern social, cultural, and ideological concerns. The comparative analysis of selected works—Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology*, and Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief*—reveals that mythology remains relevant because it provides writers with a rich literary framework through which universal human experiences can be explored from new perspectives.

One of the most important findings is that contemporary adaptations shift the focus from traditional heroic narratives to the experiences of marginalized characters. Classical myths often celebrate male heroes, divine authority, and military achievements while limiting the roles of women and other subordinate figures. Modern authors challenge these conventions by giving voice to characters who

were previously overlooked. For instance, Miller's *Circe* transforms a minor mythological figure into a complex protagonist whose journey emphasizes self-discovery, resilience, and independence. Similarly, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* reinterprets Homer's *Odyssey* by foregrounding Penelope's perspective and exposing the injustices experienced by her twelve maids. These reinterpretations support feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how mythology can be used to question patriarchal traditions and recover silenced voices (Rich, 1972; Zajko & Leonard, 2006).

The study also confirms the relevance of Adaptation Theory in understanding contemporary mythological literature. Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) argue that adaptation is a creative act of reinterpretation rather than simple imitation. The selected texts illustrate this principle by preserving essential mythological themes while introducing innovative narrative techniques, characterization, and ideological perspectives. Gaiman modernizes Norse mythology through accessible storytelling, whereas Riordan relocates Greek mythology to a contemporary setting, making ancient narratives meaningful for younger readers. These adaptations demonstrate that myths remain culturally significant because they are continually reshaped to reflect changing historical and social realities. Intertextuality further explains why mythological adaptations continue to resonate with readers. As Kristeva (1980) suggests, literary texts derive meaning through their relationships with earlier works. Each contemporary adaptation examined in this study establishes a dialogue with classical mythology while inviting readers to reconsider familiar narratives from fresh perspectives. Readers' recognition of mythological characters and events enhances their understanding of the new interpretations, illustrating that mythology functions as a living literary conversation connecting the ancient and modern worlds.

The findings additionally reinforce the arguments of Campbell (2008) and Frye (1957), who maintain that myths provide enduring archetypal structures that continue to shape literary imagination. Themes such as the hero's journey, transformation, sacrifice, identity, and moral conflict remain central to contemporary adaptations. However, modern writers redefine these archetypes by emphasizing psychological development, ethical responsibility, diversity, and social inclusion instead of solely celebrating heroic conquest. This evolution demonstrates that archetypes are not static but adaptable to changing cultural contexts.

Finally, the comparative analysis highlights mythology's dual function as both cultural heritage and creative literary resource. While classical myths preserve historical traditions and collective memory, contemporary adaptations expand their significance by addressing issues such as gender equality, identity formation, justice, and cultural diversity. Consequently, mythology remains an essential component of contemporary literary discourse because it enables authors to connect timeless human concerns with present-day realities.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the literary legacy of mythology lies in its remarkable adaptability. Contemporary retellings neither abandon nor simply repeat classical myths; instead, they reinterpret them in ways that preserve their symbolic power while making them relevant to modern audiences. Through adaptation, intertextuality, and comparative literary innovation,

mythology continues to inspire creative expression and critical reflection, ensuring its enduring place within twenty-first-century literature.

Conclusion

Mythology has remained one of the most enduring and influential foundations of literary expression, continually inspiring writers across cultures and historical periods. This study examined the literary legacy of mythology by exploring how contemporary authors reinterpret and adapt classical myths to address modern social, cultural, and ideological concerns. Through the theoretical perspectives of adaptation theory, intertextuality, myth criticism, and comparative literature, the research demonstrated that mythological narratives continue to evolve while preserving their symbolic and cultural significance.

The comparative analysis of selected works—including Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology*, and Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief*—revealed that contemporary adaptations are not simple reproductions of ancient myths. Instead, they are creative reinterpretations that reconstruct traditional characters, themes, and narrative structures to engage with present-day issues such as identity, gender equality, justice, power, cultural memory, and social inclusion. These authors preserve the universal appeal of mythology while reshaping its meanings to reflect the values and challenges of contemporary society.

The study also confirms the relevance of Adaptation Theory in explaining how literary texts generate new meanings through creative transformation rather than textual fidelity. Likewise, Intertextuality Theory demonstrates that contemporary mythological works remain connected to their classical predecessors through an ongoing dialogue between past and present. Myth criticism further illustrates that archetypal patterns continue to shape literary imagination, while comparative literature provides a broader understanding of how myths evolve across cultures, historical periods, and literary traditions.

Another significant finding is that modern mythological retellings provide opportunities to recover marginalized voices and challenge conventional interpretations of classical narratives. Feminist adaptations such as *Circe* and *The Penelopiad* illustrate how mythology can be reimaged to question patriarchal structures and offer alternative perspectives on familiar stories. Meanwhile, works such as *Norse Mythology* and *The Lightning Thief* demonstrate that mythology continues to educate, entertain, and inspire readers of different generations through innovative storytelling techniques.

Overall, this study concludes that mythology remains a dynamic and evolving literary tradition rather than a static collection of ancient stories. Its adaptability enables authors to preserve cultural heritage while simultaneously responding to contemporary intellectual, ethical, and social concerns. The enduring presence of mythology in modern literature demonstrates its continuing capacity to illuminate universal human experiences and foster meaningful dialogue across cultures and generations.

Finally, this research contributes to the fields of comparative literature, adaptation studies, and myth criticism by providing an interdisciplinary analysis of contemporary mythological retellings.

Future research may extend this study by examining adaptations from non-Western mythological traditions, exploring mythology in digital media and film, or investigating the influence of mythology on emerging forms of global literature. Such research will further demonstrate that mythology continues to be an essential and transformative force in literary studies, ensuring its relevance for future generations of writers, scholars, and readers.

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