



# Reception of Mythology in Modern Popular Culture

Mythology Crash Course

# Overview

- Mythology Around Us: Art and Culture
- Understanding Reception Studies
- Different Types of Reception
- Case Studies:
  - *Hercules* (Film)
  - *Circe, The Silence of the Girls* and *A Thousand Ships* (Books)
  - *Hadestown* (Musical Theatre)
- Understanding the Use of Mythology in the Modern World

# Key Words

- **(Classical) Reception Studies:** the study of how the classical world has been received and represented since antiquity
- **Popular Culture (Pop Culture):** popular cultural and media products that have mass appeal within a society, including material across music, literature, TV, film, art and social media



# Power of Myths

- Myths are more than just stories
- Often, myths have purpose – not just in the ancient world
- Throughout history, mythology has been **used to engage with the past**
- We **use the past** as a tool to represent our own society and reflect our own societal views
- Why? Sometimes myths can have **functions** (e.g. Political use)
- Myths tell **universal and timeless** stories that **resonate throughout cultures**

# Mythology Around Us

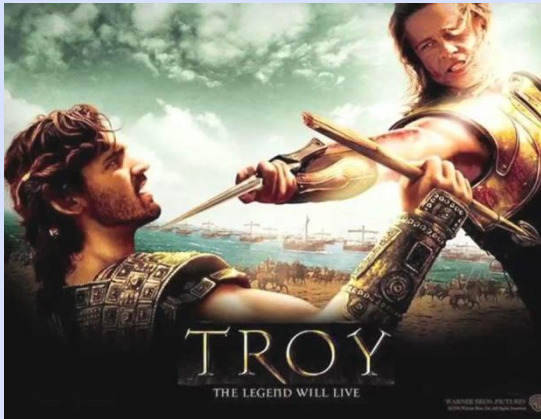


**PANDÖRA**



**Hermes**  
the parcel people

# Mythology Around Us (TV & Film)



Troy

2004

Trojan War/Iliad



Hercules

1997

Heracles/Hercules



Wonder Woman

2017

Amazons



Moulin Rouge!

2001

Orpheus & Eurydice

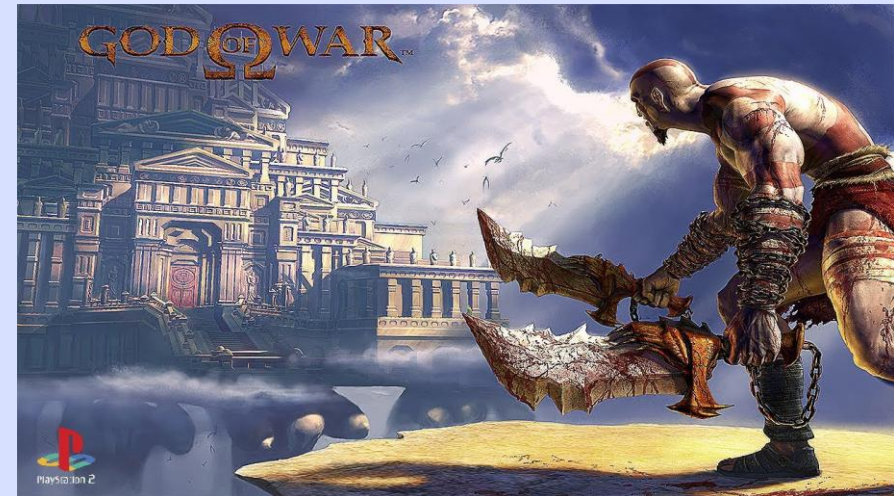


# Mythology Around Us (Video Games)



Assassin's Creed Odyssey

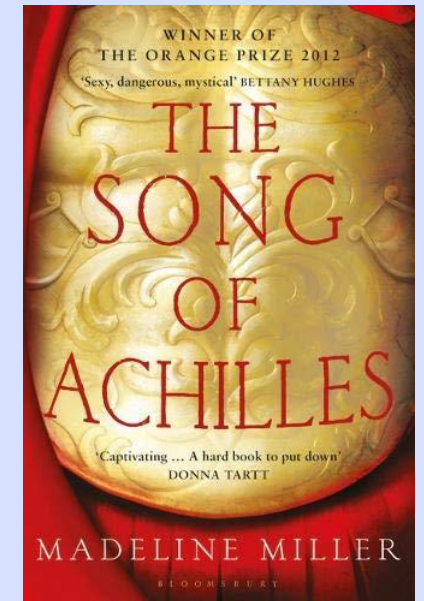
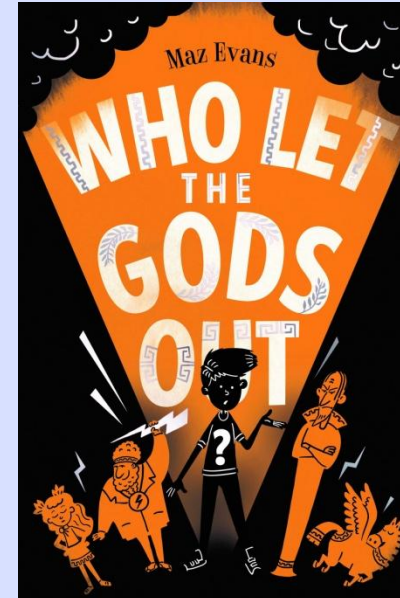
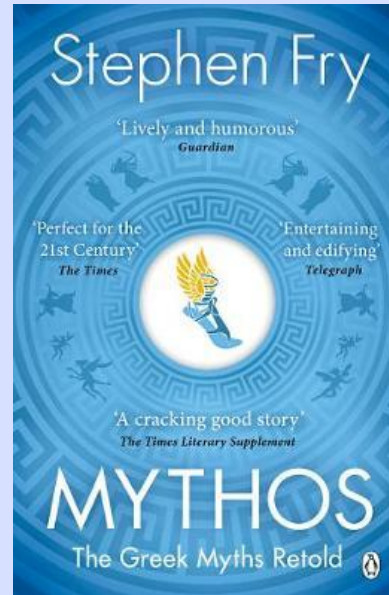
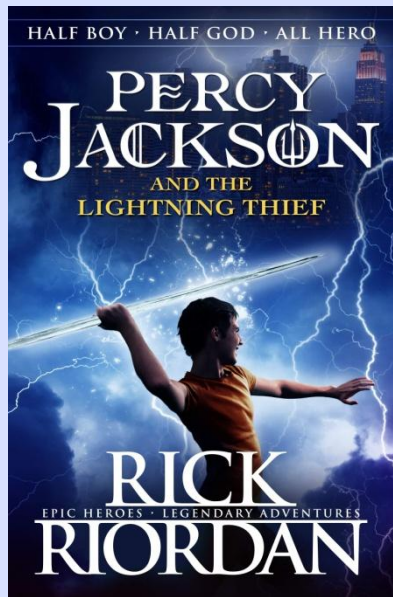
Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta



God of War

Ares and Sparta

# Mythology Around Us (Literature)







# Reception Studies

- What do we mean by **reception and reception studies**?
- **Reception Studies** is the study of how the ancient word has been **received** since antiquity
- By received, we mean **used, portrayed or engaged with**
- Includes art, literature, music, film, politics, architecture and more



# Reception Studies

- How mythology – or indeed any part of the ancient world – is **brought forward** from the ancient world and into our own
- How modern society **engages with** and **portrays the ancient world**
- How later societies **understand** the ancient world
- How we **use** the ancient world ourselves
- **Why** we use the ancient world



# Different Types of Reception

- 'The ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented'
- Can include direct translations or adaptations, no matter how loose the adaptation may be
- Does not have to be explicit – oftentimes, we may not even overtly recognise something is influenced or engaging with mythology



# Different Types of Reception

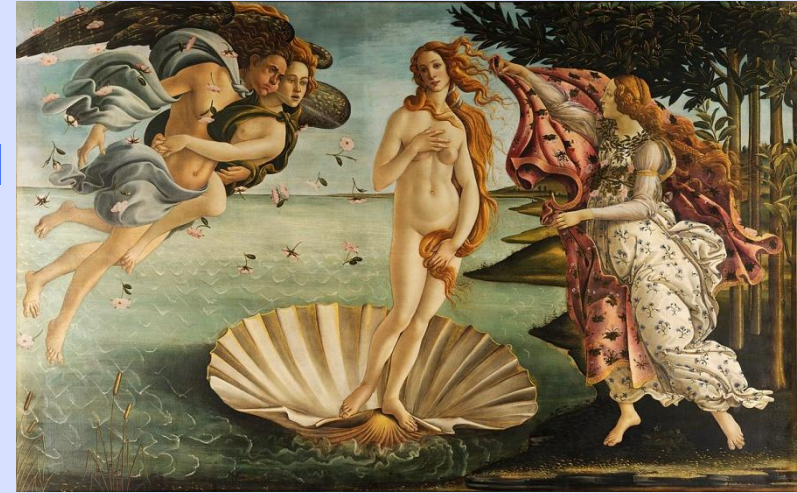
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# Is Mythology Fixed?

- When we are looking at representations of mythology throughout history – throughout antiquity right up until modern day – we should remember that it is **always changing**
- Mythology is a huge mixture of different stories and representations throughout history
- We can view mythology as **active** rather than **dead**
- Later representations of mythology can be viewed as **adding to the wider mythology**



# Hercules (1997 Disney Film)

- Loosely based on the mythological hero Heracles, often known by his Roman name, Hercules
- Film tells the story of Hercules, the son of Zeus and Hera, who was snatched as a baby by Hades and forced to live amongst mortals
- As a teenager, Hercules is living as an outcast and needs to prove himself worthy and become a 'true hero' in order to get back to Olympus



# Hercules (1997 Disney Film)

- Significant differences to the accounts of Heracles/Hercules we find in Antiquity
- In the movie, Hercules is the son of Zeus and Hera instead of being the son of Zeus and the mortal Alcemene
- Especially omits the account portrayed in Euripides' *Heracles*, where Heracles is set into a fit of madness and kills his wife Megara and their children





# Hercules (1997 Disney Film)

'Illegitimacy would be difficult subject matter for a Disney movie. So we thought of different ways he could be half-man and half-god. We moved more toward making Hades the villain instead of Hera. The Underworld seemed like such a fascinating, dark images; the contrast with Olympus seemed to have all kinds of visual possibilities.'





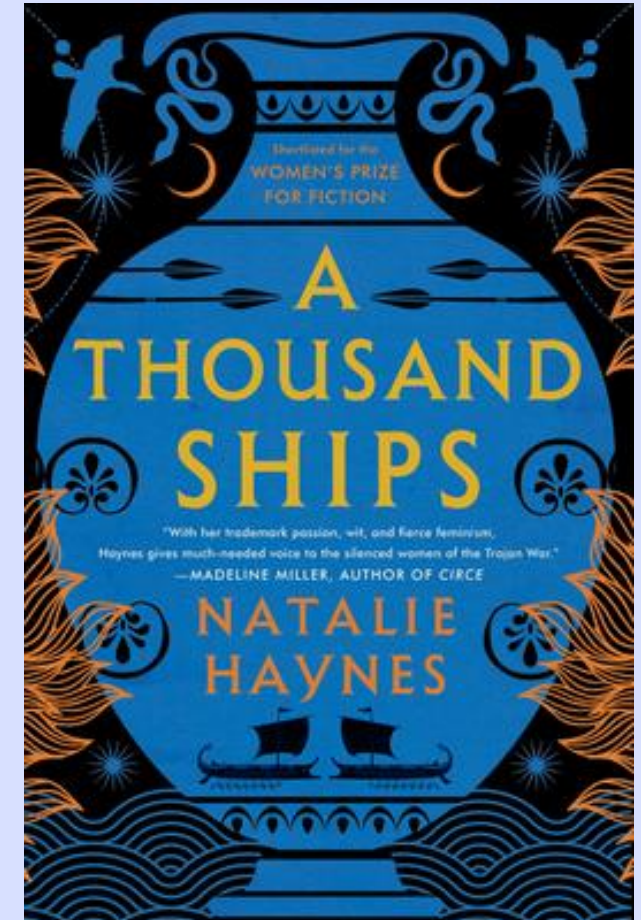
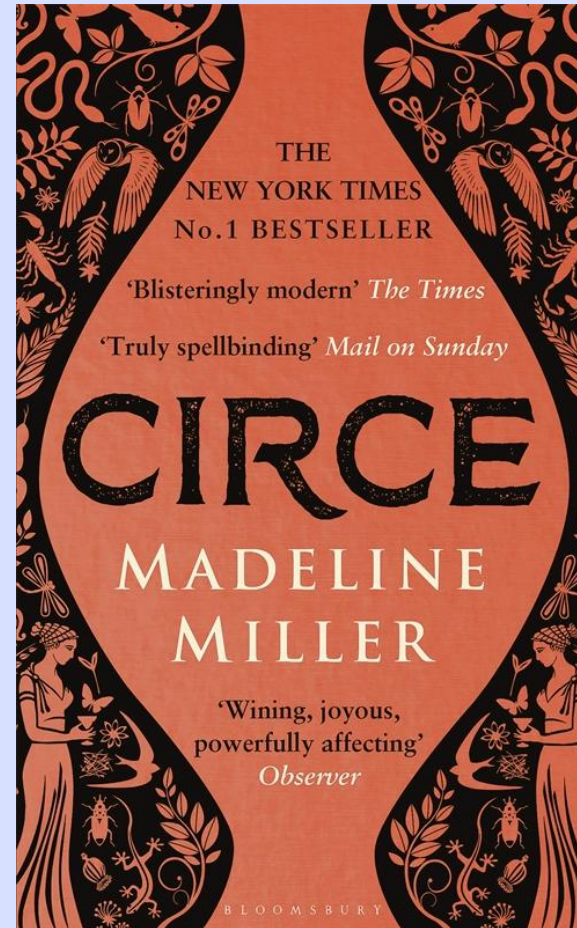
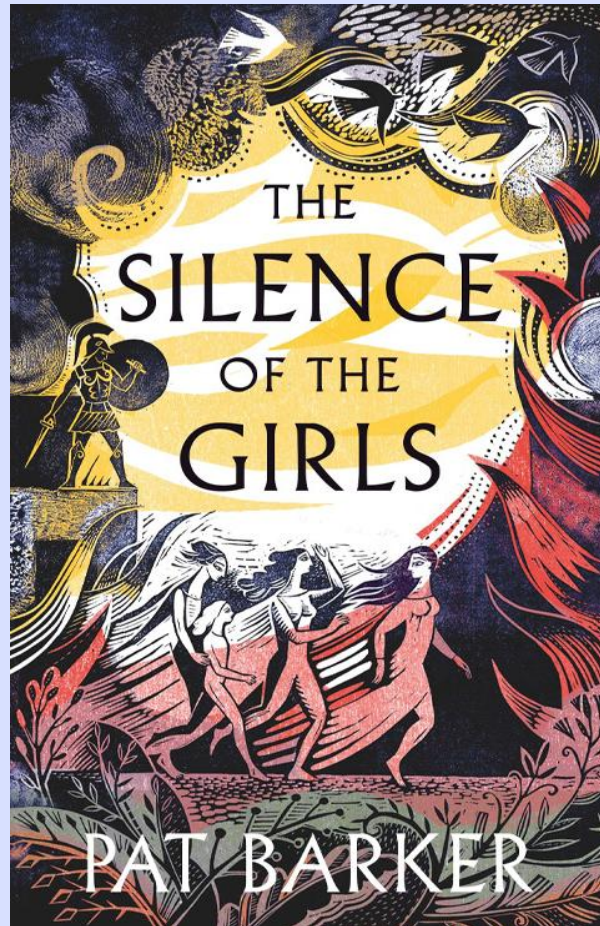
# Retellings: Minor Characters

A number of recent books have engaged with the idea of 'retelling' ancient myths and giving minor characters a voice:

- Pat Barker, *The Silence of the Girls*
- Madeline Miller, *Circe*
- Natalie Hynes, *A Thousand Ships*

This is another example of how modern culture engages with the ancient world







# Retellings: Minor Characters

These retellings directly **engage** with ancient texts and mythology by **challenging** how those stories have traditionally been told

This shows how modern representations of mythology is about **entering into a dialogue** with the ancient world

- How our **understanding** of an ancient text is **impacted** by our own society
- When one myth is used again and again in the modern world, or when myths are used in a **similar way**, we need to ask **WHY**
- Exploring silenced voices of marginalised groups within society



# Retellings: Minor Characters

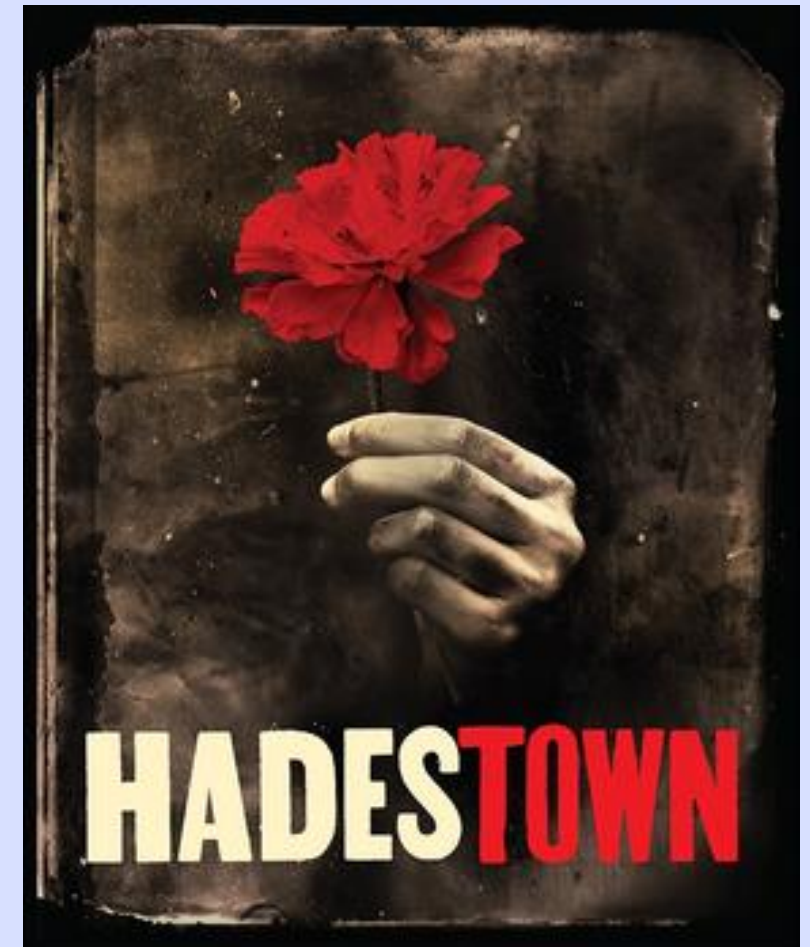
‘You’ve got these two absolutely brilliant characters going head to head with each other, Achilles and Agamemnon. I think that, throughout history, that is what has pulled people back to *The Iliad*. But the people going back to this story have been men and what drew them back wasn’t what drew me back. For me **it was the silence of the girls**, the fact that this girl is being quarrelled over by these two great, distinguished, eloquent men and **yet the girl herself says nothing**. She has no opinion, she has no power, she has no voice. **It was the urge to fill that vacuum that made me go back and start retelling the myth yet again.**’

Pat Barker



# Hadestown (Musical)

- Tells a version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice
- Orpheus' journey to the Underworld to rescue his love, Eurydice
- Hermes is the musical's narrator
- Musical has a unique setting and design: dystopian version of early 20<sup>th</sup> century America; inspired by jazz and folk music



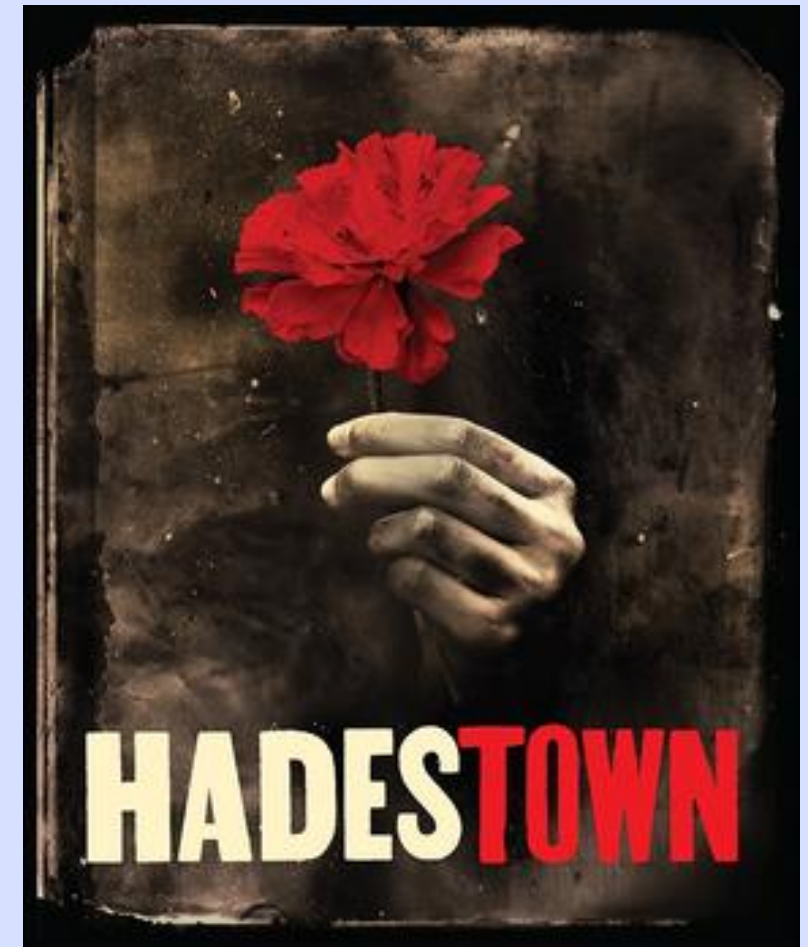
# Hadestown (Musical)

[HERMES]

It's an old tale from way back when  
And we're gonna sing it again and again  
We're gonna sing, we're gonna sing

[ALL]

It's a love song  
It's a tale of a love from long again  
It's a sad song  
We keep singing even so  
It's an old song  
It's an old tale from way back when  
And we're gonna sing it again and again





# Hadestown (Musical)

'I think the great thing about Greek tragedy is they exist to teach us about ourselves' – Reeve Carney, Orpheus

Myth as a **two-way mirror**:

In learning about the past, we learn about ourselves. And in engaging with the past, we constantly change our relationship with it.

In creating new cultural material, we also **add** to mythology.

Mythology is one of the most **powerful tools** we can use to understand our history and understand our world.

