THETIS: BEYOND MATERNAL NORMS. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF MOTHERHOOD THROUGH REPRESENTATIONS OF THETIS

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ABSTRACT: In Greek mythology, Thetis, mother of Achilles, defies the traditional archetype of the ideal mother figure, portrayed instead as a complex deity with layers of strength and resentment. Often overlooked in her role as a nurturing parent, Thetis emerges from the retellings of the *Iliad* as a powerful goddess whose wrath and vindictiveness towards Achilles' mortal lineage reflect her divine origins and agency. This article explores how Thetis' character evolves beyond maternal norms, reclaiming her place as a formidable force in both mythological narrative and maternal dynamics.

KEYWORDS: Thetis, Achilles, Greek mythology, maternal dynamics, retellings.

TETIS: MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS NORMAS MATERNAS. ENTENDIENDO EL CONCEPTO DE MATERNIDAD A TRAVÉS DE LAS REPRESENTACIONES DE TETIS

RESUMEN: En la mitología griega, Tetis, madre de Aquiles, desafía el arquetipo tradicional de la figura materna ideal, siendo retratada como una deidad compleja con capas de fuerza y resentimiento. A menudo pasada por alto en su papel de madre cariñosa, Tetis emerge de las reinterpretaciones de la *Ilíada* como una poderosa diosa cuya ira y afán de venganza hacia la estirpe mortal de Aquiles reflejan sus orígenes divinos y su agencia. Este artículo explora cómo evoluciona el personaje de Tetis más allá de las normas maternas, reclamando su lugar como una fuerza formidable tanto en la narrativa mitológica como en las dinámicas maternales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Tetis, Aquiles, mitología griega, dinámicas maternales, retellings.

INTRODUCTION

Amongst many underappreciated and overlooked female characters in myths, whose stories are often downplayed in classic texts, as they are mostly retold in reference to the stories of their male counterparts, certain characters stand out due to their potential to represent much more within the cultural frame of the point in time in which they are studied. Thetis, as a subsidiary deity, is one of such characters, whose purpose, in the story of the *Iliad* and other myths revolving around or referencing to Achilles, is limited to highlighting certain qualities of the hero, such as his mortality and foretold demise. In her earlier representations, Thetis is portrayed as a protective mother who is aware of the impending death of his son, which will come at a young age, and yet still tries to shield Achilles from his demise, as much as her relations with other gods and general power as an immortal deity would allow. She is the character who utters «the only lament speech expressed for Achilles in the *Iliad*» (Tsagalls, 2004: 9), which further proves the role

befitted to her in the poem. She is the mother that «weeps out of compassion for Achilles» (Ledbetter, 1993: 488), and perhaps a tool under Achilles' belt to guarantee his postmortem legacy. Achilles is aware of his mother's position as a powerful pawn in the political games in which he finds himself, and is not afraid of using her so, as explained below:

> Neither the substance of this request nor the motivation to deliver it stems from Thetis' own invention. Not only has Achilles himself solicited his mother's intervention but he has also devised the plan she unfolds. Achilles complains how Agamemnon has deprived him of his deserved honor (time) and Thetis embraces the cause of honor as the essence of her son's desire. Honor is also at issue on other occasions when Thetis intervenes in Achilles' fortunes. She is aware that a short life is the price to be paid for lasting glory (kleos, 9.410-16), but the crux of her fear, in accordance with Achilles' own fear, is that his cause might be so thwarted that even this short life will lack its merited respect. (Leach, 1997: 354-355)

Leach further questions the dynamics between Achilles and Thetis, as Thetis acts not only out of her own desire, but in response to a request from Achilles, who feels wronged by Agamemnon for the loss of his honor. While Thetis embraces the cause of honor as central to her son's identity, it is Achilles who devises the plan for addressing his grievances, showcasing his agency in the situation. Thetis is acutely aware that in Achilles' case, achieving lasting glory comes at the cost of a short life, yet both she and Achilles share a deep fear that if his efforts are thwarted, even his brief existence may lack the respect and honor he seeks. This fear, in Thetis' case, stems from being unable to immortalize her son's memory, and her despair in her inability to share her immortality with him. This further concludes that in contrast to Achilles' wrath, Thetis' presence provides grief as another emotion following rage, hence creating a sense of sorrow even before the prophecy becomes true. Indeed, this contrast is further proclaimed in book 16, where Patroclus and Achilles argue and, as Daniel Mendelsohn puts it, Patroclus «curses Achilles' excessive anger and denies that Thetis and Peleus are his parents, since only the rocks and sea could have produced such a pitiless nature» (1990: 296). While this comparison moves Achilles to the point of a compromise between him and his companion, it further signifies the lack of any understanding of Thetis' position as a woman forced to be a wife and a mother, and the fury that could have been born from it. Within the boundaries of the texts accepted as canon in classical literature, the potential of Thetis as not just a mother, but a source of fury that had not yet been ignited like that of Achilles, remains wasted, and entirely overlooked.

It is this buried potential that has driven certain writers into writing Thetis from a different perspective that sheds another light onto her motherhood and its origins. As it will be further explained hereafter in this article, many scholars have argued that both Homeric and non-Homeric texts fall short on appreciating Thetis' potential as a mother, a goddess and a woman. That being said, while the opportunity to explore her role might have been missed out in her earlier representations, to this day more authors have shown interest in re-imagining her character and impact in the stories traditionally revolving around her son, Achilles. This article will explore the modern representations of Thetis as a mother figure in comparison to her traditional portrayal in classical texts. By focusing on the retellings of the *Iliad,* namely *A Thousand Ships* (2019), by Natalie Haynes, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), by Pat Barker, and *The Song of Achilles* (2011), by Madeline Miller, this article hopes to highlight the shift in Thetis' representation as a mother figure from a traditionally good and yet powerless one to a well-rounded character with her own individual value.

THETIS IN CLASSICAL LITERATURE

As aforementioned, Thetis is mostly described as a lower goddess, whose power, aside from her immortality, comes from her strong connections with other strong divinities whom she protected in various cases. In the article entitled «The Wrath of Thetis», Laura M. Slatkin questions the role of Thetis in the *Iliad* in an effort to figure out why, despite having an upper hand over powerful deities and being a powerful figure, Thetis' μῆνῖς, meaning her divine wrath, is not mentioned like other female goddesses such as Demeter, and is replaced by the μῆνῖς of Achilles instead (1986: 19). According to Slatkin, the themes of goddess-mortal affairs and the antithesis between timelessness and temporality are «recapitulated with much greater emphasis in the relationship between the goddess and her son, the offspring of her union with her mortal love» (6). In this case, Thetis' unwanted union with a mortal man, Peleus, gives birth to an undesired parting between Thetis, the immortal mother, and Achilles, her ill-fated son. Therefore, the motif of the protection casted upon the mortal hero by the goddess continues to be a «central traditional feature shared by the immortal mothers (and lovers) who inherit, or are assimilated to, the mythology of the Dawn Goddess» (6). Thus, her story is not the only one where a goddess tries to save a mortal, though this is a common occurrence is most retellings of myths.

Indeed, the classical texts which have survived to this day utilize the pre-existing knowledge of the audiences in the classical era, creating allusions and reflections in order to highlight certain traits. To further exemplify this idea, according to P.J. Heslin, «[t]he story that Thetis was destined to bear a son greater than his father is important for Statius insofar as it relates to Achilles, but, by deliberately misconstructing Homer, Statius denies that Thetis herself was a figure of cosmic importance» (2005: 163). In the light of Heslin's suggestion, one can infer that Thetis continues to be undermined in accounts that have survived to this day, and which conform what is known as classical literature today. In fact, Statius eliminates the disgust Thetis feels against marrying a mortal, and therefore against Peleus, when in the *Iliad,* as Mendelsohn puts it, «[m]arriage and children are of course notoriously problematic for Thetis» (1990: 297). Thus, casting out the reason of her revulsion of Peleus erases a chunk of Thetis' character that has the potential of defining not only her role in Achilles' life, but as a goddess among other immortals as well.

Nevertheless, the undermining of Thetis as a potentially strong character with a solid background goes further in Homeric texts, as Thetis' power is never mentioned by her own account in the whole of the *Iliad,* while various male characters mention how Thetis helped other divinities in the past. Hephaestus' dialogue with Thetis in book 16 exemplifies the use of other accounts instead of Thetis' own account to describe her importance in other myths surrounding the Olympian gods. Haphaestus talks at length about how Thetis saved him after Hera threw him down from Mount Olympus. This incident, combined with another experience Thetis supposedly has with Dionysus, is described by Slatkin in the following terms:

> In Book 18, when Thetis arrives to request the new set of armor for Achilles, Hephaestus responds to the news of her presence with an account of how she had saved him after Hera had cast him out of Olympus. In Book 6, there is another instance of Thetis preserving a god from disaster which is, similarly, not related by her but in this case by Diomedes, who cites it as part of an example of how dangerous it is to fight with the gods. Diomedes describes how Lykourgos chased Dionysus with a cattle prod until Dionysus in terror leapt into the sea where he was sheltered by Thetis. (Slatkin, 1986: 7)

As the quotation suggests, Thetis has always been a favorable goddess, even amongst other deities, behaving as a protective and helpful persona. She was uninvolved with human affairs until she was forced into a marriage after being set up by Zeus, and had sort of a «divine invulnerability» (10) to him up until that point. She is accepted as an influential, if not directly powerful figure throughout the *Iliad,* and yet she is forced to play a role where her influence and efforts come up short in protecting her son. Not only does she fail in her attempts to save her son by making deals with Zeus, asking Hephaestus to make a shield and constantly standing by Achilles' side, but she is also solely reduced to a mother, erasing her identity as the nymph who was assaulted by a mortal man with the permission of stronger gods.

While Thetis is continuously used as a protective and sorrowful mother stereotype in many classical works, the variations of myths surrounding her name might have influenced certain poets to make changes to their retellings. In the *Iliad*, Thetis is ultimately described as a protector figure, involved in multiple situations in which she helps Diomedes, Hephaestus and Zeus. However, she does not extend her help to her son beyond trying to give him an advantage in the battlefield, rather than offering immortality to Achilles. According to Slatkin, Thetis «never spirits Achilles away from danger, and she never tempts him with immortality. On the contrary, it is she who states the human limits of his choice» (1986: 7). In fact, Thetis repeatedly brings forth the prophecy about Achilles, and the fact that he must die.

However, in Aeschylus' version of Thetis, she appears as a character who has been given false hope on her son's fate by Apollo, who sang at Thetis and Peleus' wedding. According to the myth, which also appears in book 24 of the *Iliad* and is reminded in an allusion by Hera to the other Olympian gods, Apollo appeared at the wedding ceremony of Peleus and Thetis, played his lyre and sang of Achilles' supposedly long and happy life, in order to rebuke Apollo, whom he calls «always untrustworthy» (24: 63). In his article «Untrustworthy Apollo and the Destiny of Achilles: *Iliad* 24.55-63», Jonathan S. Burgess argues that the surviving fragments of Aeschylus' poetry on Thetis shows that she was complaining about being tricked by Apollo, after the death of Achilles:

> A story found in Aeschylus could be based on pre-Homeric tradition; as neo-analysts have demonstrated, post-Homeric evidence can testify to pre-Homeric myth. So it is not implausible that the fragment of Aeschylus is one manifestation of a pre-Homeric tradition to which the *Iliad* 24 passage alludes. But this conclusion can be challenged from a number of perspectives. First, the passage in Homer taken by itself does not suggest that Hera is alluding to a past prophecy of Apollo. Secondly, Apollo's false prophecy is unconfirmed by any other ancient testimony, and that should make us cautious about considering it traditional. Thirdly, myth about Thetis generally seems predicated on her foreknowledge of Achilles' early death, as do several Homeric passages. The fragment of Aeschylus, with its conceit that Thetis was misled by Apollo, is incompatible with this theme in ancient myth about Thetis. Finally, there is good reason to situate the portrayal of Apollo in the fragment within the context of fifth-century Athens. (2004: 21)

While Burgess deems Aeschylus' passage on Thetis unlikely to be part of the canonical story surrounding Thetis, it still proves that there might have been many different versions of Thetis' myths, much like any other myth around the world, according to the time and place in which they were retold. Not only does the existence of such fragments prove that «Homeric poetry existed within the context of mythological traditions and constantly played off material that played outside its boundaries through

allusion and reflection» (Burgess, 2004: 21), but it also displays how even in the variations of the pre-existing myths before their written versions, Thetis was still ultimately helpless against the fate of her son, despite having been helpful to many other deities and helping them escape their demise in the past.

Another example of Thetis' traditional representation can be seen in Alcaeus' poetry, which completely disregards the sexual assault Thetis goes through and paints an entirely positive image around the union of Thetis and Peleus. In the article «Alcaeus, Thetis and Helen», Malcolm Davies argues that especially English-speaking scholars do not view Alcaeus' poetry surrounding Peleus and Thetis to be part of the canon, due to the fact that Thetis is represented as a loving wife, when in fact, she is accepted amongst the scholars as a bad wife who abandoned her son and never took care of her husband (1986: 258). While the representation of Peleus' relationship with Thetis in the poetry of Alcaeus completely disregards the rape of the goddess Thetis, according to this article, the reason why scholars are reported not to have much sympathy for Alcaeus' poetry is the fact that Thetis does not find it within herself to stay with a husband who claimed her without her consent. Even when Thetis' personal grievances and struggles are completely erased and she is turned into a woman who has birthed a child wilfully out of love and not forcefully by rape, she was not accepted as a good mother by many scholars, as she did not stay with the man who assaulted her.

THETIS IN CONTEMPORARY RETELLINGS

As a reaction to such representations and due to the repopularization of myths in contemporary retellings, many female authors in the twenty-first century have chosen to rewrite Thetis in their own versions of the *Iliad,* representing her as a strong, immortal goddess who was assaulted, forced into marriage and becoming a mother as a result. Among these retellings, there are variations to the depictions of Thetis' appearance, personality and even relationships with Achilles and those who surround him. One of these retellings is penned by Natalie Haynes, who, in her novel *A Thousand Ship*s (2011), examines the female characters in different myths and classical texts related to the Trojan War. In the Afterword, Haynes explains the sources of inspiration for this work, by giving the example of a male friend's response to her work, when she allowed him to preview it:

> He questioned the book's basic premise: that the women who survive (or don't survive) a war are equally as heroic as their menfolk. The men go and fight, and women don't, was his essential argument. Except the women do fight (not least Penthesilea and her Amazons), even if the poems heralding their great deeds have been lost. And men don't always: Achilles doesn't fight until book eighteen of the twenty-four-book Iliad. He spends the first seventeen books arguing, sulking, asking his mother for help, sulking some more, letting his friend fight in his stead, offering advice and refusing apologies. In other words, he spends almost three-quarters of the poem in a quasi-domestic setting, away from the battlefield. (2019: 344)

Haynes' friend mentioned in the Afterword embodies the conventional perspective on gender equity, often upheld by men who prioritize certain masculine traits and responsibilities over those of women. This mindset leads to doubts about the validity of women's suffering, which Haynes seeks to challenge in her writing. By amplifying the voices of various women, including the muse Calliope, whom Homer invokes to narrate his epic poem, she emphasizes the significance of recognizing female experiences in this narrative. She contrasts this with the widely accepted views on Achilles' status as a great warrior, which enjoys a general consensus:

> Yet we never question that [Achilles] is a hero. Even when he isn't fighting, his status as a warrior is never in doubt. I hope that at the end of this book, my attempt to write an epic, readers might feel that heroism is something that can reside in all of us, particularly if circumstances push it fore. (2019: 345)

In *A Thousand Ships,* Haynes clearly aims to neither devalue nor undermine the significance of men's roles in the collective narratives of the Trojan War. Instead, she emphasizes the contributions of the female counterparts in these stories, which have often been overlooked. In this regard, Haynes briefly introduces Thetis in a chapter of her own to draw attention to her resentment towards the men that had impacted her life, as well as her pain after the loss of her son. Her chapter briefly explains how she was let down by Zeus after the prophecy of her son surpassing the strength of his father came about, and Peleus was asked to claim her forcefully, no matter how much she struggled. Her resentment first begins to show in the very beginning of the chapter dedicated to her, as the narrator explains the times she has cried:

> She had first wept when Peleus, a mortal man and nowhere near the equal of a Nereid, had claimed her hand in marriage. She sobbed again when it became clear that Zeus would not save her from the degrading union. A prophecy had foretold that Thetis' son would be greater than his father and, mindful of his impervious hide, Zeus was determined that the boy be half-mortal. She had always known that her son would cause her grief. Greater than his father? What man would not be? She despised the mortal blood of her husband, loathed to think of it running through the veins of her son, where ichor should flow instead. (2019: 106-7)

Classical representations of Thetis fail to show her resentment towards the male violence she has endured, much like classical representations of many other female characters who suffer at the hands of men; that is the case of Deidameia, who is raped and impregnated by Achilles, according to *Achilleid.* Haynes' representation of Thetis focuses on the unexplored wrath of Thetis, which might very well be the reason behind her absence as a full-time wife and mother residing next to her child in Peleus' palace. Choosing not to stay where she has lost her autonomy over her body and life, and refusing to stay by the 'pious' man who agreed to rape her to appease other gods, constitutes an understandable and vindictive reaction for a modern audience, which is less biased on the rights of women as human beings. At one point in Haynes' retelling, Thetis even shows a slight resentment towards Achilles, as she foresees how he will one day meet Odysseus, to whom he will express his remorse in hindsight of the events of Troy:

> One day, Odysseus would find him in the Underworld and would ask him what death was like, and her son would reply that he would rather be a living peasant than a dead hero. And this filled her with anger and shame. He truly was mortal, her son, if could he be so stupid, so ungrateful, when she had given him so much? Sometimes the thought slid into her that she could not truly know her son's mind, because she would never die. But this only made her despise him more: the blood of his father ran through his veins more thickly than she had believed. And so she wept but her tears tasted of nothing. (2019: 107)

Thetis' resentment against Achilles is written as a projection of her hatred towards her husband, whom she blames as the cause of all her suffering surrounding her son. After all, what made Achilles die is the side of him that he inherited from his father. She resents Peleus not only for what he had done to her, but also for cursing their son, whom she has loved despite his mortality, and the fact that he was not conceived out of love. While she is still unable to change the course of fate much like in the classical texts, her resentment

towards her husband, her other acquaintances amongst the gods and goddesses, and even her son is finally vocalized. Though it may paint her as less than an ideal mother figure for being filled with anger and shame towards her dead son (107), in her brief insertion into the novel, her reaction to the mortality of her son and where it stems from seems far more realistic within the cultural frame of the twenty-first century.

Haynes is not the only female author who reclaims the voice of women in her retellings of myths, specifically the story of the Trojan War. In the novel entitled *The Silence of the Girls*, published in 2018, Pat Parker explores the female spaces during the war of men, showing how men's fights affect their female counterparts just as much. By focusing on Briseis, a character often marginalized in the Homeric tradition, Barker provides a fresh and intimate view of the emotional and psychological struggles faced by women in a male-dominated society. The analysis delves into Briseis' internal conflicts, her complex relationship with Achilles, and Thetis' suffering, all of which challenge the glorification of heroic ideals. The novel juxtaposes the conventional image of the invincible hero with a more vulnerable Achilles, who, while dealing with personal loss and maternal longing, becomes a poignant symbol of the emotional fragility that often lies hidden behind a façade of strength. Through this perspective, Barker's retelling reveals the tragic realities beneath the heroic narrative, highlighting the silence imposed on women and their often unacknowledged pain.

While Parker shies away from giving Thetis her own voice in the story, she makes sure to show not just Thetis' reaction to giving birth to a child born out of assault, but she includes how her trauma passed down to her child, Achilles, who is the product of Peleus' assault, and affects another woman down the line. In Chapter 5, Achilles initiates intercourse with Briseis as usual, since she is his slave, but behaves strangely once he senses the smell of the sea on her, which ultimately reminds him of his mother. He suckles her like a baby, and even fills his mouth with his hair in an attempt to consume more of her, as if that can make up for the lost time and affection which he is clearly portrayed to have been missing. It comes a point where Briseis describes him as «a starving baby who's sucking so desperately it loses the breast and works itself up into a towering rage» (44) during their intercourse. While this behavior seems strange and leaves the reader feeling uncomfortable, it makes more sense as the novel continues and Parker delves into Achilles' psyche in the following chapters. Achilles' memories as a baby with his mother suggest a very plausible reason for many of his less than favorable characteristic traits, such as his need for validation, and his obsession with glory. In Chapter 46, Achilles remembers what Thetis looked like when he suckled on her as a baby: «[...] every muscle in her neck tense, trying not to pull away from the sea-anemone mouth clamped to her nipple, sucking milk, sucking blood and hope and life, binding her ever more close to the land» (300). The chapter reveals that while Thetis was a mother figure that was part of his life, by giving him advice and keeping him safe to an extent, she was less than an ideal mother, being unable to provide him with the love a child needs to feel from a parent. The narrator even goes on to state this fact in the same chapter:

> Even breast-feeding her child…He imagines her— is it imagination, or memory?— every muscle in her neck tense, trying not to pull away from the little sea-anemone mouth clamped to her nipple, sucking milk, sucking blood and hope and life, binding her ever more closely to the land. Oh, it's left a mark on him, the imagined, or remembered, revulsion. He's never found much joy in sex, whether with man or woman. Physical relief, yes… But no more than that. Even Patroclus was made to pay a high price for such pleasure as he gave or got. (300)

The importance of this chapter lies in the fact that despite explaining the point in time at which Achilles first felt, as an infant, the coldness of her mother, which marked the beginning of a plethora of familial traumas for the hero, Barker's retelling chooses not to blame Thetis. She is not held responsible for the revulsion she feels, as she tries to fulfill her duties as a mother until she can return to the sea again, even though it clearly scars the child to the point of stuffing his mouth with a woman's hair covered in sea salt years later, in an attempt to feel something akin to his mother's warmth. In fact, the third person narrator in the second half of the novel cements this idea as the truth behind the defects in Achilles' personality, as accepted within this retelling of Achilles' myth:

> He is, first and foremost, the son of Peleus — the name he's known by throughout the army; his original, and always his most important, title. But that's his public self. When he's alone, and especially on those early-morning visits to the sea, he knows himself to be, inescapably, his mother's son. (300-301)

Thetis' absence as a mother figure is well justified in Barker's retelling, and the lack of certain parental values traditionally attributed to the maternal side is not held above her head as an instrument to scrutinize her as a bad mother figure, despite the havoc it clearly wreaked in Achilles' character. While Achilles is a perpetrator of the same crimes as her father, he is another blameless victim of a crime, and a product of his mother's misery. In the meanwhile, Thetis is another blameless victim in her own account, as she suffers from what is unanimously accepted in today's world as a traumatic incident, regardless of the gender of the victim. While she is not the embodiment of an ideal mother, the novel never questions why it is so. Instead, this is used to explain how her son turned out the way he did, refusing to celebrate the hero for only fitting into the masculine understanding of strength and power. By vocalizing Thetis' struggles, and her nature as a cold and somehow absent mother figure who cannot help but resent her child, Barker illustrates what many women in a similar situation to that of Thetis still have to face today, and transforms her into a relatable character by using her potential to the fullest.

While making characters relatable is usually the norm in most retellings in contemporary fiction, it is not the goal of some authors who seek to reimagine certain characters mainly for the purpose of deepening into their already established personalities, or to use them in order to shed light on another part of the myth in which they are interested. For Madeline Miller, the author of *The Song of Achilles,* (2011) her motivation to write a retelling of Greek myths extends beyond simply creating entertaining and modern interpretations of Greek myths. In all her previous works, she selects narrators who have been overlooked or lacked agency in the original myths. In addition to *The Song of Achilles*, Miller has also written another novel entitled *Circe* (2018) and a short story called «Galatea» (2013), both inspired by mythology. Her main goal in these works, similar to that in many contemporary retellings, is to give a voice to characters who have been marginalized in earlier narratives, due to the political and social contexts of their times. To achieve this, she adopts a Statiusian approach, revisiting the story long before its official beginning and exploring the events leading up to the narratives found in other myths or classical texts. As a result, her rewritings involve extensive academic research, which elevates them beyond mere fanfiction. In *The Song of Achilles,* Miller uses her narrative to explore Thetis as a mother figure and a deity serving as a tool to further the plot. Miller also refers to Thetis' rape in an attempt to amplify her backstory, although the description of this incident is far more graphic than earlier accounts. It contains realistic reactions of a woman who is getting assaulted, and refuses to sugar-coat the assault with traditions, gender roles or victim blaming:

> Peleus was a pious and obedient man and did all that the gods had instructed him to do. He waited for her to emerge from the slate-colored waves, hair black and long as a horse's tail. Then he seized her, holding on despite her violent struggles, squeezing until they were both exhausted, breathless and sand-scraped. The blood from the wounds she had given him mixed with the smears of lost maidenhead on her thighs. Her resistance mattered no longer: a deflowering was as binding as marriage vows. The gods forced her to swear that she would stay with her mortal husband for at least a year, and she served her time on earth as the duty it was, silent, unresponsive, and sullen. Now when he clasped her, she did not bother to writhe and twist in protest. Instead she lay stiff and silent, damp and chilled as an old fish. Her reluctant womb bore only a single child. The hour her sentence was finished, she ran out of the house and dove back into the sea. (2011: 18)

The depiction of Thetis' deflowering and later impregnation serves almost as a response to the twentieth-century scholars who deemed her a bad-wife, as argued by Burgess, as Miller makes a point of not skipping the brutal effects of Thetis' entrapment in a forced marriage. The gods' plan to prevent her from ever bearing a child more powerful than them is described as a sentence on her head, which she has done nothing to deserve in the first place. Later on, in the same chapter, the narrator questions how the marriage must have gone for both parties after Achilles' birth, and portrays the picture anyone familiar with the myth knows, and yet manages to pull a fresh perspective that brings forth certain questions:

> She would return only to visit the boy, never for any other reason, and never for long. The rest of the time the child was raised by tutors and nurses and overseen by Phoinix, Peleus' most trusted counselor. Did Peleus ever regret the gods' gift to him? An ordinary wife would have counted herself lucky to find a husband with Peleus' mildness, his smile-lined face. But for the sea-nymph Thetis nothing could ever eclipse the stain of his dirty, mortal mediocrity. (18)

The narrator, who is Patroclus in this novel, questions whether Peleus was ever happy in a marriage that was supposed to be a gift from the gods, and yet was persecuted in a way that has damaged his wife in ways perhaps indescribable for Thetis. In fact, this foul act ends up marring every interaction Thetis ever has with any mortal with disdain and hatred. Unlike *The Silence of the Girls,* where Pat Barker explored the effects of Thetis' resentment towards mortality on Achilles, in *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller chooses to delve into how Thetis was affected by her wrath instead. As expected by the contemporary reader, Thetis seems cold and distrustful towards the mortals in the plot, especially Patroclus, who are close to her son. The more she believes Patroclus encourages the mortal side of Achilles, the more enraged she becomes, taking it to the point of forcing Achilles to have a child with Deidameia, after separating him from Patroclus. While Patroclus seems to wonder why Thetis hates him this much, he understands that it is her maternal instincts mixed with her fears that makes her act in the ways she does, when it comes to the safety of her child:

> And she wished him to be a god. She had spoken it so simply, as if it were obvious. A god. I could not imagine him so. Gods were cold and distant, far off as the moon, nothing like his bright eyes, the warm mischief of his smiles. Her desire was ambitious. It was a difficult thing, to make even a half-god immortal. True, it had happened before, to Heracles and Orpheus and Orion. They sat in the sky now, presiding as constellations, feasting with the gods on ambrosia. But these men had been the sons of Zeus, their sinews strong with the purest ichor that flowed. Thetis was a lesser of the lesser gods, a seanymph

> only. In our stories these divinities had to work by wheedling and flattery, by favors won from stronger gods. They could not do much themselves. Except live, forever. (52)

Not perceiving the beauty of her son's mortal side as Patroclus does, Thetis wishes for what Patroclus views as the key traits of Achilles' personality to die forever, so he can exist as an entity above what has impurified her and her offspring, beyond the limits of time. Although this description may cause her to be viewed as controlling and perhaps abusive, Patroclus notes that she simply cannot understand Achilles' mortality as she has never been a mortal. This difference between Thetis and Achilles, hence, causes a rift between them, not allowing their relationship to reach a healthy place where she accepts her son as who he is, in love with a mortal man. Miller makes use of non-Homeric texts, such as *Achilleid*, to add more to the angst created by Thetis' inability to relate to her son's mortal side and her distrust against Patroclus for being a mortal:

> «WAIT!» Achilles shouted. It took him longer to reach me than it should have, I noted with detachment. The dress must be tangling his legs. He caught up to me, seized my arm. «Let go», I said. «Please, wait. Please, let me explain. I did not want to do it. My mother— » He was breathless, almost panting. I had never seen him so upset. «She led the girl to my room. She made me. I did not want to. My mother said— she said— » He was stumbling over his words. «She said that if I did as she said, she would tell you where I was». (126)

Miller's use of Achilles' story in Scyros as depicted in *Achilleid* reinforces the idea that Thetis abuses her son by projecting her hatred towards Peleus to the side of Achilles which he inherited from his father. Thetis kidnaps her son during his sleep to the island of Scyros, where she disguises him as a woman in order to prevent him from being taken to war. Instead of letting Achilles rape Deidameia, as the story goes in *Achilleid,* Miller opts to make Thetis responsible from their coupling as she falsely promises her son that if he complies and sleeps with Deidameia, she will tell Patroclus where she is hiding him. Although the limits of her hatred towards mortals comes as a shock to Achilles, Patroclus the narrator explains on many occasions what Achilles fails to see when she looks at her mother, which is her disgust with mortal men. She despises any mortal men who remind her of Achilles' own mortality, including Patroclus. Later in the following chapters, she attacks Odysseus for the very same reason:

> Her gaze went to him as a snake's to her prey, and her skin glowed. The air around Odysseus seemed to tremble slightly, as if with heat or a breeze. Diomedes, on the ground, edged away. I closed my eyes, so I would not have to see the explosion. A silence, into which at last I opened my eyes. Odysseus stood unharmed. Thetis' fists were strangling themselves white. It no longer burned to look at her. «The gray-eyed maiden has ever been kind to me», Odysseus said, almost apologetically. «She knows why I am here; she blesses and guards my purpose». It was as if I had missed a step of their conversation. I struggled now to follow. The gray-eyed maiden— goddess of war and its arts. She was said to prize cleverness above all. «Athena has no child to lose». The words grated from Thetis' throat, hung in the air. (15: 156-7)

Thetis' motifs in kidnapping Achilles to Scyros become clearer as she explains that Achilles is certainly going to die, if he goes on this journey, although the reasoning behind her actions remains the same. Thetis is portrayed as a worried mother, despite her divine qualities and detachment from certain traits of humanity, and she is willing to go at great lengths to protect his son from reaching his demise as a mortal. She even tries to immortalize him by making Deidameia have Achilles' child, in a vain attempt to hold

onto a piece of him in case her plans to protect him fail. She only comes to accept Patroclus after death, when she no longer has anything to lose, and Achilles is already dead. In the last chapter, Miller provides the perception of both sides when they think of Achilles, and starts by explaining what Thetis thought of Achilles' mortality:

> She remembers standing on a beach, hair black and long as a horse's tail. Slate-gray waves smash against rocks. Then a mortal's hands, brutal and bruising on her polished skin. The sand scraping her raw, and the tearing inside. The gods, after, tying her to him. She remembers feeling the child within her, luminous in the dark of her womb. She repeats to herself the prophecy that the three old women spoke to her: your son will be greater than his father. The other gods had recoiled to hear it. They knew what powerful sons do to their fathers— Zeus' thunderbolts still smell of singed flesh and patricide. They gave her to a mortal, trying to shackle the child's power. Dilute him with humanity, diminish him. She rests her hand on her stomach, feels him swimming within. It is her blood that will make him strong. But not strong enough. *I am a mortal!* he screams at her, his face blotchy and sodden and dull. (33: 350)

Miller's representation of Thetis' wrath is similar to other contemporary retellings penned by female authors, in which the goddess cannot contain her bitterness towards mortal men. From the very first moments of her pregnancy, she wishes for her son to be born more like her. Although it is a brief one, providing her own account allows the reader to make peace with her character and perhaps see her actions from a different perspective. While Thetis can still not relate to the mortal side of her son, she still loves him, and tries to protect him in ways that may only make sense to a goddess who has been punished by mortals before. On a bittersweet note, Patroclus gets his chance to share the beauty of Achilles' mortality with Thetis, before joining him in the afterlife:

> I conjure the boy I knew. Achilles, grinning as the figs blur in his hands. His green eyes laughing into mine. *Catch*, he says. Achilles, outlined against the sky, hanging from a branch over the river. The thick warmth of his sleepy breath against my ear. If you have to go, I will go with you. My fears forgotten in the golden harbor of his arms. The memories come, and come. She listens, staring into the grain of the stone. We are all there, goddess and mortal and the boy who was both. (366)

In the end, the novel ends on a rather positive tone, as Thetis finally understands that her and Patroclus' shared love for Achilles transcends time. Instead of seeing the mortality of Patroclus, she chooses to see the immortality of his love for her son, and unites them in the afterlife by engraving Patroclus' name on his grave, which allows him to cross into the other world. This addition to the reimagined story is in alignment with her traditional representation as a protector, and someone whom people seek for help when they are stuck in grave danger. In this case, Patroclus was facing an eternity stuck in between two worlds, since his grave did not have his name on it, and did not want to fade away and become nothing when his ashes were buried with those of Achilles. In death, Thetis finally approves of her son's mortality and her mortal lover, who ultimately gives her more power over the story of Achilles than the classical texts do.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Thetis has always been a character with great potential to have a more significant impact on the myths surrounding her, particularly in the story of the *Iliad*. Traditionally, representations of Thetis in classical literature tend to confine her to the role of a sorrowful mother, limiting her depth and complexity. This stereotype often

reduces her to a passive figure, overshadowed by the male heroes and their exploits. However, many recent retellings challenge this narrow portrayal, allowing Thetis to emerge as a multifaceted character. These contemporary interpretations explore her motivations and emotions, showcasing her as an imperfect yet deeply relatable mother figure who grapples with her identity and her relationships with powerful men.

Depending on the narrative lens, Thetis can be depicted in various ways— sometimes as a disdainful mother who struggles with her son Achilles' fate, and at other times, as an innocent victim of cruel circumstances. This flexibility in her characterization enables contemporary writers to delve deeper into the complexities of motherhood, immortality, and trauma. Instead of rigidly adhering to traditional archetypes, these retellings examine Thetis's struggles and strengths, emphasizing the nuances of her experiences. By portraying her as a character shaped by her own traumas and desires, writers invite readers to engage with her story on a more profound level, ultimately challenging the norms of maternal representation. Overall, Thetis symbolizes the violence and struggles that women face at the hands of men, regardless of their power. While she possesses divine strength, her experiences reflect the broader societal issues of gender dynamics and oppression. This theme of women's suffering— rooted in their relationships with men— remains relevant even today, mirroring the historical treatment of female figures in mythology. Unlike the evolving representations of Thetis in contemporary literature, the core challenges faced by women, as depicted through her character, have tragically persisted over the centuries. Through her story, contemporary writers not only reclaim Thetis's narrative but also shed light on the ongoing struggles women endure, making her a timeless figure in the discussion of gender and power.

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