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## "I Am Not Certain I Will / Keep This Word"

Victoria Parker

Rhode Island College, [vparker\\_3022@email.ric.edu](mailto:vparker_3022@email.ric.edu)

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“I AM NOT CERTAIN I WILL / KEEP THIS WORD”:  
LOUISE GLÜCK’S REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING

By

Victoria Parker

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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## Introduction

Contemporary American poet Louise Glück has published twelve books of poetry spanning almost fifty years from *Firstborn* in 1968 to *Faithful and Virtuous Night* in 2014, as well as one critically-acclaimed book of essays. Her work has received prestigious awards such as the Wallace Stevens Award (2008), the Pulitzer Prize (2003), and the Bollingen Prize (2001), and she was appointed the twelfth United States Poet Laureate in 2003. Glück's poetry is often anthologized, as in the *Vintage Contemporary American Book of Poetry* and *No More Masks: An Anthology of Twentieth Century American Women Poets*, and taught in college classrooms. Despite her prolificacy and critical success, literary scholarship on Glück's work has been relatively slim. The scholarly attention her work has received repeatedly focuses on the style of her lyric poems, which Elizabeth Dodd has dubbed "personal classicism," as well as the evolution of her poetic structures from petite, isolated poems to book-length sequences. Another primary focus of scholars is the personal philosophy that pervades Glück's work—best encapsulated in the poem title "Dedication to Hunger"—which has led critics to interpret her repeated imagery of anorexia, hunger, and self-denial as metaphors for artistic creativity. Within this already sparse tradition of criticism, there is an even smaller selection of feminist scholarship on Glück. As a result, portions of her oeuvre have been ignored or only occasionally considered.

Feminist scholars have brought attention to certain motifs—such as hunger, paralysis, silence, anger, and distrust—that recur throughout Glück's depictions of white female experiences. These experiences primarily center around gender roles, family dynamics, artistic creativity, and heterosexual love, which Glück often relies on myth to portray. Although Glück persistently focuses on the complicated intersections among womanhood, power relations, and

desire—central concerns of feminist analysis—she has received little recognition by critics as a “feminist poet.” Her exclusion from the ranks of celebrated feminist contemporary women poets like Adrienne Rich could be in part because Glück herself has rejected this label in interviews and in her personal essays, disavowing a feminist agenda, as when she states in her essay “Education of the Poet”:

I am puzzled, not emotionally but logically, by the contemporary determination of women to write as women. . .if there are such differences [between the sexes], it seems to me reasonable to suppose that literature reveals them. . .more interestingly, more subtly, in the absence of intention. (7)

Some feminist critics have nonetheless read her poems about female experiences as consciously critiquing patriarchy. E. Laurie George and Diane S. Bonds, for example, find subversion of androcentric language in the poems of *Descending Figure* and *House on Marshlands*, respectively, while Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts view Glück’s revision of the mythological figure Penelope in *Meadowlands* as participating in the broader interest of women poets and feminist scholars in reinterpreting Homer.

A number of other feminist critics are ambivalent about the feminist elements in Glück’s poetry, however, or instead argue that Glück’s poetry is nonfeminist.<sup>1</sup> While these critics often acknowledge Glück’s portrayal of the harmful and stifling effects of gender roles on women, they tend to see her poems as not subversive “enough.” For example, Waltraud Mitgutsch argues that Glück demonstrates a “female self consciousness rather than a feminist consciousness,” since her views are “still dichotomized into male versus female poles” (131). Helen Farish further distances Glück from a feminist poetic tradition when she claims that Glück “perpetuates the tradition of an adversarial relationship to the body” by maintaining the gendered divide

between mind and body (217). Similarly, Lynn Keller finds Glück's "self-loathing" troubling, suggesting that her poetry "raises crucial, disturbing issues about women's complicity in their own oppression," although Keller nonetheless insists that these disturbing elements should not be a reason for feminist readers to turn away from Glück's work (par. 20). Interestingly, the feminist critics who have interpreted Glück's poetry as nonfeminist for what they perceive as her adherence to traditionally Western hierarchal divides between a "female" body and "male" mind—even when they recognize other subversive elements in her poems—have failed to focus on her preoccupation with using and revising myth. I believe that it is crucial to acknowledge the role myth revision plays in Glück's poetry, considering that poems employing biblical, classical, historical, and fairy tale myths make up a significant portion of Glück's oeuvre. Moreover, three of her books—*Meadowlands*, *Vita Nova*, and *Averno*—contain lyric sequences built around the classical Odysseus, Orpheus, and Persephone myths, respectively.

On the whole, there has been a dearth of feminist scholarly attention paid to myth in Glück's poetry. Only a handful of articles focus exclusively on her use of myth in specific volumes of poetry, like Brian Henry's "The Odyssey Revisited" and Linda Gregerson's "The Sower Against Gardens." In his book *The Poetry of Louise Glück: A Thematic Introduction*, Daniel Morris addresses this gap in the criticism by exploring Glück's repeated use of myth across her oeuvre. Nonetheless, it is important to note that despite his comprehensive investigation of Glück's myth poems, Morris analyzes her poetry from a number of different theoretical perspectives besides feminism and so, for the most part, dismisses the possibility of her myth revision as a feminist undertaking. Although a few feminist critics do interpret some of Glück's individual myth poems, they do not make a larger argument for her use of myth as a feminist focus. In fact, the feminist critics who imply that Glück's poetry is nonfeminist, such as

Farish, Mitgutsch, and Keller, have not devoted any attention to her myth poems in their analyses.

Louise Glück's interest in myth is particularly important in light of Adrienne Rich's 1972 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." In this influential essay, Rich argues that an element or byproduct of our awakening (feminist) consciousness is re-vision, which she defines as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). Re-vision is a particularly necessary task for female writers and poets because women's writing and self-identity have historically been restricted by a canonical body of images and myths about women dominated by male-written versions—portrayals which "negate everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream...not herself" (21). Alicia Ostriker extends this idea in her 1982 article "Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking." According to Ostriker, "revisionist mythmaking," or the activity of reclaiming, reappropriating, and correcting myths, allows women poets to redefine portrayals of femaleness in myth and, by extension, to "correct" the culture from which the myth originated. Hence, the poet "simultaneously deconstructs a prior myth or story and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excludes, herself" (72).<sup>2</sup>

Given that revisionist mythmaking is widely regarded as a feminist approach for women poets, why has Glück's preoccupation with revising myth not been acknowledged by more feminist critics? It seems to me that this disagreement among feminist critics about the extent to which Glück's poetry is or is not feminist, as well as their lack of attention toward Glück's feminist use of myth, results in part from their operating under varying definitions of and assumptions about what comprises "feminist poetry." Considering that feminist theory as a whole is not unified by one central, universally-accepted interpretation of feminism—to the extent that

some theorists have called for a plural understanding of the theory as “feminisms”<sup>3</sup>—it is unsurprising that feminist literary critics have similar difficulty agreeing on one definition of “feminist poetry.” Michèle Barrett’s observation that “problems still remain in (i) the difficulty of arriving at a consensus among feminists as to what constitutes ‘feminist’ art and (ii) the fact that the use of women’s lives, histories and experience does not necessarily ensure the coherent, feminist, reading...that the artist appears to desire” (206) applies to the diverse viewpoints of critics on what constitutes “feminist poetry.”

The debate about whether a women’s writing tradition exists and what qualities characterize feminist poetry was particularly lively from the 1970s until the early 1990s. During this period, some critics adopted Adrienne Rich’s “female aesthetic” approach as a model for “feminist poetry.” According to Claire Keyes, “at the core of Rich’s aesthetic is an awareness of power and its constructs in the patriarchy”; additional elements of Rich’s aesthetic include a focus on female imagery, an emphasis on woman’s silence, and the desire to create an exclusively gynocentric poetic tradition in which women write to, for, and about women (1-10). Yet other feminist critics have rejected this “essentialist” approach, such as Jan Montefiore, who authored an influential text in this debate: the 1987 book *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, and Identity in Women’s Writing*. In an interview about the book’s second edition, Montefiore argues that the concept of feminist poetry as focusing on women’s shared experience, acting as a “poetry of cultural critique, very much committed to accessible language and form,” is flawed (99). First, Montefiore points out that the emphasis on shared experience ignores the fact that women’s experiences are not universal (and so risks overlooking differences in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class). Second, she argues that this definition of feminist poetry

fails to take into account how women poets sometimes rely upon male rhetorical traditions in order to express themselves and perform their critiques of patriarchal society (99).

This debate has more or less subsided since the late 1980s, although the issue was never resolved. Even though scholars continue to disagree on what kind of poetry can be labeled as feminist, they do not acknowledge the disagreement as such. Those who do provide a definition do not defend it at length or offer alternative possibilities. Accordingly, the definitions subsequently offered have been given in increasingly vague or unnecessarily restrictive terms, if they have been provided at all. For instance, in her 1991 book *Masks Outrageous and Austere* about what she dubs the nightingale tradition, or the group of 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century women writers who she perceives as unified by a specific set of thematic concerns and formal approaches, Cheryl Walker briefly notes that “As not all poets capable of feminist insight belong to the nightingale tradition, neither is the tradition itself necessarily feminist, if *by feminist we mean the translation of isolated insights into a coherent sociopolitical philosophy*” (12-13, italics mine). In contrast, in “Women and the Poetic Tradition: The Oppressor’s Language” from the 2002 edition of *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*, Montefiore sees feminist poetry as “always political and highly-charged, often informal in structure or even close to prose, [as] feminist poets work to deconstruct the oppressor’s language, not only with anger, but [also]...with humor” (220).

Perhaps this unresolved issue of how to define feminist poetry accounts for why many contemporary critics, in their feminist readings of Glück’s poetry, have avoided labeling her work altogether—even when they demonstrate that her work does contain subversive, feminist elements. Meanwhile, feminist critics who have categorized Glück’s poetry as either feminist or nonfeminist seem to take for granted the meaning of the term “feminist poetry,” assuming that

readers already know what feminist poetry is, or rather what that critic considers feminist poetry to be. For instance, Farish frames her analysis of the poetry of Louise Glück and Sharon Olds within Adrienne Rich's concept of "thinking through the body," by which women poets should offer "outside of phallogocentric discourse...[an] alternative constitution of the feminine" (224). Using Rich's framework of gendered body-mind reconciliation, Farish perceives Glück's poetry as problematically solidifying the old hierarchies of body and mind (230) and therefore implicitly reads her poetry as nonfeminist. In contrast, George works with a broader concept of feminist poetry through which she identifies Glück with Rich because they both perform "a necessary critique of civilization" (236). Specifically, George perceives Glück's use of "art to reflect precisely how traditional Western thought has reduced us to playing inhuman roles of thrust and ache" (246) as making her poetry "radically feminist" (236).

George's more inclusive definition of feminist poetry strikes me as most useful, and I incorporate it in my own definition of feminist poetry. I have chosen to offer my own definition because I seek to make clear not only that Glück's poetry benefits from feminist analysis but also that her work is, in fact, feminist. Hence, for my purposes, exclusively performing a feminist reading of Glück's work is inadequate. Many of the feminist critics who ignore or reject reading Glück's poetry as feminist do not go into depth about what they see as constituting a feminist poetic tradition and yet exclude her work from that tradition. I wish to respond to these critics' dismissals of Glück's work as nonfeminist as well as make clear the grounds on which I consider her work "feminist" in the first place. Moreover, I opt for a capacious concept of feminist poetry because I am wary of interpreting women's poetry through definitions that I perceive as too restrictive. I believe that these narrow definitions can lead to readings that exclude poetry like Glück's from consideration as feminist poetry on the basis that the poems do not accomplish

certain feminist tasks—whether that is something like subverting traditionally gendered imagery or employing a gynocentric language—even when they portray subject matter in a feminist manner in other ways, such as through revisionist mythmaking. Furthermore, it seems to me that a woman poet’s exclusion from the feminist poetic tradition leads to her work being read and taught less in feminist circles, causing her poetry to be overlooked by an audience that might otherwise be interested in the feminist themes and textual strategies present in her work.

However, because I acknowledge that not all women’s poetry is inherently feminist poetry, I will be using “feminist poetry” throughout my discussion of Glück’s work to mean poetry that does not only arise from or portray women’s experience(s), but that also—through its employment (and subversion of) form, language, imagery, metaphor, and/or tone—critiques how patriarchal gender roles and power relations contribute to women’s objectification, silencing, powerlessness, and/or risk of violence, all of which can result in female struggles with identity. Ultimately, I hope that my definition of feminist poetry can serve as a model for or step toward a more inclusive, widely-accepted definition that can prove applicable to poets other than Louise Glück, thus serving to open up more women poets’ works to positive feminist interpretations.

By interpreting Glück’s work through the framework provided by this definition of feminist poetry, I aim to reveal how Glück’s use of revisionist mythmaking qualifies much of her poetry as “feminist poetry.” I offer close readings of myth poems published over the course of Glück’s career, including “Mythic Fragment,” “Circe’s Power,” “Orfeo,” and “Persephone the Wanderer,” from her collection *Poems 1962—2012*. Because I am addressing a range of poems selected from Glück’s twelve books, I use a chronological approach and divide my thesis into four chapters. In each chapter I focus on one book, analyzing a selection of poems that to me best represent her mythmaking tendency. In adopting a chronological approach, I am not arguing that

Glück's poetry gets "better" over the course of her career nor that she grows more or less feminist over time. Instead, I aim to demonstrate what I perceive to be a common thread woven throughout her career: her persistent interest in revising myth. Hence, the first chapter focuses on her relatively early myth poems, primarily from her fourth book *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985). The second chapter looks at her first myth lyric sequences in her seventh book *Meadowlands* (1996). The third chapter analyzes poems from her eighth book *Vita Nova* (1999), and the fourth chapter focuses on her tenth book *Averno* (2006), her most recent myth revision undertaking.

Overall, this twenty-year period contains Glück's largest number of myth persona poems as well as encompasses the three book-length lyric sequences that are her most ambitious revisionist mythmaking projects. Throughout these sections, I expand upon Morris' analyses of Glück's preoccupation with various types of myth and Murnaghan and Roberts' attention to the female-centered retelling of Homeric myth in *Meadowlands*, incorporating Ostriker's and Rich's concepts of revision (feminist re-vision and revisionist mythmaking) in the process. Thus, by connecting her myth poetry to a larger feminist poetic tradition, I intend to recuperate Glück's work from being written off as "nonfeminist." In so doing, I hope to allow for more extensive exploration of Louise Glück's poetry—particularly her revision of myth—through a feminist lens in the future, as well as a more complex understanding of her achievements and influential position as an esteemed, contemporary American poet.

## Chapter 1

## Daphne and Love as Imprisonment

Louise Glück's first four books of poetry—*Firstborn* (1968), *The House on Marshland* (1975), *Descending Figure* (1980), and *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985)—reveal her fascination with alluding to a variety of myths and revising mythological figures as persona speakers for many of her poems. For example, in one poem from *Firstborn*, “The Cell,” Glück takes up the voice of the historical figure Jeanne des Anges, a woman from 17<sup>th</sup> century England and leader of a convent whose claims of demonic possession by the priest Urbain Grandier led to his witch trial and execution. Glück considers the complicated psychology of this woman through the first-person point of view: a paranoid Jeanne recounts how delusions were hidden “under my habits / For my self was empty. . .But HE did / It, yes” (8-10). In *The House on Marshland*, Glück explores the subjectivity of another historical figure known for her religious visions in the persona poem “Jeanne d’Arc” about the famous French saint, a figure to whom Glück returns on multiple occasions. Here, Glück presents Joan as calm and strong, someone whose response to her vision was simply that “I heard. / My body hardened into armor” (3-4). Yet Glück characteristically ends the poem on a note of ambiguity and irony, as Joan is ultimately forced to kneel “to bless my King, and thank / the enemy to whom I owe my life” (10-11).

In their critical readings of specific books or themes from this early period of Glück's oeuvre, literary critics have provided feminist analyses of a handful of myth persona poems like those mentioned above. However, none have argued extensively for understanding Glück's myth poems as feminist revisionist mythmaking. For example, E. Laurie George makes a compelling case for reading “Pietà” from *Descending Figure* as a biblical persona poem which retells the birth of Jesus from Mary's perspective. George argues that “Glück's point here seems to be that

the environment of the mother's body is much more safe than that of the outer patriarchal world” (238). Moreover, she also interprets the poem’s portrayal of a “silent communion between mother and son” as not only representing but also privileging an “alternative, non-phallic discourse” in alignment with French feminist theorists’ search for a gynocentric, rather than an androcentric, mode of language (239). Likewise, Daniel Morris also pays close attention to Glück’s retellings of female mythological figures. For instance, he analyzes two poems from *The House on Marshland*: “Abishag” and “Gretel in Darkness,” the former of which explores the subjectivity of an overlooked biblical figure, and the latter of which retells the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel from Gretel’s traumatized perspective. In particular, Morris provides a strong feminist reading of “Abishag,” which he argues “reflects Glück’s fascination, perhaps identification, with an unsung female character” (73). Morris demonstrates how “Abishag” is an example of Glück’s revisionist mythmaking because “she pays attention to an absence in the proof text—how a woman known primarily as a royal concubine and nursemaid to the aging King David was not adequately imagined as a human being with a significant voice, vision, subjectivity and desires of her own” (79).

However, even though Morris makes a case for reading this poem as a feminist revision, he simultaneously—and confusingly—discounts feminist revision as playing an important role in Glück’s oeuvre. Despite the fact that Morris pointedly notes that “Abishag” was “published when Glück was in her early thirties and in the midst of the first wave of feminist revisions of the bible” (73) and that “Glück is writing a distinctly feminist midrash” (73), he nonetheless insists that “in Glück's Bible poems, the primary interest in canons is not to promote feminist revisionism of sacred sources” (73). Problematically, Morris goes on to assert that “instead, her Bible poems offer nervous reflections on status, power, morality, desire. . . issues that more often

than not connect Glück's speaker to dominant male characters from the Torah such as David and Moses" (66). It is unclear to me why Morris believes that themes about power and status are necessarily equated with male, rather than female, characters in myth, especially given that themes of power (and powerlessness) and desire figure prominently in many of Glück's revisions of female mythological characters. Although I am not arguing that "promoting feminist revision" is Glück's priority, I do believe that the frequency with which she revises both classical and biblical myths in a feminist manner throughout her oeuvre suggests that it is worthy of more consideration than Morris and other critics have allowed.

One such example of revisionist mythmaking concerned with themes of power and desire related to woman's experience is the poem "Mythic Fragment" from *The Triumph of Achilles*. This collection features fewer persona poems but contains a larger array of mythological allusions than do her later books, which are composed of longer lyric sequences centered on only one or two myths. For instance, in *The Triumph of Achilles* Glück alludes not only to Achilles but also to various classical myths (Sisyphus, Hyacinth, Cupid and Psyche, Daphne and Apollo) and biblical myths (Moses, Joseph, David). Throughout these poems Glück incorporates motifs of hunger, love, apathy, distrust, violence, powerlessness and paralysis, all of which converge in her revision of the story of Daphne and Apollo in the poem "Mythic Fragment."

The title of this 18-line poem immediately signals that the poem is based on a myth; in fact, it is a "fragment" of a well-known story. The word "fragment" emphasizes brokenness or incompleteness, calling attention to the brevity of the poem as well as highlighting how a piece of the original myth has survived through this poem like a relic of the past. "Mythic Fragment" turns out to be not merely a fragment of the myth of Daphne and Apollo, though, but rather a *revision* that resolves some of the story's incompleteness by providing Daphne's perspective of

her encounter with Apollo. On the whole, Glück's revision sticks closely to the plot of the original myth: a love-stricken Apollo pursues the nymph Daphne even though she refuses to take any lovers. When Daphne realizes Apollo is about to catch up to her (the implication of the myth being that he will rape her), she prays to her father, the river god Peneus, to save her. Peneus answers by turning Daphne into a laurel tree, which Apollo then vows to protect as his own—thereby explaining the origin of the laurel wreath as one of Apollo's symbols. However, the language Glück employs in Daphne's first-person account does not merely reiterate this familiar story but instead critiques both male characters with her retelling. Thus Daphne begins, "When the stern god / approached me with his gift / my fear enchanted him" (1-3). Even though Apollo approaches Daphne with "his gift"—his love—Daphne nonetheless perceives him as "stern," an adjective used to describe someone who is "serious and unrelenting in the assertion of his authority" according to the New American Oxford Dictionary. His love, then, is something which he will not allow her to refuse. In other words, Apollo's gift is an assertion of his authority, demonstrated when Daphne rejects this "gift" and then has to flee from him. It is not her beauty that enchants Apollo, but rather her "fear," which explains why the chase that ensues is so appealing to him.

Next, Daphne stresses how the god's actions contradict his words:

...he ran more quickly  
 through the wet grass, as he insisted,  
 to praise me. I saw captivity  
 in praise; against the lyre,  
 I begged my father in the sea  
 to save me. (4-9)

Even though Apollo insists that he is chasing her for the opportunity to “praise” her, Daphne sees through his words to his true intentions. Glück’s strongly enjambed line “I saw captivity / in praise” emphasizes that more is at stake for Daphne than being an object of admiration: she is at risk of imprisonment, of losing the freedom she so highly values. Glück further highlights Apollo’s duplicity with the strangely phrased line “against the lyre / I begged . . .” On one level, “against the lyre” suggests that Daphne rejects the musical instrument associated with Apollo because the lyre is one means by which Apollo can “praise” her. But this phrase also has another layer of meaning: the American-English pronunciation of “lyre” is such that it is a homophone of “liar”; hence, Daphne also begs her father to save her from the “liar” Apollo.

Unfortunately, Daphne’s prayer results in her trading one form of captivity for another, as the only way for the powerless Daphne to evade Apollo’s advances is to go into permanent hiding, giving up her identity forever so that “I was nowhere, / I was in a tree forever” (10-11). Glück draws a strong comparison between Apollo’s actions and Daphne’s father’s actions with the paralleled trisyllabic phrases “to praise me” (Apollo) and “to save me” (her father). Hence, the poem concludes with Daphne having “turned from him” and “summoned” her “invisible father” (13-14) so that as:

I stiffened in the god’s arms,  
of his encompassing love  
my father made  
no other sign from the water. (15-18)

The ambiguity about which man Daphne is referring to in the line “*his* encompassing love” serves to critique both Apollo’s and Peneus’ forms of “love” as harmful, considering that the word “encompassing” takes on a negative connotation. On the one hand, Apollo’s “love” results

in him circling (encompassing) his arms around Daphne who stiffens in his embrace—stiffening because her body is literally stiffening and hardening into tree bark, but also stiffening because she is afraid of him and so her body becomes rigid in response to his touch. On the other hand, her father’s “encompassing love” translates into him using his godly power to hold or encompass Daphne within a tree forever. Glück further emphasizes Peneus’ apathy to his daughter’s plight by ending the poem on a note of abandonment: Daphne receives no other sign, no other form of comfort or demonstration of love from her father after he “saves” her from Apollo—Peneus just silently returns to the water.

Glück’s revision of the Daphne myth, then, focuses on Daphne’s paralysis as well as critiques power relations between men and women. “Mythic Fragment” demonstrates not only how these power relations condone men’s behaving predatorily toward women, but also how the woman in question must rely on another man’s authority (in this case her father’s) to evade a pursuer who will not accept her rejection. Ultimately, Glück stresses how under patriarchy even father-daughter relationships have the power to destroy woman’s autonomy, in that the father’s demonstration of love toward his daughter is just as much a form of captivity—imprisoning her in a tree—as the lover’s praise is.

In addition to these themes of paralysis and powerlessness, there is one other aspect of “Mythic Fragment” by which Glück subverts the original myth, although it is best illuminated by examining “Mythic Fragment” in conjunction with another poem from *The Triumph of Achilles*. Toward the middle of “Mythic Fragment” Daphne directly addresses her audience, saying: “I was in a tree forever. Reader, / pity Apollo...” (11-12). Daphne’s remark to the reader to “pity” the god immediately follows Daphne’s narration of her tragic situation—ending up in a tree forever because of Apollo’s relentless pursuit—and yet the solemn overall tone of the poem

suggests that this comment is not meant to be interpreted as a sarcastic remark. Instead, Daphne's appeal to the reader to feel sympathy for Apollo's misfortunes, even after she has just recounted her own misfortunes as the victim of his advances, shows how Glück intends for Daphne to be understood as a more mature and nuanced figure than the original myth allows. Moreover, by having the speaker ask that readers feel pity for the man as opposed to demonizing him for his behavior, Glück emphasizes that, as much as Daphne is a victim of gender roles, men are also constrained by the roles expected of them. Thus Apollo is doomed to chase what he can never have, while Peneus' expression of love for his daughter only serves to further harm her. Ultimately, both men are "imprisoned" by their compulsion to dominate.

Not only does Glück's Daphne demonstrate maturity, insight, and empathy, but these two lines also reveal that Daphne anticipates an audience for her narrative. In fact, Daphne's address to her "reader" can be interpreted as a metapoetic moment in which Daphne, the speaker of the poem, assumes the role of poet. The portrayal of a mythological female persona as a poet is not uncommon in Glück's oeuvre; in fact, she reverses the traditionally gendered roles of artist and muse in her revision of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth with her eighth book *Vita Nova* (1999). Shedding further light on the speaker-as-poet in "Mythic Fragment" is "The Reproach," a poem that opens the final section of *The Triumph of Achilles* and in which Glück again characterizes Daphne as a poet. Admittedly, the identity of the speaker in "The Reproach" is not as apparent as the speaker in "Mythic Fragment," making it difficult to ascertain whether this is indeed a dramatic monologue or whether it has an unknown contemporary speaker. Nevertheless, I read this poem as a continuation of Glück's revision of the Daphne myth because it is so clearly in conversation with "Mythic Fragment." For example, in the fourth strophe of "The Reproach," the speaker prefers to "walk beside the river" (19) watching the "trees / on the other side" (28-29). In

addition, the speaker explains that she likes to “lie / in the wet grass beside the river, / running away, Eros” (21-23). Glück’s wording here echoes the phrasing in “Mythic Fragment,” such as in the lines about Daphne turning into a tree “at the water’s edge” (12) and how Apollo quickly “ran” through “wet grass” (5), as well as how Daphne herself “runs away” from Apollo in the myth.

In addition, the other elements of this poem recall Ovid’s popular variation of the Daphne myth. This version of Daphne’s story involves Cupid, called Eros by the Greeks. In this story Apollo insults Eros and in retaliation Eros fires two arrows: one that makes Apollo fall in love with the first person he sees, which is Daphne, and one that makes the other person (Daphne) scorn all love. Apollo then pursues Daphne, leading to the familiar conclusion of Daphne’s transformation into a laurel tree. Similarly, Glück begins “The Reproach” with a speaker reproaching Eros for shooting the arrows that led to the speaker’s demise:

You have betrayed me, Eros.

You have sent me

my true love.

On a high hill you made

his clear gaze;

my heart was not so hard

as your arrow. (1-7)

In light of this version of the myth, the speaker in “The Reproach” can potentially be interpreted as Daphne. Daphne has every reason to feel betrayed by the god Eros, considering that sending her “her true love”—Apollo—was a kind of death sentence. Moreover, I interpret the speaker’s apostrophe to Eros and reference to being shot by an arrow to the heart not as a clichéd metaphor

for falling in love but rather as a literal account of events from the myth. In the fourth strophe, the speaker's reflection that her preference for walking in the garden and by the river (in the "wet grass") must be "a bitter insult" (16) makes sense in the context of the Daphne myth as well—Daphne's refusal to take lovers in favor of her own freedom to do as she chooses would indeed be an insult to the God of Love.

The similarities to Ovid's version of the Daphne myth and "Mythic Fragment" lead me to consider that the first-person speaker of "The Reproach" can reasonably be read as another variation of Daphne in which Glück further expands Daphne's role as a poet. I say this because the third strophe deviates from the traditional Daphne myth as the speaker asks:

What is a poet  
without dreams?  
I lie awake; I feel  
actual flesh upon me,  
meaning to silence me— (8-12)

In this strophe Daphne not only identifies herself as a poet, but also reveals her crisis in identity as a poet unable to produce art—the speaker lies awake, unable to dream because she feels "flesh" (presumably her male lover) upon her. Moreover, the lover means "to silence" her; in other words, a relationship with a man threatens the (female) poet's art. It is important to note that, while "The Reproach" recalls Ovid's version of the myth, the poem gives no indication that Daphne has been transformed into a tree as a result of Eros sending Apollo after her. Yet in deviating from the plot of the myth, Glück still retains its theme; after all, she portrays Daphne as being just as trapped and made voiceless in her relationship as she is literally paralyzed by being turned into a tree by her father. Moreover, in characterizing Daphne as a poet, Glück makes this

restriction on Daphne's self-expression even more tragic. Another way to understand the purpose of Glück's sustained portrayal of Daphne as a poet in her feminist revision of the myth is to consider Apollo's role as the god of music and poetry (already alluded to with the reference to the "lyre" in "Mythic Fragment"). In this sense, Apollo's pursuit of Daphne is doubly damning: not only does he cause her to lose her autonomy, but his love also threatens the very art over which he is supposed to be patron.

Therefore, in making Daphne address her reader in "Mythic Fragment" and reflect on her occupation as poet in "The Reproach," Glück revises the original myth in order to comment upon how male-female power relations and gender roles threaten the autonomy and self-expression of a woman, resulting in her paralysis and silence. Perhaps this is why "The Reproach" concludes with the speaker confessing that "All my life / I have worshiped the wrong gods" (26-27). All the male gods in Daphne's life—Apollo, Peneus, and Eros—have betrayed her by harming her in some way, whether by threatening captivity and demanding that his love be reciprocated, by imprisoning her in a tree and abandoning her, or by forcing her into a relationship that stifles her ability to make art.

## Chapter 2

## Transforming Circe

In her article “Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” Alicia Ostriker discusses the various approaches women poets take in revising myth, ranging from “hit-and-run attacks” (73) on gender stereotypes in myth to portraying the female “destroyer, a figure women's poetry has been inhibited from exploring in the past by the need to identify femininity with morality” (77). One example of this latter type of revisionist mythmaking in Louise Glück's oeuvre is the poem “Circe's Power” from *Meadowlands* (1996). *Meadowlands* is a book constructed of extended lyric sequences, some of which are based on myth—in this case, the story of Odysseus as told by Homer. Glück uses a similar formal structure in *The Wild Iris* (1992), published just before *Meadowlands*, and in the two following books, *Vita Nova* (1999) and *Averno* (2006). As Murnaghan and Roberts point out, Glück's decision to reframe myths within book-length lyric sequences is yet another type of revisionist mythmaking; in particular, the choice to “recapitula[te] Homeric themes in extended lyric sequences” participates in a practice that is “notably... a feature of poetry by women” (4). Murnaghan and Roberts argue that in writing lyric, Pastan and Glück work in a genre traditionally more open to women than epic and identified to some extent with women from the time of Sappho on. In combining their lyrics into longer structures, they both transgress the traditional limit on women's poetry and put themselves in the company of the many twentieth-century women who have written poem sequences constituting what Alicia Ostriker calls “revisionist myth.” (5)

Moreover, Glück not only employs a revisionist mythmaking strategy in her use of lyric sequences to retell Homer's epic *Odyssey*, but she also revises the subject matter itself. In

Glück's version, Odysseus' journey is not the focal point. Instead, "minor" characters such as Penelope, Odysseus' wife; Telemachus, his son; and Circe, the sorceress with whom he has an affair, are made central. Glück complicates the myth of Odysseus by providing—and emphasizing—these three different perspectives. Specifically, in revising Circe to be a more sympathetic character, and in giving Telemachus and Penelope ambivalent emotions about Odysseus and one another, Glück critiques the original myth's androcentric portrayal of family, marriage, and love.

Glück's casting of Circe as a more sympathetic figure takes place over three individual poems that can be read as a series: "Circe's Power," "Circe's Grief," and "Circe's Torment." Glück's revision is particularly interesting in light of Ostriker's argument that women poets often return to the portrayal of "the destroyer" and demonic female figures like Circe throughout myth. To illustrate the feminist revision of demonic female figures, Ostriker cites as an example Margaret Atwood's revision of Circe:

The Homeric earth-goddess and sorceress Circe, who turns Odysseus's fellow sailors to beasts and who throughout Western literature represents the evil magic of female sexuality, is transformed in Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems" into an angry but also a quite powerless woman. Men turn themselves to animals; she has nothing to do with it. . . . What Atwood implies, as do other women who examine the blackness that has represented femaleness so often in our culture, is that the female power to do evil is a direct function of her powerlessness to do anything else. (78)

Although Glück's version of Circe is not quite as powerless as Atwood's, as I will reveal, the two women poets seem to share similar interests in refusing to portray Circe as an evil woman

embodying the threat and “witchcraft” of female sexuality and power. Instead, both poets explore Circe as a woman who is sympathetic in her affection, grief, and anger.

The first poem of Glück’s Circe lyric sequence, “Circe’s Power,” incorporates much of the original myth, such as Circe’s use of witchcraft, her role in tricking and later aiding the sailors, and her affair with Odysseus. Despite her adherence to these aspects of the myth, Glück does not portray Circe as the wicked goddess who seduces and tortures men. Instead, this persona poem begins with Circe defending herself (in a rather cool and matter-of-fact tone) from the accusation that she turned the men into animals:

I never turned anyone into a pig.  
Some people are pigs; I make them  
look like pigs.

I’m sick of your world  
that lets the outside disguise the inside. (1-5)

In these opening lines, Glück revises the mythological figure of Circe in a number of ways. First, Glück provides Circe with a rationale for why she transforms Odysseus’ men into pigs, in direct contrast to the original myth which gives Circe no motive for doing so other than that she can. Moreover, Homer describes Circe as inviting the men in and drugging their food; when the drug fails to work on Odysseus, she attempts to seduce him. In contrast, Glück does not present Circe as guileful. In fact, Circe argues that it is Odysseus (whom she directly addresses in this poem) and his men who are the deceitful ones, considering that in “their world” their true selves on the “inside” are disguised by their outward appearances. Circe believes that she does not turn the men into pigs—transforming them into something they are not—but rather reveals their true

inner nature by using her magic to make their outward physical appearances match their inner personalities. In other words, Circe perceives herself as the logical, righteous, and truthful one, whereas the connotations of “pigs” suggests that Odysseus and his men are greedy or uncivilized, as well as deceitful—a clear reversal of the original myth.

Furthermore, Circe’s distinction about Odysseus’ world (“your world”) suggests that Circe considers herself separate from them, an outsider whose position gives her the vantage point to perceive and criticize their flaws. The obvious difference between Circe and Odysseus’ company would be that she belongs to the divine, immortal world whereas the sailors belong to the human, mortal world that Circe criticizes as being deceitful. In the context of Greek mythology, though, this distinction does not make much sense. There is a plethora of examples in Greek mythology of gods and goddesses taking on the shapes of animals or humans in order to interact with the mortal world. In many cases the gods and goddesses use these forms as disguises with the intent to trick humans—Zeus’ various romantic exploits are key examples. If anything, then, it is Circe’s divine world, and not Odysseus’ world, that resorts to the deceit and hypocrisy she so despises. However, when taking gender into consideration, the “your world” clearly refers to the world of men, of which the goddess-sorceress and her maidens (“me and my ladies,” line 10) are not a part. Therefore, Circe appears to suggest that men, specifically, rely on deception and lies.

Glück’s implication that men are deceitful runs counter to a Western tradition that equates women with deception, perhaps best embodied in the figure of Eve. It is probably no coincidence, then, that “Circe’s Power” appears in the volume immediately after the poem “The Rock.” In this poem, a presumably female speaker—likely Odysseus’ wife Penelope, judging by the similar language and voice used in the other Penelope persona poems—fantasizes about

punishing her beloved. The speaker wonders “what is required in hell, / for I would send / my beloved there” (16-18) although she does not wish to send him there forever—only to severely chasten him “as he has not been, here / on the surface” (24-25). Reading the speaker as Penelope, the “beloved” clearly refers to Odysseus. Consequently, Penelope’s wish to send her beloved to a place in the “earth’s / terrible recesses” (2-3) conjures up the image of Homer’s Odysseus, who actually travels to the underworld at the behest of Circe. This collapses the biblical Hell and classical Hades into one place and phrase, which further ties into how three canonical mythological figures, Penelope, Eve, and Circe, are combined in one poem. In a mix of biblical and classical myth, the speaker addresses a snake hiding under a rock, asking:

How else  
 did you approach Eve  
 .....  
 I have paid  
 bitterly for her  
 lapse” (8-13)

By making the speaker Penelope reflect upon Eve, Glück invites a comparison between these two icons of femaleness in literature. Returning to my point that Circe associates men with deception, it is interesting to consider these three female figures together: Eve, who symbolizes women’s faithlessness and deception when she convinced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, leading to the “original sin”; Penelope, the perfect model of a good, faithful wife; and Circe, the evil, cunning witch who abuses her power to target men.

However, in juxtaposing the two poems “The Rock” and “Circe’s Power,” traditional divides between good and bad women, faithful and faithless, Madonna and whore, are blurred.

On the one hand, Glück's Penelope in "The Rock" is hardly a model of "goodness" when she identifies with the serpent who tricked Eve and Adam, reflecting that "perhaps I have / the soul of a reptile after all" (42-43). Moreover, Penelope even wishes she could send Odysseus to hell to punish him—a strange wish for the wife celebrated for her faithfulness and virtue who, in the original myth, hopes for her husband's safe and immediate return home. On the other hand, Glück's revised Circe in "Circe's Power" seems far less demonic when she insists that she is not deceitful at all, but rather that men are the ones who resort to disguises. Circe also reminds her audience that she could have abused her power but chose not to. Instead, she "reversed the spell, / showing you my goodness / as well as my power" (12-14) and wanted them all to "be happy here" (15). In addition, Glück emphasizes Circe's kindness and strength when Circe states that only with her help could Odysseus and his men brave "the crying and pounding sea" (20). It is worth noting, however, that "Circe's Power" does not conclude with a portrait of Circe as entirely benevolent and harmless. Instead, it ends with a threat that reasserts Circe's power and destructive potential: "If I wanted only to hold you / I could hold you prisoner" (25-26). Therefore, throughout these poems Glück revises the gender stereotypes inherent in Western tradition by portraying women as complex beings capable of flaws and a range of emotions. In so doing she complicates female figures like Circe and Penelope who have been assigned to dichotomies of "good" and "evil" in their original myths.

Glück continues this complex portrayal of the female characters in the *Odyssey* throughout *Meadowlands*: Penelope is the focus of multiple poems, such as "Penelope's Song" and "Departure," and Circe has two more dramatic monologues in "Circe's Torment" and "Circe's Grief." This lyric sequence provides a complex portrait of Circe as she becomes a tragic figure by the third poem, devolving from a powerful woman to someone powerless in love. In

fact, this devolution of Circe is even reflected visually in the poems' structures, as each subsequent poem in the series shrinks in size and in the space it takes up on the page ("Circe's Power" consists of 9 strophes with 26 lines total, while "Circe's Torment" and "Circe's Grief" are both a single stanza, 22 and 16 lines, respectively). Hence, Circe by the second poem is no longer the sorceress who defines herself as a "pragmatist" (23), defiantly asking "You think / a few tears upset me?" (23-24) and threatening imprisonment if she is refused in her love. Instead, she is a woman full of regret, questioning whether she ever really had power at all:

. . . how  
 could I have power if  
 I had no wish  
 to transform you (7-10)

Although "Circe's Torment" also concludes with two threats, "I refuse you / such feeling for your wife" (17-18) and "I refuse you / sleep again / if I cannot have you" (20-22), this time they feel more like empty threats. Whereas in "Circe's Power" Circe was confident in her ability to control Odysseus if she wanted, the subjunctive mood in "Circe's Torment" reveals that she was unable or unwilling to keep him, and so she must resort to cursing him instead.

In portraying Circe as a woman made powerless in love, Glück further criticizes how gender roles lead to female crises of identity. Choosing to love the mortal man Odysseus, even when she foresees his inevitable departure, forces the goddess to forfeit her power. For example, instead of "selfishly" keeping Odysseus on the island against his will, she gives him freedom, sacrificing her own desires for the sake of her beloved. While this notion of selflessness is commonly viewed as integral to love, Circe's position as a female problematizes her selflessness. According to traditional white, Western gender roles, women are *expected* to sacrifice their own

desires and needs for the benefit of the husband, family and/or society. Thus Circe’s selflessness signals that her relationship with a mortal man somehow requires that she conform to traditional gender roles. Furthermore, because these gender roles are part of a set of power dynamics in which men are expected to have power and authority in the relationship, Circe must give up her power for the sake of heterosexual love.

Unfortunately, Circe’s combined feelings of loneliness, betrayal, anger, and powerlessness lead her to question her own identity as a sorceress-goddess, which was connected to her empowerment and clear-sightedness. She realizes then that any semblance of power she thought she had while in their relationship was an illusion because “she had no wish to transform” Odysseus, keep him against his will, or ultimately do anything that would not agree with his wishes. Hence, in “Circe’s Grief” Circe resorts to one last tactic that has a similar lack of effect on Odysseus. Here, Circe is active rather than passive, but she is only able to act against Odysseus’ wife:

In the end, I made myself  
known to your wife as  
a god would, in her own house  
.....  
this is how a god says goodbye:  
if I am in her head forever  
I am in your life forever. (1-16)

Apparently unable to change Odysseus’ feelings for his wife as she hoped in the second poem, Circe attempts to create a division between Odysseus and his wife by haunting Penelope via a disembodied voice. Curiously, Circe refers to herself as a “god” instead of a goddess throughout

this poem when she talks about violating Penelope's physical space and invading her thoughts. As a result, the opening lines echo other Greek myths in which gods "make themselves known" to women through various means, such as when Zeus impregnates Danaë, who is locked in a chamber in her house, by appearing to her in a shower of gold. Thus, Circe acts according to male models of dominance and conquest in her last desperate attempt to regain the attention of her lover. Although this final poem appears to make Circe monstrous, or at least more malevolent than the other two poems, Glück does not revert to portraying Circe in a stereotypically evil way. Instead, she demonstrates that the only option left for a woman to exact her revenge is not to target her beloved, whom gender roles prohibit her from confronting, but to instead target his wife. In order to do this, though, Circe must further act as "a god would," mimicking models of male power since she is left with none of her own.

Ultimately, by allotting Circe three persona poems, Glück implicitly critiques the original myth for reducing Circe to a stereotype rather than providing her full subjective experience. Hence, Glück not only gives this character the chance to "speak," but the chance to defend herself from the accusations that she is a witch who seduces and torments men. Glück even creates a version of Circe who does not have evil intentions, and who is in fact quite benevolent at times. Murnaghan and Roberts also come to this same conclusion about Glück's approach to the original myth, arguing that she (and Linda Pastan, the other poet whose work the critics analyze) "fills in a gap in the story, or supplies a missing voice or emotional register...giv[ing] voice to the sensibilities of characters from whom little is heard in the *Odyssey*: they explore unspoken feelings of anger, lust, grief" (4). Murnaghan and Roberts go on to conclude that what "Pastan and Glück... disclose in their fuller representation of women's experiences and sensibilities corresponds to what the epic tradition, in its allegiance to the interests of a male-

dominated culture, depicts less fully and with greater circumspection” (26). Therefore, while Glück’s revised Circe ultimately devolves from a non-stereotyped version into a cliché of the woman out to get revenge on her competition (the wife) instead of punishing the lover himself, I nonetheless read these poems as feminist revisions. Throughout the Circe lyric sequence Glück critiques gender stereotypes by revising the classical myth to make Circe a more complex female figure. At the same time, Glück depicts how heterosexual love in a mortal, patriarchal world ruled by traditional gender roles and power relations leads to a woman’s loss of self, consequently pitting her against other women because she is powerless against men.

## Chapter 3

## Eurydice's Lament: The Muse Turned Artist

In her book *Vita Nova* (1999), Glück continues some of the themes from her previous book of poems *Meadowlands* (1996), such as love, marriage, grief, power, and betrayal. Here, Glück combines two different Greco-Roman myths: the story of Dido and Aeneas and the story of Orpheus and Eurydice—the latter of which is the focus of my attention in this section. In her juxtaposition of these myths, Glück emphasizes the similarities between the two tragic love stories as well as complicates them by interweaving other lyric sequences in the book. These sequences have unnamed female speakers and, like the dialogue poems in *Meadowlands* that center on the unhappy exchanges between husband and wife, some of the sequences in *Vita Nova* are also in a dialogue format. The contemporary speakers in these sequences often make reference to the myths in the book, identifying with the mythological figures of Orpheus and Eurydice or speaking about their situations in a similar language. Because the structure of the lyric sequences is more complex and because many speakers are unidentified, leaving it uncertain whether the poem is a dramatic monologue of a mythological figure or the voice of a contemporary speaker, Glück's revision of these myths is less straightforward than that of *Meadowlands*. Therefore, it is necessary for me to provide readings of multiple poems that intersect in order to provide a complete understanding of how Glück employs revisionist mythmaking.

Glück's revision of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth joins themes of marriage and divorce with artistic creativity and inspiration. The famous singer and musician Orpheus has long been used by male writers as a symbol of the ideal artist/poet, while Eurydice has traditionally been depicted as the tragic muse who inspires his art. In the original myth, the death of the female

character is linked with male destiny and accomplishment: Orpheus' grief over Eurydice leads him to create his most poignant music, which he uses to persuade the gods to break divine rules so that he can attempt to bring Eurydice back from the underworld. As Alicia Ostriker points out, women poets have often used feminist revisionist mythmaking to dismantle this traditional "male creator-female muse convention" inherent in Orpheus and Eurydice's relationship (74). For example, Ostriker cites a poem by Alta that resists the stereotype of a "passive Euridice who exists only as the tragic object of Orpheus' love"; a poem by Erica Jong, "Arse Poetica," that reverses these roles by "deflat[ing] centuries of male aesthetic pretentiousness and [asserting] the identity of female sexuality and female creativity"; and Rachel DuPlessis' poem "Eurydice" in which "the heroine . . .resents (like Alta's Euridice) the loss of herself to a husband whose powerful sex and art define her 'like a great linked chain'" (74-75). I would add to this list a poem like Adrienne Rich's "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus," which has similar feminist goals in displacing Orpheus in order to highlight the perspective of the woman artist. The poems by Louise Glück that focus on Orpheus and Eurydice in *Vita Nova*, such as "Eurydice," "Relic," "Lament," "Lute Song," and "Orfeo," also participate in this feminist tradition of critiquing and revising the male artist-female muse convention.

It is important to note that in her revision of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, the dramatic monologue "Orfeo"—the sole poem Glück provides Orpheus—is placed first in the lyric sequence. By placing "Orfeo" before any of the Eurydice poems, Glück informs and biases her audience's reading of the Eurydice poems through their initial impression of the characters Orpheus and Eurydice in "Orfeo." Hence, in order to discuss Glück's revision of Eurydice, it is essential to understand how Glück causes readers to see Orpheus differently (and more negatively) than in the original myth before she even introduces Eurydice's perspective, with

whom her sympathies seem more aligned. Thus the poem begins, with Glück’s characteristically dry humor:

*“J’ai perdu mon Eurydice...”*

I have lost my Eurydice,  
I have lost my lover,  
and suddenly I am speaking French  
and it seems to me I have never been in better voice;

.....

And it seems one is somehow expected to apologize  
for being an artist

as though it were not entirely human to notice these fine points (1-9)

Glück’s gentle mocking of Orpheus as an unapologetic, pretentious narcissist in this poem is an interesting contrast to the serious treatment Orpheus has traditionally received from male artists.<sup>4</sup> Although the poem begins with Orpheus’ lament for his lost Eurydice, the potency and genuineness of his grief is undermined by his “suddenly speaking French,” which gives him the best voice he has ever had and makes his songs “of a high order” (7). Later strophes in the poem reveal that these heightened artistic powers occur after losing Eurydice not the first time (when Eurydice is bitten by a poisonous snake and dies), but the second time, which is when Orpheus fails to successfully bring her back from the underworld. This is significant because in the myth, the second time Orpheus loses Eurydice is more tragic because it is his fault—he had the chance to rescue her but lost her again. By choosing to provide his thoughts after the second death of Eurydice, Glück emphasizes just how important fame and recognition for his art is to Orpheus, to the extent that the focus of Orpheus’ dramatic monologue is more on his artistic prowess rather

than on the painful loss of his wife. Orpheus' concern with his art and with fame continues throughout the poem, although he also tries to downplay it, saying "perhaps the gods...never singled me out, / perhaps it was all illusion" (11-13). He immediately contradicts himself, however, when he concludes the poem saying "I sang to them; they will remember me" (22), referring either to the furies in line 16 or the gods in line 11. Thus Orpheus is quite clear that he remembers singing to gods and that they acknowledged him.

The most important revision Glück makes to Orpheus comes about in the third and fourth strophes when Orpheus addresses his wife: "O Eurydice, you who married me for my singing, / why do you turn on me, wanting human comfort?" (14-15). Here Glück subverts the myth with her twist on the idea of "turning"—after all, the climax of the myth occurs when Orpheus *turns* toward Eurydice, wanting to look back at her to make sure she is there behind him, followed by the subsequent *turning* away of Eurydice when her spirit is dragged back to Hades because Orpheus betrayed her with his faithlessness. In Glück's version, Orpheus believes that Eurydice is the one who *turned* on him, betraying him—but the catch is that her "betrayal" is wanting human comfort. In other words, Eurydice wanted not just her husband's music, but also his love and attention. Orpheus is upset with Eurydice for asking this of him because it is something he is not willing to give. As a result, his tone is callous rather than grief-stricken when he speaks of her return to the underworld, saying: "Who knows what you'll tell the furies / when you see them again" (16-17). Although the furies are present in the original myth, which speaks of how Orpheus' music causes the furies to weep, the furies have an additional function in Glück's poem. Considering that the furies are goddesses of vengeance and punishment, Orpheus' wondering what Eurydice will tell the furies implies that he has indeed done something to Eurydice to make her feel wronged enough to seek out the furies on her return to hell.

Furthermore, I read Glück's version of this myth as suggesting that Orpheus' turning back to look at Eurydice was a deliberate choice and not an accident (as in the myth). After all, Eurydice wants human comfort, and the greatest way of providing her with that comfort would be to rescue her from the underworld and bring her back to human civilization. Orpheus' deliberate choice to send Eurydice back to hell would explain why Eurydice would seek the furies to exact revenge on her husband for this betrayal. The following strophe supports my interpretation in that Orpheus tries to present his actions more positively by telling Eurydice what she should say to the furies: "Tell them I have lost my beloved... Tell them there is no music like this / without real grief" (18-21). Although Orpheus speaks of grief and loss here, he nonetheless makes apparent that his music, his art, could not have been accomplished without having "lost" Eurydice in the first place. In other words, the loss of Eurydice is necessary to his art and so it is essential that Eurydice returns to hell—allowing him to feel loss and grief all over again and thus produce more art. Of course, a deliberate attempt to feel grief by purposefully "losing" his beloved undermines the "realness" of his grief—and love—for his dead wife.

Overall, Glück does not portray Orpheus as a noble hero willing to journey to hell in order to reclaim his beloved wife. In contrast to the male poetic tradition of exalting Orpheus as a hero and ideal artist, Glück instead presents him as a narcissist more concerned with journeying to Hades in order to gain fame (to be spoken to by the gods and to have been "singled out" for his art) rather than out of true love for his wife. Moreover, in this revision of the myth Orpheus is portrayed as viewing Eurydice merely as a tool, essential to him only as a source of inspiration, and so genuine love is absent in their relationship.

The non-myth speaker of the poem "Lute Song," which immediately precedes "Orfeo," reinforces Glück's negative portrayal of Orpheus in her revision of the myth. For example, the

speaker comments on the traditional glorification of Orpheus as the inspired artist when she says “No one wants to be the muse; / in the end, everyone wants to be Orpheus” (1-2). The speaker even notes that his song does not restore “Eurydice, the lamented one” but rather restores “the ardent / spirit of Orpheus. . . detached, immortal, / through deflected narcissism” (6-13). If the speaker in this poem is understood to be a female, as are the majority of Glück’s non-myth poems—especially those which reflect on love and art—then the final strophe of the poem represents Glück’s ambivalent position within the creator-muse paradigm. In talking about her own anguish over her art, the speaker says, “if I speak openly, / less the wish to be remembered / than the wish to survive” (18-21). Thus, the speaker does not necessarily produce art in order to be remembered, like Orpheus, but rather to “survive.” The connotations of “survival” are ambiguous because it can refer to both the notion of figuratively surviving through the immortality of one’s art or it can mean physically surviving. The latter association aligns the speaker with Eurydice, the woman who is given a second chance to “survive” by returning from death to the human world above, which the speaker says is the “deepest human wish” (22). The ambiguity of these lines and of the word “survive” reflect Glück’s ambivalent position as a female poet aligning herself both with Orpheus, the narcissistic male artist whose desire to produce art depends on human relationships but who also disdains those relationships, and Eurydice, the woman who only exists in the myth as the source of inspiration for Orpheus’ art. The female artist must negotiate these harmful traditional gendered roles of artist and muse, where “artist” is male and “muse” is female, in order to form her identity. Glück appears to resolve this ambivalence by devoting more attention to Eurydice than to Orpheus in this book, with the poems “Eurydice,” “Relic,” and “Lament.”

Unlike “Orfeo,” “Eurydice” is not a persona poem, even though the matching titles and the fact that both are constructed of five strophes for approximately twenty lines total seem to make the two poems counterparts. In “Eurydice” an unspecified speaker narrates the moment “Eurydice went back to hell” (1). The speaker sympathetically recounts how the travel back for Eurydice is difficult, since the transition between worlds is a “passage / filled with regret, with longing” (10-11). Hades is not otherwise depicted as a miserable place; in fact, the “dark of the underworld” is so “gentle, respectful” (15-17) that only for a moment does Eurydice grieve for “earth’s beauty” (19). However, while she mourns the loss of beauty, the true trial for Eurydice is to “live with human faithlessness” (22). Ultimately, this poem, told through a distant third-person point of view, serves as a link between the two myth persona poems dedicated to Orpheus and Eurydice, as though the poem is also “moving between two worlds” (7). However, that this poem focuses on Eurydice’s untold journey back to the underworld and concludes by reminding the reader of Orpheus’ faithlessness (and the painful task Eurydice has of living with his betrayal) clearly demonstrates that Glück is more interested in exploring what is ignored in the myth regarding Eurydice’s perspective.

“Relic” continues the focus on Eurydice’s experience in hell, but this time Glück tells the story specifically from Eurydice’s first-person perspective. This persona poem serves as the truer parallel to “Orfeo,” but the tone of “Relic” is far more solemn. Hence, the poem begins with Eurydice asking, “Where would I be without my sorrow, sorrow of my beloved’s making” and states that his song is “of all gifts most lasting” (1-4). Eurydice’s question points to the problem of how her identity is tied to Orpheus and his music; thus, she does not know where she would be without the “sign” of his presence/song (3). Ironically, the question is not “*who* would I be” but rather “*where* would I be”—a question that contains its answer: Eurydice would be alive and

not back in the underworld if Orpheus had not proven faithless. Furthermore, Eurydice does not seem to appreciate Orpheus' song as much as he claims, as when he states in "Orfeo" that she married him for his singing. In fact, Eurydice uses the term "gift" almost bitterly here in reference to his music because the song is only a "relic" of their marriage, when if not for Orpheus' betrayal their marriage could have continued in full on the earth's surface.

Eurydice continues explaining her sorrow by directly addressing her audience:

How would you like to die  
 while Orpheus was singing?  
 A long death; all the way to Dis  
 I heard him. (5-8)

From Eurydice's point of view, Orpheus' song is not a beautiful melody, but is instead painful to listen to and makes her death longer than necessary, a "torment" (9). Eurydice even reflects that "sometimes / our consolations are the costliest thing" (13-14). As Daniel Morris explains of these lines, Eurydice "critiques the Orphic exchange of her presence for the compensation that his language is supposed to provide. . . Having dealt with the myth as an example of female objectification, Glück also recalls the cost of the exchange of life for lines in a memorable poem from the perspective of the grieving lover or singer" (119). By providing Eurydice's perspective, Glück gives voice to an otherwise silenced character in Greco-Roman mythology, through which she critiques the glorification of Orpheus as the ideal artist and hero by questioning the character's motives, the authenticity of his grief and love for Eurydice, and the beauty or even importance of his art.

In addition to providing Eurydice's perspective, Glück also subtly reverses the male creator-female muse convention. Hence, in "Relic" Eurydice repeats: "All the way to Dis / I

heard my husband singing, / much as you now hear me” (15-17). This metapoetic moment, combined with a direct address to the reader by the mythological speaker-poet, harkens back to Glück’s revision of Daphne as a poet in “Mythic Fragment.” Here, Eurydice not only draws attention to her own voice and perspective, but also highlights the fact that the poem itself is her work of art, her “song.” These three lines lend new meaning to the title “Relic” in that it now refers not just to Orpheus’ song but also to her own. Moreover, Glück even uses phrasing that serves as a clever tie-in to the final line of “Orfeo,” in which Orpheus asserts “In Dis, I sang to them; they will remember me” (22). The paralleled phrasing reinforces the fact that Eurydice is comparing her voice to Orpheus’, suggesting that Glück places the power of Eurydice’s art on an equal level with his. After all, Eurydice’s voice is also being “heard” by the reader “all the way” from Dis.

Glück’s revision of Eurydice as an artist herself, not just a muse for the male artist, continues in the poem “Lament.” This persona poem highlights Eurydice’s role as a musician/poet in that, although “Lament” can refer to any passionate expression of grief, it traditionally refers to a song or poem expressing sorrow. In fact, as Murnaghan and Roberts note,<sup>5</sup> in ancient Greek culture the “lament is especially associated with women, who were the primary performers of the actual laments on which the poetic form was modeled” (29). There is a specifically song-like quality to this poem that contributes to the impression that this poem is Eurydice’s “lament” for her husband. For example, the fifth strophe of “Lament” goes:

Once is enough. Once is enough  
to say goodbye on earth.  
And to grieve, that too, of course.  
Once is enough to say goodbye forever. (15-18)

The refrain “once is enough” is also repeated elsewhere in the poem, serving to establish a musical quality that is not present in some of the other poems in the book. For instance, “Eurydice” has a very prose-like quality with few internal or end rhymes, only a few repeated words, and little alliteration. Although “Orfeo” and “Relic” use repetition, “Lament” contains the most repetition and alliteration, as well as is the longest poem of the five I have mentioned.

One refrain that is particularly important to the poem’s meaning first occurs in the opening strophe when Eurydice laments “A terrible thing is happening—my love / is dying again, my love who has died already: died and been mourned” (1-3). Initially this is confusing to read because it sounds like it comes from Orpheus’ perspective. However, that the speaker is Eurydice is made clear by the lines “Where will I find him again / if not in grief, dark wood / from which the lute is made” (12-15). The combination of the pronoun “him” and the “lute” immediately connects the dying lover to Orpheus.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this poem not only establishes Eurydice’s occupation as artist by having her sing a lament for Orpheus, but Glück also reverses the myth to such an extent that Orpheus physically trades places with Eurydice. This is further demonstrated through the imagery of nature (willows, birches, sunlight, and birds) surrounding the speaker, confirming that Eurydice is indeed no longer in the underworld, but alive and on earth. By extension, Orpheus is the dead beloved and muse for Eurydice’s poem/song; Orpheus becomes “the lamented one” in Eurydice’s lament. With this in mind, the repeated phrase “Once is enough”—which is ironically stated more than once in the poem—serves to emphasize how Orpheus is not dying only once, but over and over again, forcing Eurydice to mourn anew each time. The emphasis on grief serves as a contrast to Orpheus’ disingenuous “lament” for his beloved in “Orfeo” because Eurydice’s song in “Lament” is passionate and sincere. It is true that Eurydice seems to take a certain amount of pleasure in her own grief and the cathartic art it

produces. For example, in describing how nature also collectively mourns for Orpheus by creating music of its own—“the trees / become instruments” (4-5) and the birds and willows are “singing again” (27, 29)—Eurydice describes nature as both “cruel” and “profoundly tender,” focusing mostly on the beauty of nature as sunlight plays off of the trees and water (8). However, Glück’s Eurydice is not at all concerned with the fame and immortality that her art could afford her in the way that Orpheus does. Instead, her focus remains on the loss of the beloved and her song is an expression of that loss.

In sum, Glück revises the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice numerous times throughout *Vita Nova*, ultimately concluding with a version of the myth completely changed from the original. I read Glück’s changes to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as feminist revisions which constitute these poems as “feminist poems.” In her identification with both Orpheus and Eurydice, Glück highlights the struggle of women poets to navigate canonical stories that only represent women as inspiration for art and not as artists themselves. Glück partly resolves her ambivalence by simultaneously portraying Orpheus in a negative manner and by elevating Eurydice to the status of artist, thus reversing the traditional gender roles inherent to the myth so that a figure formerly silenced in the myth is given the chance to tell her own story and stake her claim as artist.

## Chapter 4

## “The daughter is just meat”: Persephone’s Powerlessness

The most recent portion of Louise Glück’s oeuvre, from *The Seven Ages* (2001) to *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014), signals a turning away from the frequent mythological allusions and myth revisions featured in her previous books. The striking exception to this is her tenth book, *Averno* (2006), which focuses on the Rape of Persephone myth. Like *Meadowlands* and *Vita Nova*, *Averno* is constructed of multiple interwoven lyric sequences which alternate between the myth sequence and a paralleled series featuring a non-myth female speaker in a contemporary setting. Unlike the other two books, however, Glück does not provide any of the characters in the myth—Persephone, Demeter, or Hades—with dramatic monologues. Nonetheless, the poems in this volume—“Persephone the Wanderer,” “A Myth of Innocence,” “A Myth of Devotion,” and “Persephone the Wanderer”—arguably represent the culmination of Glück’s revisionist mythmaking, even while she takes a different stylistic approach.

It is worth noting<sup>7</sup> that *Averno* marks Glück’s *return* to the Persephone myth. Her first use of the myth occurred in the beginning of her career with the poem “Pomegranate” from *The House on Marshland* (1975). “Pomegranate” is a persona poem from the perspective of Persephone, although it is Hades’ voice that dominates the poem as he points out Demeter’s destruction of the earth in her quest to get back her daughter, all while questioning her true motives for doing so. In “Pomegranate” Glück characterizes Persephone as stubborn, defiant, and committed to a philosophy of asceticism, as she refuses to eat the pomegranate Hades offers her (which would bind her to him and the underworld). In contrast, Glück’s Persephone in *Averno* struggles with feelings of powerlessness, paralysis, and loss of self. Glück also places more emphasis on the original myth’s focus on Persephone’s sexuality. In addition, the change in

Glück's interpretation of the myth from her 1975 poem "Pomegranate" is accompanied by a change in style. As Rosanna Warren explains, "Glück has taken up and expanded the struggle between Demeter and Persephone as a leitmotif" which includes the "introduction of an analytical voice we can take less as that of a narrator than as an outside, orchestrating, probing intelligence, a metanarrator. This voice interferes with the story, involving the reader in its creation" (107). In this sense, Glück is not only revising the classical Persephone myth, but also revising her own previous version of it in "Pomegranate" as well, as she more clearly sympathizes and identifies with the experiences of Persephone (and, at times, Demeter).

The first myth poem of the volume is one of two poems identically titled "Persephone the Wanderer." Uta Gosmann helpfully points out that the identical titles and matching number of lines of these two poems, combined with their respective placements in the volume (one at the beginning, one at the end), emphasize the cyclical nature of Persephone's story of regeneration (222). Furthermore, the division of the volume into two sections highlights how each "Persephone the Wanderer" poem presents a different variation of the myth. In the first "Persephone the Wanderer," the metanarrator calls attention to the revisionist nature of the poem by acknowledging how the myth is subject to multiple interpretations. At the same time this (presumably female) speaker points out the androcentric bias inherent in the myth's portrayal of Persephone as well as the problematic way females and female experiences are discussed by men, saying:

Persephone's initial  
sojourn in hell continues to be  
pawed over by scholars who dispute  
the sensations of the virgin (11-14)

The speaker goes on to explain how scholars debate whether she "cooperate[d] in her rape" (15)

or whether “she was drugged, violated against her will / as happens so often now to modern girls” (16-17). Gosmann interprets this strophe as the speaker “unmasking the ‘scholars’ perverse interest in a rape fantasy” while “reproaching them for lewd motives: they ‘paw’ over Persephone and take keen interest in the question of whether she instigated her rape or not” (225).

In contrast to the male scholars who are criticized here, Glück presents a more complete portrayal (and analysis) of the myth across all four poems; namely, she does not reduce Persephone’s identity to that of the abducted and raped virgin. For example, the lines that follow the speaker’s reproach of the scholars include a description of Persephone as returning “home / stained with red juice” (20-21). This imagery simultaneously alludes to the juice of the pomegranate Persephone eats in the original myth and suggests the blood of a broken hymen that marks the loss of virginity. Although Glück’s revision is closer to the original myth (unlike in “Pomegranate,” Persephone clearly has eaten the fruit, and the pomegranate serves as a symbol for her loss of innocence), Glück’s speaker rejects focusing on Persephone’s sexual experience as the defining moment of her story. Instead, the speaker not only goes on to raise questions about the myth but also actively questions and revises her own perspective, asking, “I am not certain I will / keep this word: is earth / ‘home’ to Persephone? . . . Is she / at home nowhere?” (24-27). Glück’s emphasis on revision and correction of the myth is further manifested in the visual appearance of the poem. The poem’s structure comprises a fragmented and random pattern of long and short (sometimes one-line) strophes that look especially disjointed because of Glück’s strongly enjambed lines throughout. Overall, the structure contributes to the sense of incompleteness and the impression that this retelling and interpretation of the myth is still “in progress”—which is particularly fitting given that the daughter (Persephone’s) story is just

beginning, is “in progress,” now that she has left her mother’s side.

In the following strophes Glück proceeds to analyze Persephone’s experiences in the underworld that are left unconsidered in the original myth. For instance, the speaker wonders about Persephone “lying in the bed of Hades”: “Is she afraid? Has something / blotted out the idea / of mind?” (50-55). These rhetorical questions redirect the reader’s attention away from Persephone’s sexual experience to the traumatic consequences of being kidnapped and kept in the underworld. However, when the speaker next transitions from speculating about Persephone to providing Persephone’s thoughts on the matter via third-person, the poem switches directions. Instead of continuing to explore how Persephone’s abduction and first sexual experience lead to a loss of self, Glück presents Persephone’s identity struggle as being rooted in her relationship with her mother. Hence, while the speaker is uncertain if living in the world of the dead has “blotted out the idea of mind,” she says that Persephone:

. . .does know the earth  
 is run by mothers, this much  
 is certain. She also knows  
 she is not what is called  
 a girl any longer. Regarding  
 incarceration, she believes

she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter. (56-62)

In this strophe Glück traces Persephone’s position relative to the roles of “mother,” “girl,” and “daughter.” The second sentence emphasizes Persephone’s crisis of identity because Persephone’s loss of virginity can only lead her to define herself in the negative—she knows she

is “not” a girl anymore, but is unable to define herself using a positive statement. In other words, the speaker does not offer an answer as to what Persephone *is*, perhaps revealing the struggle of an adolescent female to understand her transition from girlhood to womanhood.

Persephone’s attitude toward the roles of “mother” and “daughter” is equally complicated, as the final sentence demonstrates. The last line is set off for extra emphasis, calling attention to the surprising change in tone. Whereas the reader might expect Persephone to reflect on “incarceration” in terms of her situation as Hades’ prisoner, Persephone instead feels that, as a daughter, she has always been a prisoner. With these lines Glück suggests that Persephone’s struggle with feeling confined ultimately has less to do with her abduction by Hades than it has to do with her fraught relationship with her mother. The connection between daughterliness and imprisonment implies that the mother is in a position of power over her daughter, tying into the previous statement that mothers rule over the earth. With these lines Glück draws a parallel between Demeter and Hades in seeing them both as Persephone’s oppressors, a perspective on the myth that she continues throughout this poem and the rest of the sequence. For instance, the speaker casts the tale of Persephone as “an argument between the mother and the lover— / the daughter is just meat” (86-87). Hence, in her mother and lover’s tug-of-war over who will possess Persephone, and in Demeter’s insistence on “expiation” (65), or receiving reparations for the wrongdoing of Hades against Persephone, neither concerns themselves with what Persephone, the injured party, wants. Worse, due to her powerlessness in the situation, Persephone is altogether prohibited from having her own desires and goals since she has no ability to act on them in the first place. The only option for Persephone, then, is to passively retreat into the “white of forgetfulness, / white of safety” (75-76), as a means of survival.

Overall, with the first poem in her myth revision lyric sequence, Glück asks readers to

understand the myth from the daughter's point of view, to the extent that the poem's speaker criticizes both Hades and Demeter for their contribution to Persephone's loss of self and feeling of powerlessness. As Isobel Hurst argues, Glück's prevailing interest in revising this myth places her in a broader tradition of women's writing in which women frequently turn to the Persephone myth in order to explore the bond between mother and daughter (179). Furthermore, Hurst shows that women poets have explored the myth from either the daughter's or the mother's perspective. With the second myth poem of *Averno*, "A Myth of Innocence," Glück expands upon the interplay of sexuality, power, and female adolescence, particularly in relation to the conflict between mother and daughter and questions of agency and victimization.

This narrative poem begins with Persephone pausing by a pool of water to check whether she can see any changes in herself, but to her disappointment she sees only "the same person, the horrible mantle / of daughterliness still clinging to her" (5-6). The metaphor of daughterliness as a mantle that clings to Persephone evokes the image of the mantle as a kind of cloak or shawl, something that covers a person's body. Given the negative connotation of the mantle as something awful and oppressive, it is apparent that Persephone perceives her relationship to her mother and her role as a "daughter" as obscuring or preventing her maturity and the corresponding transformation in her physical appearance that she hopes to see in the water's reflection. The burden of "daughterliness" for Persephone, then, Glück seems to suggest, is that it confines the daughter to the "innocence" of girlhood. In line with some feminist views which hold that "mothers in our [patriarchal] culture are cajoled into killing off the self-actualisation of their daughters, and daughters learn to hate them for it, instead of seeing the real enemy," Persephone believes that in order to move beyond girlhood she must shed the "horrible mantle" and her role as daughter that is preventing her "self-actualisation" or maturity—presumably, by

separating herself from her mother (Daly 149; qtd. in Chang, 57).

This solution comes in the form of Persephone's abduction by Hades, which Glück's Persephone concludes was not an abduction at all. Instead, in Glück's retelling of the myth, "death appears, like the answer to a prayer" (12). Here Glück uses "death" to refer to Hades, lord of the underworld and ruler of the dead who "appears" through a rift in the earth to kidnap Persephone. At the same time, the line also references how Hades' appearance also *brings death*: Persephone essentially "dies" by being brought to the underworld. It is for this latter reason that Isobel Hurst interprets this poem as suggesting that "Persephone's attraction to Hades has more to do with yearning for death than with sexuality" (185). However, I read "A Myth of Innocence" as being equally concerned with death and sexuality, as both are embodied in the figure and actions of Hades. After all, in the third strophe the speaker describes in erotic terms the moment when Hades takes Persephone:

No one understands anymore  
 how beautiful he was. But Persephone remembers.  
 Also that he embraced her, right there,  
 with her uncle watching. She remembers  
 sunlight flashing on his bare arms. (13-17)

While this description certainly illustrates the idiom "death's embrace," these lines do more than just focus on the allure of death to Persephone; they also reveal her sexual attraction to "him," the adult male, as her focus on the physical beauty of "his bare arms" reveals. Uta Gosmann best explains Glück's depiction of death/Hades in these *Averno* poems when she says: "Death is imbued with complex connotations: it comes as a relief; it is a traumatic turning point; it is an erotic encounter; it is a crisis calling for a decision; it is a moment with the divine" (223).

Glück's decision to characterize Persephone as attracted to Hades is an essential aspect of her revision of the myth in this poem. Unlike the scholars from "Persephone the Wanderer" whose interest in Persephone's sexuality is part of a perverse rape fantasy, though, Glück's focus on Persephone's attraction to Hades is part of her retelling of the myth in which Persephone has more agency and plays an active role in her fate. This is illustrated when Persephone states that she "was not abducted" but rather that "*I offered myself, I wanted / to escape my body*" (30-31). However, the tone of this poem also has a quality of regret and nostalgia that suggests that Persephone is not satisfied with the outcome. The adult Persephone seeks to "understand / whether [her prayer] was answered or not" (43-44) and part of the problem is that she is unable to remember "the girl she was" (25). This loss of memory, the sense that she has been cut off from an aspect of her past and her identity (the girl Persephone was "died"), is one factor that contributes to the regretful tone. The other factor is Persephone's ambivalence toward Hades, as revealed in the fifth strophe: "She also remembers, less clearly, / the chilling insight that from this moment / she couldn't live without him again" (20-22). The key adjective "chilling" suggests that Persephone is disturbed that, in seeking through Hades a way to escape her role as an innocent girl and daughter, she must accept a troubling trade-off—even though she returns to earth a "woman" after her time in the underworld with Hades, instead of gaining independence by escaping her mother she resigns herself to further dependency. Therefore, in "A Myth of Innocence" Glück further revises Persephone's character so as to provide a more complex understanding of her as a daughter and as an adolescent girl.

In the third poem of the sequence, "A Myth of Devotion," Glück turns her attention to Hades' role in the myth. Glück portrays Hades as an oblivious "lover" whose "devotion" to Persephone involves replicating in the underworld Persephone's home on earth—the meadow,

sunlight—in order to make her first time there more “comforting” (12). Even though this might appear to be a sympathetic revision of Hades, Glück nonetheless reveals that “he is no less controlling than Demeter. His strategy is the result of years of planning and observation [and] he fails to imagine that she might fear his love or feel guilt about her mother” (Hurst 186). In fact, the depiction of Hades’ (seemingly well-meaning) love as harmful to the beloved is consistent with Glück’s portrayal of love in her earlier poem “Mythic Fragment,” in which both the love of the predatory Apollo and the protective father ultimately prove fatal to the female beloved. This theme of love as dangerous to the female is encapsulated in some of the final lines of “A Myth of Devotion”:

He wants to say *I love you, nothing can hurt you*

but he thinks

this is a lie, so he says in the end

*you’re dead, nothing can hurt you* (43-46)

Hades’ rephrasing of his promise to Persephone that nothing can hurt her highlights how this “myth of devotion” should be considered not simply as a story, but rather a fabrication, a “lie.” After all, Hades is incapable of promising Persephone that his love will protect her from harm in part because he himself—and his “love”—is a threat to Persephone. The only truthful promise he can give is one of protection from physical, bodily harm. With some irony, he promises her that by virtue of being already dead (which he caused in the first place), she is “safe.”

This theme of the danger and destructiveness of love applies not only to the male’s love, but also to the mother’s love in Glück’s revision of the myth. In fact, as was shown in the opening “Persephone the Wanderer” poem, the daughter might well perceive the mother as the

greater threat to her autonomy and selfhood than the male lover-abductor. It is necessary to acknowledge here that by negatively portraying the relationship between Demeter and Persephone, Glück diverges from a myth that, in its origin, celebrates the loving, unbreakable bond between mother and daughter. This retelling has thus far cast the mother in accordance with Western narratives that only allow for portrayals of mothers as either “good” or “bad”—and in particular, seems to draw from the stepmother trope of the controlling, even malicious mother figure who is jealous of her daughter. Glück’s portrayal of Demeter and the mother-daughter relationship in the myth seems troubling from a contemporary feminist perspective that seeks to reclaim a positive or at least more complex understanding of motherhood and female-female relationships. However, as I hope to show, Glück’s overall revision of this relationship from the myth is more complicated than an outright vilification of the mother figure. Instead, the poems’ speakers vacillate among sympathy, ambivalence, and disapproval of Demeter. These conflicting attitudes converge in the final poem of *Averno*, the second “Persephone the Wanderer,” which delves into Demeter’s subjectivity. The metanarrator of the poem analyzes and retells the myth from the point of view that “Persephone / is dead” (1-2) and so “we don’t expect to know / what Persephone is doing” (6-7), implying that instead “we” can (and should?) understand the myth from the mother’s grieving point of view.

The focus on Demeter’s perspective begins in the third strophe as the speaker describes the “experience / of the mother” (11-12) looking into her child’s face. The infant daughter is compared to a “cipher” (10), a puzzle or secret writing that the mother is unable to decode, and the infant is equally “puzzled” by her mother (15). Part of this barrier to a complete understanding between the mother and daughter is that the mother can remember a time when the child did not exist. In contrast:

the child's opinion is  
 she has always existed, just as  
  
 her mother has always existed  
 in her present form. Her mother  
 is like a figure at a bus stop,  
 an audience for the bus's arrival. Before that,  
 she was the bus, a temporary  
 home or convenience. (15-22)

Glück's simile comparing the mother to both the audience for the bus and the bus itself, while the daughter is the child on/in the bus, exposes motherhood as an institution or patriarchal construct. Elaine Tuttle Hansen mentions in her discussion of stories about mothers whose "relational identity is at once disrupted and confirmed by the loss of the child," that even when these stories do not "challenge normative, categorical definitions of *mother*...they may, read from the point of view of feminist critique, expose their faultlines and constructedness" (25-26). Although Glück's analogy perhaps fails to redefine "mother" and motherhood, I believe that her analogy nonetheless calls attention to the constructedness of the patriarchal notion "that there is no concept of *mother* unless, as Ruddick says, there is a concept of *child*" (Hansen 26). Thus, while the mother (Demeter) is aware of a time before the child's "existence" when her identity was not solely tied to her child, the child herself is incapable of conceiving of the mother as having any other identity or relationship to the world other than "her present form" of the maternal. In fact, Glück highlights how limiting this understanding of motherhood and the role of the mother is: first, during pregnancy the mother is an inanimate object, "the bus," in that she

exists only to serve as a vehicle or vessel for bearing the child. The mother must sacrifice her selfhood to ensure the child's protection and safe delivery to such an extent that the mother is reduced to a mere "convenience." This understanding of the mother as existing only for the sake of the child and the child's care persists, disturbingly, as the child grows up. Hence, even when the mother transitions into a "figure at a bus stop" rather than the "bus" itself, she is defined in no other terms beyond her subservient role to the child. She is not even a person, let alone a woman at a bus stop, but only a vague, abstract "figure."

As the poem continues, Glück returns to Demeter's specific role in the myth. The lines that follow have marked shifts in tone toward Demeter, as the mother herself is revealed as feeling ambivalent about her child and motherhood in general. First, the speaker points out that although Persephone's situation is tragic, since she will only know "two adults: death and her mother" (29), Demeter's position is even worse by comparison because "two is / twice what her mother has" (30-31). These lines make it clear how being a mother has certain costs—by sacrificing all for her daughter, when the daughter is taken away, the mother is left with nothing. Yet this sympathetic portrayal of Demeter is immediately complicated by the speaker's remark that Demeter created her own loneliness, since "as a god, she could have had / a thousand children" (34-35). The speaker then attributes this dilemma to

the deep violence of the earth

whose hostility suggests

she has no wish

to continue as a source of life. (37-39)

The violence and hostility mentioned here recall the acts of destruction Demeter makes against

the earth in the first “Persephone the Wanderer.” However, while Demeter’s “punishing” of the earth was the product of her grief over having lost Persephone, the violence of the earth detailed in this poem is a repressed feeling of animosity toward childbearing and motherhood itself. Thus, as Gosmann clarifies, “While the mother consciously claims she would have liked to have many children, the actuality of only giving (a short) life to one daughter is the manifestation of an unconscious wish: not to be ‘a source of life.’ The goddess of life and fertility has an unconscious rampant with violence and hostility” (233). By revising the character of Demeter to hold repressed feelings of hostility toward the role of motherhood (as well as her daughter), Glück suggests that even the goddess whose role or duty it is to provide fecundity on earth might resent the burden of “giving life.” In so doing Glück reveals how even a traditional model of the “good mother” like Demeter can have more complex emotions about what it means to be a mother—emotions that might even risk making her a “bad mother.”

Importantly, Glück’s portrayal of a hostile and at other times ambivalent mother is not without precedent. Hansen posits that “stories of the mother without child confront without flinching the often-ignored hate, the fantasies of aggression, the desire even to kill her child that is allegedly repressed by conventional accounts of maternity (including feminist accounts)” (20-21). Similarly, in her analysis of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, Emily Jeremiah explains how “the notion of mothering as an ambivalent, even hostile undertaking has been a significant focus of recent feminist thinking about maternity” (59). Furthermore, the poem’s speaker emphasizes that she is deconstructing the original story by pointing out that this “hypothesis” about the mother’s desire to no longer be a source of life is not discussed “because / it is not *in* the story; it only / creates the story” (40-43). By highlighting the contradiction between what is in the story (Demeter’s love for Persephone, her grief, and her determination to get back her only daughter)

versus what creates the story (the earth goddess's failure—or refusal—to act as a “source of life” by bearing many children), Glück draws attention to how ambivalent feelings on the part of the mother, and in particular a woman's desire to stop having children, is never discussed or acknowledged in the myth. Instead, Demeter is only singularly portrayed in the myth as the “good and benevolent mother,” an ideal.

As the poem continues, the speaker provides further insight into the ambivalent feelings Demeter has toward Persephone. For example, Demeter reflects that “her daughter's / birth was unbearable, her beauty / was unbearable” (50-52), and the guilt she feels at having these jealous and resentful thoughts causes her to wander the world “preparing her case” (46) in self-defense because “like a politician / she remembers everything and admits / nothing” (47-49). Admittedly, the portrayal of Demeter takes a slightly harsher tone here, especially since the daughter's inability to understand her mother as anything except a mother (a “bus” and “figure at the bus stop”) is paralleled in the mother's belief that: “the daughter's body / doesn't exist, except / as a branch of the mother's body” (63-65). As Gosmann notes, “the mother's grief is not motivated by love but by feeling threatened by the loss” (234). In contrast to the more sensitive depiction of Demeter and consideration of her experiences and ambivalent feelings toward motherhood in the beginning of the poem, Glück now characterizes Demeter as a controlling and jealous woman who fails to see her daughter as her own person.

One way to consider this shift in tone, and the reverting back to the initial characterization of Demeter as an oppressor and threat to the daughter from the first “Persephone the Wanderer” poem, is that it is the result of the speaker's (and Glück's) strong identification with the daughter. That both Demeter and Hades are not as thoughtfully considered by Glück reveals that she is primarily interested with those two characters in terms of their relation to

Persephone and Persephone's story. Hence, throughout these four poems Glück revises the myth so as to understand it from the daughter's untold perspective, as narrated by unidentified speakers who clearly sympathize with her. Consequently, Glück provides a fuller and more complete representation of this female character while simultaneously critiquing the restrictive gender roles and harmful power relations that contribute to Persephone's overall powerlessness, state of dependency, and loss of identity (and that contribute to some degree, too, to Demeter's hostile feelings toward motherhood and her daughter).

## Conclusion

As this thesis demonstrates, Louise Glück has frequently employed the feminist textual strategy of revisionist mythmaking over the course of her 50-year career. Whether she is revising familiar fairy tales, biblical, historical, or classical stories, Glück repeatedly returns to themes of paralysis, objectification, silence, grief, and loss of self in her depictions of white female experiences. She presents these themes by portraying female figures who feel trapped in their gender roles and oppressed in their intimate and familial relationships. In particular, Glück often depicts heterosexual love as threatening a woman's autonomy, self-expression, or even her life—whether because it involves forfeiting her own power in order to maintain the relationship, as Circe does; being viewed by her husband as a convenient object or tool that aids his own creativity, like Eurydice; or being the victims of a conflict between the determined lover and the protective parent, as are Daphne and Persephone.

Glück's expansion of isolated lyric poems into longer lyric sequences in her later books reveals her engagement in the process of using formal structure to further remake and retell myth. The extended sequences prove especially useful in exploring these female characters at length. By assigning multiple poems to the figures of Circe, Eurydice, and Persephone, Glück gives a multifaceted understanding of these women. As a result, she allows her readers to reconsider each story from the woman's point of view rather than from the male character's (or narrator's); in other words, Glück revises these myths so that the female characters matter in themselves, instead of mattering only as objects of male attention or desire. In so doing Glück calls attention to the androcentrism of each story and questions the assumptions, stereotypes, and missing voices underlying the original myth's construction. That Glück devotes more attention to

Circe and Eurydice in particular, rather than continuing the myths' focus on their (traditionally more celebrated) male counterparts, further highlights her woman-centered approach.

In addition, Glück employs other elements in her revisionist mythmaking, such as tone and ambiguity, which prove key to understanding the varied attitudes—solemn, outraged, humorous—of the speakers toward their situations and toward the other characters. Linguistic ambiguity is a means through which Glück defamiliarizes the myth and subverts stereotypes; however, when combined with her tendency to leave speakers unidentified, this ambiguity can also make it difficult to understand the position Glück takes toward her subject matter when filtered through the speaker's perspective. In some cases, this translates into ambivalence on the part of Glück toward the figures in the myth, as with her mixed portrayal of Demeter. One aspect in which her poems undermine revisionist mythmaking is in her negative portrayals of female-female relationships or interactions, such as with Circe's actions against Penelope and the mutual hostility between Persephone and Demeter. In fact, in revising these characters out of one traditional stereotype (the "evil witch and seductress," the "good mother") Glück risks depicting the women as another stereotype that is different but still harmful ("the jealous and vengeful other woman," "the bad mother").

Nonetheless, her revisions are, on the whole, feminist poems that succeed in exploring forgotten or marginalized female characters' subjectivities, giving voices to silenced figures whose perspectives often reveal the traumatizing consequences of patriarchal society on women. Sometimes, the speaker even assumes the voice and role of a (female) poet determined to convey her insight and narrate her experiences to an attentive audience. As often seems to be the case, in reimagining these mythological figures as poets, Glück not only empathizes with the women's

plights but appears also to identify herself with them—as a daughter, a mother, a lover/wife, and a poet.

Up to this point, I have argued in this thesis that Glück's use of revisionist mythmaking and the prevalent feminist themes throughout her oeuvre show that much of her work should be considered as feminist poetry. However, I must now stress the possibly confusing semantic distinction between “feminist poetry” and “feminist poet.” While I believe that reading Glück's work through the framework of my definition of feminist poetry—and understanding how her work exhibits similar characteristics and use of revisionist strategies as many other (celebrated, feminist) women poets—justifies classifying her work as feminist, I do not mean to suggest that Louise Glück herself is or should be labeled a feminist. Therefore, throughout my thesis I have observed this distinction and avoided claiming that Glück is a feminist poet. However, I have not yet addressed how I believe it is possible to read a poet's work as feminist without assigning the label of “feminist” to the poet herself. There are two crucial questions that remain to be answered, then: first, “is feminist poetry produced only by feminist poets?”; and second, “is every poem written by a feminist poet a feminist poem?”

To help answer these questions, I want to revisit Glück's own words from her essay collection *Proofs and Theories* on the question of feminist and women's poetry, which I quoted in the Introduction. In reflecting on how she is “puzzled” by the “determination of women to write as women,” Glück suggests that literature reveals any differences between the sexes “more interestingly, more subtly, in the absence of intention” (7). Here, Glück herself acknowledges that what a poem reveals upon analysis is just as important as what the poet initially intended. Considering her consistent woman-centered approach to the myths as well as her identification with these female figures, it is clear to me that Glück's work does just that: in the absence of any

feminist agenda or self-conscious intention to write as a woman, Glück's poems can nonetheless be understood as "feminist poems" for the way they sympathetically portray and comment upon the experiences and struggles of women. In other words, Glück not only demonstrates that one does not have to be a feminist poet to write feminist poetry, but also validates critical readings like mine that consider her work as feminist.

Another way to approach this issue of authorial intent—and, by extension, the question of whose work should be included in or excluded from the feminist poetic "canon"—is to consider whether, conversely, it is possible for a self-identified feminist poet to write nonfeminist poems. I think the answer is clear that, yes, a feminist can produce something that is nonfeminist. For instance, it might be the case that the poet only recently began to identify as a feminist, so that her earlier poems do not reflect a feminist consciousness. Alternatively, she could write poems that, upon analysis, do not exhibit the qualities of "feminist poetry" as defined by feminist critics—perhaps, in a specific poem, the poet does not critique patriarchal conditions; subvert masculine poetic forms or canonical images; or illuminate the ways in which the socialization of gender shapes our experiences. Therefore, if a feminist poet can produce nonfeminist work, then it seems clear to me that a nonfeminist poet can just as easily produce feminist poetry.

Moreover, in recalling the disputed matter of how feminist critics define what is and is not feminist poetry, I think it useful to consider an important, though easily overlooked, possible way to differentiate between "feminist poetry" and "feminist poet": while "feminist poetry" is a term applied to a subgenre of poetry defined by a shared set of goals and similarities in subject matter, theme, or style, the decision to call oneself a "feminist" is an aspect of that poet's *personal identity*, as much as is that individual's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, or something like their political affiliation. Of course, this distinction has become somewhat

blurred due to how common it is for the two to overlap. In other words, “feminist poet” and “feminist poetry” seem almost interchangeable because of the many contemporary poets who identify as feminists and also write feminist poetry, of which Adrienne Rich is a prime example. However, I think this clarification is an important and necessary one to make because of poets like Glück who do not identify as feminists but who nonetheless write feminist poetry. In fact, the complexity in determining what/whose work should be included in this category of poetry and the inevitable questions that arise (can a nonfeminist’s work be included? what about men’s poetry?) finds a parallel in other debates in academia, such as the lively discourse surrounding what the proper parameters should be for African American literature.<sup>8</sup>

To return to my original point, then, I think it is reasonable to consider Glück’s work, on a poem-by-poem basis, as feminist poetry, but simultaneously not to force the label of feminist on the poet herself—especially when she has refused to identify as such. Overall, with this thesis I aim to have shown that poets like Louise Glück who have not garnered as much attention or acclaim from feminist audiences—perhaps because the poet herself does not identify as a feminist, and perhaps because critics have largely ignored the possibility of reading her poetry as feminist—can significantly repay feminist analysis. Moreover, I hope that by drawing attention to Glück’s frequent and varied use of revisionist mythmaking throughout her oeuvre, and by arguing for her work’s inclusion in the feminist poetic tradition, Glück might be taught and read more widely in academia.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> By “nonfeminist” I mean poetry that does not exhibit the qualities of “feminist poetry” as defined by feminist critics, one understanding of which is poetry that reveals a political consciousness in seeking to subvert the “oppressor’s language,” particularly through portraying women’s experience and critiquing patriarchal society. Instead, nonfeminist poetry might adhere to masculine poetic traditions in language and form rather than utilize feminist textual strategies and techniques, or simply not be concerned with subject matter and themes that have fallen under feminist tradition. I do not mean “nonfeminist” as a synonym for “antifeminist,” however, which to me suggests poetry that is directly opposed to or deliberately rejects the aims and values of feminism.

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah Roberts make a similar point in “Penelope’s Song: the Lyric Odysseys of Linda Pastan and Louise Glück” when they connect Glück’s use of myth to Ostriker’s concept of revisionist mythmaking, as I later learned in consulting their work.

<sup>3</sup> See for example *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Mark Strand’s “Orpheus Alone,” Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, or Shakespeare’s “Orpheus” song from *Henry VIII*, among others.

<sup>5</sup> Murnaghan and Roberts make this point in a separate discussion of Glück’s (and other women poets’) use of Penelope as an emblem for the female artist in “Penelope’s Song: the Lyric Odysseys of Linda Pastan and Louise Glück.”

<sup>6</sup> Technically, the Orpheus of classical mythology played a lyre and not a lute. Glück’s decision to refer to his instrument as a “lute” could be an oblique reference to Shakespeare’s song about Orpheus from *Henry VIII* in which he describes the poet as “Orpheus with his lute.” It is also likely that Glück chose “lute” in order to incorporate the description of “grief” as “dark wood”—lyres were traditionally made in ancient times using tortoise shells, whereas lutes are string instruments made of wood.

<sup>7</sup> As do Isobel Hurst in her article “‘Love and blackmail’: Demeter and Persephone” and Rosanna Warren in the chapter “Contradictory Classicists: Frank Bidart and Louise Glück” from her book *Fables of the Self: Studies in Lyric Poetry*.

<sup>8</sup> Clarence Major began this debate in academia with his 1974 book *The Dark & Feeling: Black American Writers and Their Work*. See also the extensive recent discussions of and symposia on Kenneth W. Warren’s 2012 book *What Was African American Literature?*.

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