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"The Ancients Taught Me How to Sound Modern": Mythological Allusions in A. E. Stallings's Poems

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INTRODUCTION

Classical mythology continues to prove valuable even in the twenty-first century, given that it allows contemporary artists, poets, and writers to draw inspiration from ancient myths in order to create or enrich their works. In fact, as Kapoor (91) points out,

> … mythology has continued to influence and fascinate people from antiquity to the present day. Myths have been considered traditional sacred narratives that intend to explain the relationship between the entire universe and the human experience.

The growing popularity retained by classical mythology also depends on the fact that ancient myths have been used to call attention to current issues and phenomena. Indeed, several myths have been reworked and retold with the purpose of emphasizing complex situations which contemporaries may still encounter in their daily lives, altering the conventional perspective adopted in ancient times. For instance, a number of authors and artists rely on mythology to start discussions on misogyny, inequality, and the vilification of otherness. As a result, the typically marginalized figures of mythology – such as women and monsters – have been recast as the protagonists of various mythological retellings, finally being granted the opportunity to tell their stories in the first person.

Alicia Elsbeth Stallings, who publishes as A. E. Stallings, is an American poet and translator currently residing in Greece with her family. When asked about the purpose of poetry, she answered that poetry's function is

> To have life, and to have it more abundantly. … Other times perhaps it is about making dead limbs come together and miraculously breathe—to bring something to life, even if it is a monster. (Ignatowitsch 2)

Stallings's poetry is heavily influenced by classical mythology and her works are steeped in antiquity. In addition to this, she occasionally engages in the revisionism of ancient myths in her works,

regularly demonstrating how mythology helps her understand the world in which she lives. The protagonists of her poems are frequently the outcasts and background characters of ancient myths and epics. Stallings's interests are diverse, and she writes about death, love, and kitchen tools with equal enthusiasm, repeatedly featuring her favorite myths in her works – such as the myth of the Cretan labyrinth, the abduction of Persephone, and Eurydice's death. In spite of the fact that she devotes herself to antiquity, she has been praised for her "freshness" and her unique ability to "make a formal poem conversational" (Murchison). Thus, Stallings's poems are in line with the contemporary engrossment in the classics. For this reason, the present thesis aims to explore A. E. Stallings's references to ancient myths with the purpose of determining how she manages to use mythology to contemplate and explain her surroundings, seamlessly connecting the past with the present: to examine, that is to say, how she "reaches back to antiquity to explore contemporary life" (O'Rourke).

The first chapter of this thesis will briefly investigate the contemporary fascination with the classics by inquiring into well-known contemporary mythological retellings such as Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne*, Madeline Miller's *Circe*, and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* – introducing the literary movement known as "feminist revisionism". Additionally, it will call attention to the existence of alternative media used to revitalize mythology such as graphic novels, podcasts, and music. In particular, it will highlight how mythology has been used by contemporary poets such as Rachel Hadas, Louise Glück, and Nikita Gill to discuss several topics pertaining to the present, showing that mythological figures allow multiple readings. The second section of this chapter will focus entirely on A. E Stallings. After delving into her career and her views on poetry, this section will concern itself with Stallings's use of mythology connected to her preoccupation with contemporary issues such as the refugee crisis. As a result, the poet seemingly places poetry and activism side by side in her works. Moreover, this section will introduce the poet's ability to join antiquity and modernity and unite epic and the mundane in her poems. For example, house chores, birds, and kitchen tools are ordinary activities, animals, and elements which inspire Stallings with thoughts of ancient stories and worlds.

The second chapter will focus attention on Stallings's feminist revisions, namely those poems centered around the experiences of mythological women and goddesses. In fact, in her works, Stallings appears to challenge the androcentric and patriarchal mindsets typical of antiquity, describing how women and goddesses were treated by men and gods such as Tereus and Apollo. In addition to this, she provides a number of mythological women with the chance to speak in the first person, an opportunity frequently used to denounce the mistreatment and abandonment inflicted by their lovers upon them. The poet also comments on ancient beauty standards, acknowledging that twenty-first-century women are still expected to live up to the same unattainable ideals. The second section of this chapter will focus on Stallings's sympathy for the outcasts and monsters of Greco-Roman mythology, which she identifies as victims rather than oppressors. In particular, Stallings shows mercy and tenderness towards the Minotaur, a mythological beast of which she is especially fond.

The third and final chapter of this thesis will consider Stallings's views on love and death. The poet writes relentlessly about love and its struggles in her works, concentrating on difficult relationships and struggling marriages. Additionally, Stallings unceasingly meditates on death and mortality, turning the Greek Underworld into a ubiquitous presence in her poems. Stallings relies on mythology to investigate both love and death, and these two spheres seem to be closely connected in her poetry. As a consequence, after discussing Stallings's fascination with these two conditions, the second section of this chapter will illustrate how the poet manages to mix love and death by taking into consideration three couples who constantly recur throughout her works. These couples – namely, Hades and Persephone, Orpheus and Eurydice, and Eros and Psyche – develop part of their stories in the Underworld. Hence, the House of Hades becomes the place in which they either build their relationship or they fall out of love. As a result, Stallings is able to create a multifaceted Underworld, which can either be seen as a prison or as a form of salvation depending on the description provided by the unfortunate characters who are forced to travel to the House of Hades.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 “The Act of Looking Back”: The Relevance of Classical Mythology to the Contemporary World

Greco-Roman mythology has managed to maintain its relevance across several eras, succeeding in offering a possible interpretation of the curious elements and mysterious happenings of the world. Its importance shines through the works of famous painters, writers, and poets, who turned ancient myths into a source of inspiration. In an email conversation, the novelist Stacy Swann advanced the hypothesis that ancient myths may be so enthralling because they offer a plausible explanation for incomprehensible events and behaviors (Higgins and Swann). In addition to this, Christensen points out that the feelings and actions of the heroes and gods mentioned in classical literature bear a strong resemblance to the emotions and reactions of modern-day men and women, who are able to explore and analyze their own feelings by relying on ancient myths. However, myths are oftentimes transformed and revisited – a process which has been immensely popular since ancient times, to such an extent that countless myths are essentially retellings of previously existing myths. As a result, it is not simple to identify the ‘original’ plot of a myth, since various contrasting versions of the same story exist – especially considering that myths used to be passed down orally before appearing in writings, a practice which may have further altered the initial narrative, leading to the acknowledgment of manifold perspectives on a number of mythological figures. For this reason, inconsistencies abound in classical mythology, thus revision – “the act of looking back” (Rich 18) – becomes fundamental for the classics and their modern retellings because it adapts their forms and messages to new eras, allowing their main meaning to live on (Jaeger qtd. in Brown 130).

In fact, contemporary readers and writers have succumbed to the charm of Greco-Roman mythology, managing to turn books and novels which heavily rely on classical literature into bestsellers. Yet, the approaches used to handle the mythological material vary significantly. For example, authors and artists might portray the classics either as a mysterious subject suited for the

selected few or they may attempt to captivate the general public in order to demonstrate that mythology can be easily accessible and entrancing. In fact, on the one hand, Donna Tartt's bestseller *The Secret History* (1992) romanticizes classical studies (Mills 14) and portrays classicists as a bizarre and eccentric clique of students who seem to regard themselves as intellectually superior to their peers (Tartt 17-19). On the other hand, Rick Riordan's series of five fantasy novels, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009), aims the mythological material mainly at children. Interestingly, the main character, Percy, does not excel at school, contradicting the notion that classical mythology should be associated only with distinguished scholars.

What is more, Irving points out that, in the classics, mythological women were commonly demonized and kept under control, as men feared their potential power. Indeed, ancient Greece was patriarchal at its core, hence ancient myths mirror a situation in which men were favored over women, particularly emphasizing the struggles and achievements of heroes and gods. These so-called 'heroes', while being the protagonists of countless stories, were oftentimes war criminals, murderers, and rapists rather than exemplary men (Higgins). On the contrary, the voices of women and goddesses have long been ignored by authors and scholars, contributing to converting the classics into a male-dominated field generally "defined by the exclusion of women" (Goff). Notwithstanding, women have started showing more interest in the field of Classics, and they have decided to revisit myths which were previously told and written down by generations of men, looking at them from new, innovative perspectives. As a consequence, there has been a recent surge of interest in classical mythology which resulted in the willingness to re-examine ancient myths, paying attention even to the most marginalized figures, and adopting their perspectives in music, poetry, and prose. In particular, this contemporary sympathy for the ignored and scorned characters of mythology has helped cast light on issues which are still relevant to the modern world. For instance, special attention has been devoted to female mythological characters in a possible attempt to challenge the prevailing androcentric perspective which characterizes the majority of myths – a movement which has become known as "feminist revisionism" (Guest 3). In fact, mythological women were frequently background

characters, scapegoats, or passive figures in stories centered around heroes and gods, suggesting that "while men have myths on their side, women have myths against them" (Kapoor 91). This inequality still represents a problem in the twenty-first century because, at times, the mistreatment of women displayed in the classics is still used to support misogynistic behaviors and justify contemporary misdemeanors (89). For this reason, the subversion of patriarchal values in mythology appears to be a pressing issue which aims at conferring dignity to the emotions and experiences of women – a necessity which becomes fundamental when discussing recurrent topics in the classics such as sexual assault and overly cruel punishments.

For example, Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005) welcomes Penelope, who is generally only considered important since she is Odysseus's wife, as the protagonist of the novel, drawing attention to the struggles she endured during the twenty years of Odysseus's absence from Ithaca – a decision which helped in promoting the mythological feminist agenda (Conrad). Likewise, Madeline Miller is an American author who has gained international fame thanks to her novels, which are known for shifting the focus of ancient myths from the canonical heroes to the secondary characters of the story – focusing both on mythological women and on additional overlooked figures of classical mythology. In fact, her debut novel, *The Song of Achilles* (2011), appears to be a retelling of the *Iliad*. However, the narrator is Patroclus, Achilles's right-hand man, and Miller expands on Homer's possible hints of homoerotic love between the two characters, exploring a mutual affection which started during their youth and lasted all the way into the Underworld. To do so, Miller ingeniously introduces their romantic feelings by taking inspiration from Homer's own words,

> 'That is – your friend?'
>
> '*Philtatos*,' Achilles says, sharply. Most beloved. (*The Song of Achilles* 333)

In fact, Woodard (64) points out that Achilles refers to Patroclus as "poly philtatos" in the *Iliad* – namely "the most loved by far" (qtd. in Leidich 8) – and "my Patroclus" (9). Patroclus's conventional role as Achilles's cousin or best friend in various retellings or film adaptations seems to explain

neither this label nor Achilles's inconsolable grief after Patroclus's death in the *Iliad* (8). Thus, Miller seemingly employs the mythological material to normalize the existence of homosexual relationships, deviating from those who rely on ancient mythology to support their misogynistic and homophobic views. Moreover, Patroclus, despite being a man, is never considered manly enough to become the hero of the story, and even in his own retelling he is depicted as a "*Coward*" (*The Song of Achilles* 16). Miller's second novel, *Circe* (2018), seems to partake more explicitly in the aforementioned movement of feminist revisionism. *Circe* is a reworking of Homer's *Odyssey* and other minor myths as experienced by Circe – the nymph and witch of Aiaia who transformed Odysseus's men into pigs. Miller sees this transformation as an act of self-defense (Edemariam), and she uses her novel to criticize men's perceived entitlement to women's bodies and minds: "Brides, nymphs were called, but that is not really how the world saw us. We were an endless feast laid out upon a table, beautiful and renewing. And so very bad at getting away" (*Circe* 202). What is more, the author comments on the cruelties inflicted by the so-called heroes of mythology upon innocent creatures often categorized as monsters due to their unusual physical appearance – a further aspect with which several contemporary retellings of mythology concern themselves: "You know how your dear father Zeus dotes on such creatures. How else can all his bastard heroes win their reputations?" (138). Miller also manages to talk about the struggles of motherhood, discussing the difficulty of being a mother without sugar-coating the bitter truth. Indeed, Circe confesses: "I did not go easy to motherhood. I faced it as soldiers face their enemies …" (251), realistically comparing motherhood to war, a harsh simile with which several mothers might find it hard to disagree.

Similarly, the English writer Natalie Haynes published *The Children of Jocasta* (2017) – a retelling of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* which focuses on the two minor characters Jocasta and Ismene – and *A Thousand Ships* (2019) – a novel concerned with the pain suffered by women during the Trojan War, which highlights their overlooked heroism (Lowry). The women of the Trojan War are also the protagonists of Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), particularly Briseis, Achilles's Trojan concubine. Additionally, Barker decided to adopt the same feminist approach while dealing

with the aftermath of the Trojan War in her novel *The Women of Troy: A Novel* (2021) (Hughes-Hallett). Jennifer Saint is a further best-selling English author who partakes in the feminist revisionism movement. In her debut novel, *Ariadne* (2021), Saint rewrites the myth of the Cretan labyrinth and its aftermath from Ariadne's perspective, the daughter of the Cretan king Minos. As a result, the author is able to depict how entire generations of women have been used and mistreated by men, rapidly making the Cretan princess feel disillusioned with the world:

> What I did not know was that I had hit upon a truth of womanhood: however blameless a life we led, the passions and the greed of men could bring us to ruin, and there was nothing we could do. (*Ariadne* 15)

Ariadne is appalled at the injustice suffered by women at the hands of men who were seeking fame and glory, confessing "No longer was my world one of brave heroes; I was learning all too swiftly the women's pain that throbbed unspoken through the tales of their feats" (15). Saint seems to reiterate this notion in her second novel, *Elektra* (2022), a feminist retelling of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* whose protagonists are Clytemnestra, Elektra, and Cassandra – respectively Agamemnon's wife, his youngest daughter, and his human prize of war. While talking about her husband Agamemnon, Clytemnestra says:

> And now he takes a woman as though she were a thing, he risks his whole war, the war for which he slaughtered his own child like an animal, for the sake of saying that this Briseis is his and not Achilles'. (*Elektra* 159)

Thus, Saint expresses Clytemnestra's disgust at her husband's treatment of women as prizes and expendable objects whose only purpose is to help him achieve pleasure and glory, creating an enraged female character who is justified in her vengeful actions.

However, novels are not the only medium used to popularize and modernize classical mythology. The contemporary interest in mythology has been expressed through a multitude of

techniques. For instance, the Canadian creator Liv Albert started a podcast in 2017 called *Let's Talk about Myths, Baby!*, in which she discusses ancient myths, paying particular attention to mythological women and potential LGBTQ+ figures (Albert). Additionally, myths have been repurposed in order to be retold in the format of graphic novels and webcomics. For example, Rachel Smythe's *Lore Olympus* (2018) is an ongoing webcomic about a modern reinterpretation of the relationship between Hades and Persephone. *Lore Olympus*'s extreme popularity is signaled by its two Eisner Awards and its 1.3 billion views (Ramsburg), proving the charm still exerted by classical mythology. What is more, the music industry appears to be willing to follow this trend, with many songwriters mentioning mythology to communicate with their listeners. "Achilles Come Down" by the Gang of Youth (2017) is a song which depicts Achilles sitting on a rooftop, ready to jump; thus, the Australian band uses a mythological figure in order to approach the topic of suicide. Similarly, in his song "Swan Upon Leda" (2022), the singer and songwriter Hozier references the myth of Leda and the swan to cover the topics of sexual assault and abortion rights. According to the myth, Zeus, after being rejected, deceitfully transformed himself into a swan in order to seduce the uninterested Leda, leaving her pregnant without her consent (Atsma, "Leda").

Yet, poetry seems to be one of the most prolific fields when it comes to the employment of myths for modern purposes. Indeed, while mythology has consistently played a significant part in poetry over the years, it appears to have become increasingly more prominent in the works of contemporary poets. For example, the American poet Rachel Hadas makes frequent references to Greco-Roman mythology in her poems, which are otherwise concerned with domesticity ("Rachel Hadas"), successfully combining the classics with her daily life. In her poem "The Fall of Troy", published in 1998 in *Halfway Down the Hall: New and Selected Poems*, Hadas joins the epic world of the aftermath of the Trojan War with the mundane world of furniture. Indeed, "The Fall of Troy" seems to be a reinterpretation of the invocation to the Muse present in Virgil's *Aeneid*; however, instead of focusing on battles or on Juno's wrath, the poet writes "Sing now the heavy furniture of the fall, / the journey's ending …" (*Halfway Down the Hall* 67) and confines her attention to battered

chairs, tables, sofas, shelves, and benches. Likewise, in "The Chorus", a poem published in 2004 in *Laws*, Hadas combines antiquity and modernity by pointing out that the horrors of current times are not so far removed from the scenes featured in classical tragedies, claiming that "dark doings in the sleepiest small town / loom dire and histrionic as a play" (3). The poet believes that seniors recognize that crimes and abominations such as murders and incest are bound to repeat themselves over the years, and she compares their ability to see the bigger picture to the role fulfilled by the chorus in ancient plays:

> This highly skilled and patient process—find
> a larger context, match and patch and mend—
> is what the chorus in Greek tragedy
> has always done … (3)

In this poem, Hadas seems to redeem the role of the frequently overlooked chorus, given that it is not as self-centered as the heroines and heroes, but is more interested in the shapes and patterns of the plot (4).

A further poet whose work is heavily influenced by classical mythology is Louise Glück, winner of the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature ("Louise Glück"), whose recent death has shaken the literary world. In her collections, Glück offers her readers an out-and-out reinterpretation of several myths, occasionally expressing views which seem to adhere to modern understandings of manifold mythological figures. For instance, the poem "The Triumph of Achilles", which was published in 1985 in the collection of the same name, revisits the tragic story of Achilles and Patroclus – similarly to what Madeline Miller did 26 years later. Contrary to the conventional portrayal of the pair, Glück gives Achilles and Patroclus equal worth, highlighting that "Patroclus resembled him; they wore / the same armor" (*The Triumph of Achilles* 16). The shared armor, which seems to belong to both of them rather than to Achilles, might also symbolize their co-dependence ("Louise Glück's Music" 39). The triumph hinted at in the title refers to Achilles's ability to be overcome with inconsolable grief after

Patroclus's death – a state into which he could only get thanks to his mortal side (39), which, coincidentally, is also "… the part that loved" (*The Triumph of Achilles* 16). Therefore, his mortality, which has been frequently considered to be his only weakness, is portrayed in Glück's poem as his greatest strength. In fact, the sea nymph Thetis, Achilles's mother, dipped her newborn son into the river Styx in order to make him fully immortal, but she neglected to dip the heel she was holding, making him vulnerable. Interestingly, although the title refers to Achilles, Glück calls it "… the story of Patroclus" (16), a decision seemingly shared by Miller, who, although she titled her novel *The Song of Achilles*, chose Patroclus as the main character and narrator. In addition to this, the Nobel Prize winner appears to be interested in the dynamics existing within the relationship between Hades and Persephone, the rulers of the Underworld – a couple that has aroused the interest of contemporary authors and artists due to its complexity. In "Persephone the Wanderer", originally published in *Averno* in 2006, the poet debates whether Persephone is Hades's protesting victim, recognizing this assault as still tragically relatable to girls and women of the twenty-first century, or whether Persephone is deliberately tormenting her desperate mother by following her lover into the Underworld. Split between the earth and what lies underneath it, Persephone seems to belong nowhere:

> … is earth
> "home" to Persephone? Is she at home, conceivably,
> in the bed of the god? Is she
> at home nowhere? … (*Averno* 22)

As a result, Persephone appears to be a "wanderer", forced to constantly move between the two realms in order to appease both her mother and her husband, suggesting a lack of control over her own life. Indeed, Glück claims that Persephone's story should be seen "as an argument between the mother and the lover— / the daughter is just meat" (24), innovatively implying that Persephone has never had control over her own decisions – neither in the Underworld nor above its surface.

In a similar fashion, Nikita Gill published an entire collection of poetry which seemingly aims at rebranding ancient myths as feminist tales – namely, *Great Goddesses: Life Lessons from Myths and Monsters* (2019). Nikita Gill is a British-Indian "instapoet" who gained popularity by publishing her works on social media platforms such as *Instagram*; however, while her poetry resonates with many readers, its execution is occasionally criticized (Staff). In her poems, Gill condemns the mistreatment that mythological women had to endure at the hands of heroes and gods, and she humanizes the monsters of mythology. For example, in her poem "Asterion", the Minotaur is depicted as "a bull-headed boy who only wanted his mother" (Gill 188). Similarly to Louise Glück, Gill seems to be interested in the complex figure of Persephone. Nevertheless, her interpretation of the goddess appears to differ from the one provided by Glück. In her poem "Persephone to Demeter", Persephone appears to be ambitious and very much in charge of her own life, choosing to go against her mother's wishes in order to willingly follow her lover, resolving the doubts concerning her possible lack of consent:

> They needed you to remind the birds to sing,
> but, Mama, you gave birth to a girl
> who knows her own mind. He didn't snatch me
> and take me to hell. I went there because
> I wanted a queendom destined to be mine. (168)

However, in an interview released on Liv Albert's podcast, *Let's Talk about Myths, Baby!*, Gill confessed to regretting the choice of turning Persephone into Hades's willing accessory to her own kidnapping, realizing that she was depriving countless survivors of trauma and kidnapping of their narratives ("Medusa, Colonialism" 10:31-10:41), finally conceding that the myth of Persephone and Hades is about the trafficking of human beings (13:24-14:20).

The fact that Glück and Gill could interpret the nature and disposition of the same goddess in such divergent manners shows that it is possible to read the behaviors and emotions of the same

mythological figures from a variety of points of view, admitting the possibility of several different versions coexisting – a tendency that already existed in ancient times. In fact, there are countless interpretations of myths and mythological figures, and a comprehensive list of these retellings would be beyond the scope of this thesis. However, this section has sought to scrutinize the most popular contemporary works which feature mythology in order to contextualize a movement in which it may be possible to place A. E. Stallings. Indeed, the use of mythological materials in the poet's impressive works will be the focus of the following sections and chapters.

1.2 Alicia Elsbeth Stallings

1.2.1 Stallings's "Love Affair with the Past": Poetry, Activism, and Myths

Alicia Elsbeth Stallings is an American poet born in 1968, currently living in Athens, Greece, with her Greek husband and two children. Her interest in Greek culture and ancient mythology led her to study the classics both at the University of Georgia and at Oxford University (Ruby), rapidly realizing that multifold interpretations of ancient myths can coexist (Murchison). Stallings's work has been critically acclaimed and she has won numerous prizes such as the Runciman Award, the Richard Wilbur Award, and the Poets' Prize. Additionally, she has been granted a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship, and she has been elected as the 2023 Oxford Professor of Poetry. So far, her published works consist of five collections of poetry – *Archaic Smile* (1999), *Hapax* (2006), *Olives* (2012), *Like* (2018), and *This Afterlife* (2022) – and three translations – Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (2009), Hesiod's *Works and Days* (2018), and the fable *The Battle between the Frogs and the Mice* (2019). Curiously, the vast majority of her poems, essays, and translations appear to take inspiration from the classics – in particular, from Greco-Roman mythology.

What is more, A. E. Stallings defends the importance of poetry by claiming that, while being considered useless, it will survive as long as human beings do, and she sees poems both as a distraction from the horrors of the world and as a source of consolation during hardships ("Why Bother with Poetry?"). The poet jokingly describes the uneasiness she feels when she discloses her profession to strangers:

> If you want to shut the conversation down, you can always say you are a poet. And then if your interlocutor is persistent, and follows up with "What kind of poetry do you write?" You can always answer, "Good". That usually does the trick. Or sometimes, if it is more of a literary crowd, I might mix things up with "the kind that rhymes". ("Why Bother with Poetry?)

Indeed, whilst being confident about the quality of her poems, Stallings acknowledges the oddness of her profession. Yet, she seemingly relishes the freedom which comes from working in an overlooked field that appears to be still uncorrupted by money ("The Freedom of Amateurs" 65-66). In addition to this, in *Like*, her third collection, Stallings collected a poem originally published in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* titled "Art Monster", ingeniously referencing Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), in which the female narrator proclaims that she wants to be an 'art monster' whose only focus is art instead of mundanity – allegedly a decision rarely taken by women (Gabbert 24). The label of 'art monster' is gendered, as it has frequently been used as an insult against women considered to be selfish for deciding what to do with their own time instead of complying with what society expects them to do (24). However, this definition has been reclaimed by women working in the arts, who have started to proudly call themselves 'art monsters' (24). Perhaps, by choosing this title for her poem, Stallings is reclaiming the label for herself, highlighting that there is nothing monstrous or selfish about being dedicated to the arts – an idea she emphasizes by casting the Minotaur as the protagonist of "Art Monster", a misunderstood creature in which Stallings fails to see monstrous traits (*Like* 7-8). As a result, Stallings seems to wholeheartedly embrace a life devoted to the arts, identifying her poetry as a priority which does not take away from her roles as mother and wife.

Furthermore, she uses bats as an archetype to describe her poetry – animals she is strangely fond of, to the point of writing "Explaining an Affinity for Bats" (*Hapax* 61), in which she defends their dignity and uniqueness, and centering her first lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry around these peculiar creatures ("The Bat Poet"). While delivering her TED talk in 2012, she compared the

creation of poetry to the necessity for bats to drop into the void before being able to fly, which requires a total abandonment of control ("The Courage of Poetry" 03:29-03:51). In the same speech, Stallings admits to not being interest in self-expression:

> I'm not really interested in expressing myself, I don't really think I'm that interesting. I am interested in expressing the poem, and finding out what the poem has to say to me and learning something from the poem. (05:42-05:57)

The poet's urgency to completely give up control and be guided by the poem itself might also explain why she favors form in poetry, as she argues that form allows her to let herself go and trust the influence of external forces (Gunn). Indeed, she believes unlimited liberty to be paralyzing (Gunn) – a belief which finds an echo in her poems, as she recurrently expresses her preference for dogs over cats. For example, the souls belonging to Stallings's mythological Underworld are positively equated with dogs thanks to their loyalty and pliability. In fact, in "The Dogdom of the Dead", Stallings claims that "There is no dog so loyal as the Dead" (*Archaic Smile* 16), an idea also expressed in "Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother", in which she writes "Yet no dog is so loyal as the dead" (8). Both poems were initially published in *Poetry* (1997) and then collected in *Archaic Smile*. On the other hand, living beings are equated with cats, given that both can be considered to be "Ungrateful creatures with their own lives" (16), which refers to the impossibility of controlling and taming them, adding that "… cats only contemplate suggestions" in "Psalm Beginning with Two Lines of Smart's *Jubilate Agno*" (*Like* 94), originally published in *The Dark Horse*. The poet expressed her light-hearted antipathy towards cats even on her *X* account – formerly known as *Twitter* – by saying that "If Odysseus had had a 20-year-old cat instead of a dog, it would have greeted his return by peeing in his suitcase" (@ae_stallings). Thus, Stallings's inclinations may explain her tendency towards order, structure, and attention to detail, qualities which are then applied to her poetry as well. As a result, she seems to choose her words very carefully and she appears to be especially interested in

their etymology (Nathan). For instance, she starts her second collection, *Hapax*, by explaining the ancient meaning and origin of its title, namely an act or event which can only occur a single time.

In addition to this, A. E. Stallings's interest in the classics becomes apparent thanks to the numerous mythological references contained in her published collections of poetry. The poet's obsession with myths and mythological figures started during her childhood ("A. E. Stallings: *This Afterlife*" 06:29-06:36) and led her to offer her readers alternative readings of popular ancient myths, inspired by the fact that classical mythology has always been open to several interpretations. Her absorption in antiquity is so absolute that it has been described as a "love affair with the past" (McGuire), and she regularly employs mythology in her works in order to discuss pressing topics and issues such as motherhood, death, and womanhood. As a consequence, it may be possible to link a portion of her poems with the movement of feminist revisionism mentioned in the previous section. Like the aforementioned authors, Stallings is aware of the lack of consideration experienced by women and goddesses in ancient myths, and she seems determined to explore the stories of mythological figures such as Persephone, Ariadne, and Penelope, providing her readers with insights into their struggles and pain. What is more, Stallings believes that the growing preoccupation with feminist revisions might stem from the recent acceptance of several female classicists, artists, and authors who were previously excluded from the field and who perceive the silenced and ignored characters of mythology as an opportunity to explore new approaches towards popular myths and restore dignity to these figures ("A. E. Stallings: *This Afterlife*" 11:48-13:19).

Furthermore, Stallings seems to follow and support the works of authors and poets who grapple with mythological retellings, thus demonstrating her interest in the movement. For instance, she publicly appreciated both Madeline Miller and Jennifer Saint by posting about their works (@ae_stallings "An important read from Madeline Miller (author of Circe, etc.):"; "Is Jennifer Saint on twitter? I want to ask if there is any merch!"), and she keeps in touch with the latest mythological trends, so much so that she occasionally exchanges *X* posts with Liv Albert, suggesting that she might be a listener to Albert's renowned podcast ("Κουράγιο, as the Greeks say!"). Similarly, Stallings

expressed her admiration for Rachel Hadas's works by writing a foreword to her collection *Love and Dread* (2021) and participating in an episode of *Poems On:* with Hadas, in which they discussed the references to the classics present in their published collections ("Poems On: Classics Season II #11 part 1"; "Poems On: Classics Season II #11 part 2"). Stallings also decided to dedicate "Epic Simile" (*Like* 42) to Hadas, who, in turn, identified Stallings's *Archaic Smile* and *Hapax* as two of her favorite volumes of poetry ("The CPR Interview"). What is more, the two poets appear to share a similar willingness to mix mythology with mundanity in their works. A. E. Stallings's admiration extends to the poetry of Louise Glück as well, on whom she wrote an essay titled "Louise Glück's Music" in 2022, in which she eccentrically describes Glück as a

> … poet often overheard talking to herself or in conversations with flowers, a poet of enclosed gardens, of longingly looking out of windows, of claustrophobic marital bickering and wry self-analysis… (37)

Nevertheless, her works present substantial differences from the novels and poems of other authors who make allusions to classical mythology, and she appears to follow her own interpretation of the myths she mentions in her poems. For example, although she praised – perhaps backhandedly – Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* on *X* by saying "I think it is a nearly perfect book in its way" (@ae_stallings), Stallings does not seem to identify classical studies as a field which needs to be associated with intellectual snobbery and elitism, distancing herself from the notion that the classics should only welcome a few brilliant scholars. Indeed, she goes as far as defining the classics as "democratic and anti-elitist" (Chen), a mindset which helped her attract a readership belonging to mixed educational backgrounds, thanks to whom her poetry feels like a "conversation with all the most interesting like-minded friends" (Chen). Moreover, unlike Nikita Gill, she does not employ the classics with the sole purpose of validating the ignored figures of classical mythology, given that Stallings's use of mythology applies to all aspects of the contemporary world, seemingly attempting to explain modernity through antiquity without renouncing fixed forms and rhymes, a further detail

which divides her from Gill. Additionally, Stallings does not shy away from commenting on the works of her fellow female writers and translators. For example, she praised Emily Wilson's newest translation of the *Iliad* in her review written for *The Spectator* ("The Bloody Prequel"). She also discussed the imperceptibility of Wilson's feminist approach on *X*, arguing that "If you didn't know a woman had translated it, you wouldn't know necessarily. It is really just deeply engaged with the Greek" (@ae_stallings) – a choice which Stallings sees as an act of faithfulness to the ancient text rather than a flaw ("But I don't think she does--that is, she is very faithful to the text, which is Homerically complex as regards men and women--she just doesn't introduce extra misogyny").

Be that as it may, Stallings's poetry appears to express concern also for serious current issues such as the refugee crisis and climate change – a preoccupation particularly apparent in her latest poems. Her poetry seems to mature with its author, and it progresses from girlhood to adulthood, shifting the focus from helpless girls like Ariadne to hopeless women like Persephone. Moreover, in her most recent publications, Stallings uses her poems as an out-and-out form of activism, exploiting her platform to sensitize her readers on topics that are close to her heart – a task she occasionally manages to complete with the help of mythology, thus simultaneously spreading powerful messages and making the poem compelling. This particular use of mythology allows Stallings to stand out against other authors who employ ancient myths in their works. For instance, A. E. Stallings appears to be active in denouncing the issues caused by the climate crisis, urging awareness among her readers by writing essays on the issue such as "I Tell my Kids: If You See Smoke Coming from the Forest, just Go. Run", in which she worries about the climactic catastrophes which are constantly occurring on planet Earth. The poet is not afraid to expound her beliefs, and she is brave enough to publicly announce her opinions on the subject, encouraging her readers to be more mindful of the planet for which their beloved poet writes all of her poetry:

> I know I lose followers every time I post/retweet about the dire situation this planet/climate is in. I do it because the poems I write (and the poems I love) are actually all about this particular planet with its special climate, so there is that. Thank you for sticking with me. (@ae_stallings)

Yet, in spite of her passionate interest in the planet, Stallings's attention seems to be directed especially towards its inhabitants. Since the outbreak of the refugee crisis in Greece in 2015, the poet has started volunteering and incorporating her experiences into her poetry ("A. E. Stallings: *This Afterlife*" 34:56- 35:37). Stallings's sympathy for this cause may stem from her ability to identify with the refugees, recognizing that her own family could be faced with a similar situation at any given time; in particular, being a mother of two, she likens the children who were forced to flee from their countries to her own (35:10-35:35). Indeed, as Rachel Hadas points out, Stallings appears to be able to see both the point of view of the families that are safe in their homes and of the refugees who are concurrently risking their lives ("Catastrophe Overload?"). In her poem "Empathy", first published in *Literary Matters* in 2016 and then collected in *Like*, she expresses her relief at knowing that her family is safe while other families are forced to flee during the night and embark on a perilous journey which may never be completed. In fact, she confesses to her husband, "My love, I'm grateful tonight / Our listing bed isn't a raft" (*Like* 40), thereupon expressing her gratitude for her children's safety (41). However, she recognizes the selfishness and uselessness of empathy for empathy's sake, deeming it hypocritical:

> Empathy isn't generous,
> It's selfish. It's not being nice
> To say I would pay any price
> Not to be those who'd die to be us. (41)

The last line seems to be meant literally, as many refugees do not survive the crossing by boat, losing their lives for their desire to become legal citizens of safer countries. What is more, the poet

recognizes that delighting in her family's safety is not enough, as it is fundamental to take action ("Shipwreck is Everywhere"), addressing these problems even before being personally affected by them – hence, regardless of their relatability.

Furthermore, in her poem "For a Young Turkish Violinist, Drowned on the Aegean Crossing (April 24, 2017)", published in *The New York Review* in 2018, Stallings recounts the tragic story of Baris Yazgi, the 22-year-old Kurdish refugee who died crossing the Aegean Sea while clinging to his precious violin (Dearden). In her poem, she comments, "I think of Arion of Lesbos, and his harp", thus comparing Yazgi's fate to the one suffered by Arion, a mythological fellow musician who crossed the sea hoping to find greater fame (Atsma, "Lucian, Dialogues of Sea Gods"), possibly noticing similarities with the violinist who hoped to reach safety. However, during Arion's journey, the crew of rascals with whom he was unintentionally travelling forced him to jump into the sea, sentencing him to death. Thankfully, according to the myth, the musician's life was saved by a dolphin who was swimming nearby and had heard his music. Unlike what happened in Arion's story, however, Baris Yazgi was not saved by a dolphin, and he suffered a tragic death whose harshness is not mirrored in the myth. Stallings's decision to weigh these two events against one another seems to highlight the harshness of a reality which myths have tried to soften using fantastic and unrealistic techniques – a striking use of mythology which perhaps serves the purpose of strengthening her message.

Similarly, in "Refugee Fugue", partially published in *Resistance, Rebellion, Life: 50 Poems Now* in 2017 and then collected in its entirety in her fourth collection, *Like*, Stallings evokes mythology in order to reason on the refugee crisis. In fact, the word "fugue" derives from the Latin word "fuga", which means "fleeing" ("Fugue, n., Etymology"). Unlike her other poems, "Refugee Fugue" seems to follow the structure of a musical fugue, as it is divided into different sections, which are construed on the same theme ("Fugue, n., 1"), namely the numerous mortal dangers to which refugees are exposed. Of the four existing sections, three mention Charon, the mythological "Ferryman of the Dead", who transports the souls of the dead to Hades by crossing the river Acheron on a boat (Atsma, "Kharon"). However, Charon only accepts the souls who pay a 'fee,' therefore the

corpses need to be buried with a coin into their mouths – in particular, an obol ("Kharon"). Stallings seems to draw precisely upon the cruelty of this monetary transaction, identifying the ferryman charged with helping the refugees to cross the sea safely with Charon since the ferryman does not care who lives or dies as long as he gets paid. In fact, in the first section of the poem, "Aegean Blues", Stallings comments:

> The ferryman says we cross tonight; and everyone pays
>
> cash.
>
> Charon don't take Mastercard, you have to pay him cash.
>
> The water seems so calm tonight, you hardly hear the
>
> splash. (*Like* 98)

Therefore, the two ferrymen seemingly become interchangeable, being equally cruel and indifferent to the fates of their passengers. The rhyming of "cash" with "splash" appears to be particularly brutal, as it possibly highlights the connection existing between the ferrymen's gains and the deaths of their passengers – a link repeated in the second section of the poem, titled after Charon himself, in which the poet writes "And Charon made a killing either way, / Per child alone, 600 euros each" (99). A further reference to this negotiation can be found in the third section, "Aegean Epigrams", in which the smugglers who ask the refugees to pay them hefty sums in order to cross the sea are seen as stealing directly from Charon, taking the fee that their future corpses would have held in their mouths in order to cross the river Acheron. Indeed, smugglers know that the majority of refugees will not make it: "Or smugglers making a killing / Palming Charon's obol?" (101). What is more, it is possible to suggest that Stallings is drawing a comparison between the smugglers who take the refugees' money and Copenhagen which, since 2016, has been allowed to confiscate the refugees' jewels and funds (Page 7), wondering "Which one seems more chilling:" (*Like* 100). Thus, death pervades the poem from its very beginning, as the poet points out that kids play in "… the selfsame water, where some swim, and others /   drown" (98), hinting at the portion of the refugees who do not make it

to safety. Indeed, these passengers “Arrived at a farther shore, another beach” (99) – in other words, the shore of the Underworld. Moreover, Stallings quotes Aeschylus, using Agamemnon’s words in order to reveal a similarity existing between antiquity and modernity, as in both eras the sea is equally filled with bodies (100). In addition to this, Stallings’s references to mythology extend to the myth of Icarus and Daedalus, comparing Icarus, who was a mere child when he encountered death, to the children who die at sea while trying to achieve freedom, “Drowned because he tried to fly. (He’s not the only one.)” (99). In fact, Icarus was flying across the sea with waxen wings made by his father, Daedalus, in order to escape their imprisonment in Crete. In spite of his father’s warnings, however, Icarus flew too close to the sun, melting his wings and drowning in the sea, meeting the same fate that many refugee children are suffering. Additionally, Stallings references Homer’s wine-dark sea, usually associated with storms and turmoil (Rutherfurd-Dyer 126); thus, the line “And there’s a dark like wine, my love, out where things get /   wavy” (*Like* 99) seems to hint at a dangerous sea whose crossing is unsafe. Nevertheless, as Herd points out, the reader does not need to understand the meaning of all of these classical references in order to grasp the gravity of the situation and shiver at the horrors which are, unfortunately, not mythological.

1.2.2 Stallings’s “Archaeology of the Domestic”

A further feature which may distinguish A. E. Stallings from other authors who take inspiration from the classics is her willingness to use the past in order to examine the present, frequently mixing the spheres of the epic and the mundane in her poems – a tendency which has been labelled as her “archaeology of the domestic” (O’Rourke). Stallings admits that she avails herself of mythology to fully understand the contemporary world (Morehead), combining in her works “… the haunting beauty of Greek myth with the daily occupations of modern life” (Sandefur). What is more, she reminds her readers that mythology has been used to discuss domestic matters since ancient times (O’Rourke), given that even Homer drew many similes between heroism and domesticity in the *Iliad*. Additionally, Stallings acknowledges the current relevance of ancient myths and their applicability to modern events and struggles. For example, by saying, “Consider the story of Phaeton and the chariot

of the sun. It's the story of a teenager who has been given the keys to his dad's Porsche and doesn't know how to control it" (Lappin), Stallings highlights the mundane similarities existing between two teenagers who want to do more than they are actually able or allowed to do. In fact, she is able to connect common fragments of everyday life to enthralling myths; for instance, in her poem "For Atalanta", first published in *Five Points* and then collected in *Like*, she draws a parallel between her daughter's name, Atalanta, and the Arcadian heroine of the same name. After participating in various expeditions with the Argonauts, the heroine bent to her father's will to marry, on the condition that her suitor must win against her in a race (Atsma, "Atalanta"). However, one of the suitors – Hippomenes – asked for help from Aphrodite, who placed three golden apples in front of Atalanta, forcing her to slow down so that she could pick them up, hence losing the race ("Atalanta"). In "For Atalanta", Stallings talks about the speed of her daughter's birth, establishing a natural connection with Atalanta's race against her suitors: "Yes, you were in a hurry to arrive / As if it were a race to be alive" (*Like* 47), perhaps suggesting that the heroine Atalanta was literally running for her life, as marriage represented in her eyes the loss of her prized virginity (Atsma, "Atalanta"). What is more, the poem seemingly ends with a warning to her daughter against repeating the heroine's mistake of falling into the traps set by ill-intentioned crowds, possibly hoping that sharing the same name will not equate to sharing the same fate:

> …
>
> O apple of my eye, the world will drop
>
> Many gilded baubles at your feet
>
> To break your stride: don't look down, don't stoop
>
> To scoop them up, don't stop. (*Like* 48)

As a result, A. E. Stallings calls to mind an ancient myth just by thinking about her daughter's name, using this connection as a cautionary tale and demonstrating how mythology serves as the filter through which the poet perceives the world.

Similarly, in "The Fiftieth Danaid", a sonnet published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 2021, Stallings invokes the mythological Danaids in order to talk about the infernal world of daily chores. As Madeline Miller explains in her blog entry "Myth of the Week: The Danaids", the Danaids, namely the fifty daughters of King Danaus, were supposed to marry the fifty sons of Danaus's twin brother, Aegyptus. After a fruitless flight encouraged by Danaus, the Danaids received instructions from their father to kill their husbands on their wedding night in order to take revenge on his twin brother. Miller further clarifies that. as a consequence of their murders, the Danaids wound up at Tartarus – the area of the Greek Underworld in which souls are eternally tormented for their earthly crimes – where they are forced to endlessly transport jugs brimming with water in order to fill a bottomless basin, thus working hard without ever being able to achieve any results. Nevertheless, one of the fifty sisters disobeyed her father by refusing to kill her husband out of love, therefore dodging her sisters' punishment. Said sister, Hypermnestra, appears to be the voice of Stallings's "The Fiftieth Danaid", in which she admits to being unable to spot the difference existing between the fate of her forty-nine sisters and hers:

> What is the difference between a hell
> And every day, if hell is but a chore
> That needs repeating? … ("The Fiftieth Danaid")

Hypermnestra seems to reflect on how the endless repetition of simple chores is not only a hellish punishment, but also a requirement of everyday life, especially women's. In fact, in the poem, she comments that "… I think it must be men / Who made it up …", possibly implying that men do not understand that this is the unfortunate fate suffered by several women regardless of whether they find themselves in Tartarus or on Earth, going as far as being unable to distinguish mundanity from eternal

damnation “As if this livelong life were all along / An afterlife, …”. Indeed, being a housewife, Hypermnestra, like the poet herself, is constantly faced with repetitive tasks which need to be performed every day all over again, as “Work is the deep spring that never dries”, thus comparing the impossibility for the Danaids to fill their basins to the unlikelihood of completing house chores once and for all. Hypermnestra’s voice also seems to echo throughout Stallings’s “Ghazal of the Fiftieth Danaid”, published in *London Review of Books* in 2021. In this poem, Hypermnestra directly addresses her “Sisters, infernal virgins …”, possibly comparing their ceaseless punishment to unsuccessful pregnancy attempts and miscarriages – “I carried thrice, bore twice, and once I grieved” – using the womb and menstrual blood as equivalents to the sieves and water: “Isn’t the womb the sieve, the moon the spring / From which blood’s phases rise, and fill, and spill again?”. Perhaps, the line “November, and the leaves flush red with shame” indicates the humiliation she feels after a miscarriage or an unwanted menstruation, symbols of non-pregnancy. The menstrual cycle seems to be itself a repetition, almost a punishment, which torments women until menopause “At fifty, the matron turns from the fickle moon / And is not subject to Her tyrant will again” (“Ghazal of the Fiftieth Danaid”). What is more, the poem is written in the form of a ghazal, which increases the perceived repetition, as this particular form uses the same word to end each couplet – in this case, the word “again”. Stallings also complies to the ghazal tradition of adding a proper name to the last stanza, inserting her own surname into the poem: “Perhaps it’s stalling, flipping the hour glass”. Therefore, Stallings successfully manages to employ the tragic myth of the Danaids in order to discuss common matters such as daily chores and menstrual cycles.

Stallings’s frustration with the redundancy of mundanity can also be found in “Menielle”, published in *Archaic Smile*. Indeed, in this poem, she laments her tiring occupations in a line which is repeated four times throughout the poem – possibly evoking the repetition which seems to haunt her: “Long have I toiled at the thankless task” (70). Interestingly, “Menielle” is written in the form of a villanelle, which is based on the repetition of the first and last line of the first stanza, increasing the impression of monotony in the poem. In fact, Stallings repeats variations of the first line four times

as well: “I’ve dragged my weary feet home after dusk” (“Menielle” 70). Similarly to the case of the Danaids’ punishment, the task is “thankless” (70), as it is expected to be carried out without any retribution. What is more, the poet once again invokes mythology by expressing her wishes to resemble Medusa with her petrifying looks, perhaps desiring to protect herself against those who “… give orders who could simply ask” (70). Feasibly, Stallings may be talking about men, who often expect women to do the endless, repetitive housework all by themselves, a belief which corresponds to Hypermnestra’s ideas expressed in “The Fiftieth Danaid”.

The poet’s growing irritation at monotonous routines easily recalls the myth of Sisyphus, the cunning Corinthian king who managed to trick death twice – the first time by trapping Thanatos himself in Tartarus, and the second time by convincing Persephone to bring him back to life in order to scold his wife, who, under Sisyphus’s instructions, left his body unburied (Grant and Hazel qtd. in Raffalovich 88). Sisyphus was punished for his crimes by being banished to Tartarus with the task of rolling a rock up a hill which was destined to fall before reaching the summit, thus forcing him to endlessly repeat the same process. In 2004, Stallings published a poem inspired by Sisyphus’s myth in *Poetry*, later collected in *Hapax*, titled “Sisyphus”, in which this endless physical repetition is central: “To live / / is to relive” (*Hapax* 74). What is more, in 2020, Stallings promoted Kim Bridgford’s poem, “Why Sisyphus Isn’t a Woman”, on her *X* account (@ae_stallings “http://peacockjournal.com/kim-bridgford-five-poems/”), possibly agreeing with Bridgford’s idea about the impossibility of having a female version of Sisyphus:

> Because it wouldn’t be mythological,
> Just life. What woman hasn’t pushed a rock,
> Or two or ten? It’s not an obstacle,
> But a way of navigating … (“Five Poems”)

This hypothesis seems to be proven in Stallings’s “The Fiftieth Danaid”. Indeed, although women continuously complete the same mundane tasks over and over, it is not seen as epic or peculiar– unlike

in Sisyphus's case, a man whose hellish punishment resembles the daily life of the majority of women. Thus, both Bridgford and Stallings seem to highlight the gap existing between the daily struggles of men and women by referring back to ancient myths.

A further poem which displays A. E. Stallings's use of mythology as a tool with which she filters and understands her daily life is "Peacock Feathers", published in 2017 in *Sewanee Review* and later collected in *Like*. In the poem, Stallings laments the annoying presence of peacocks in her garden, as they ruin her fruits and flowers (*Like* 88). Yet, she cannot help but wonder at their "pure pulchritude" (88), which seemingly makes her think of the mythological monster Argus. Argus was Hera's beloved hundred-eyed giant whose role was to guard Io, one of Zeus's mistresses, in order to frame him in his adulterous acts (Atsma, "Argos Panoptes"). However, Zeus sent Hermes to kill him and save Io, and Hera decided to put Argus's hundred eyes onto the peacock's tail – her sacred bird ("Argos Panoptes"). Stallings speaks of the "Monster with a myriad sleepless eyes" (*Like* 88) as Hera's "pet" (89), a term which sounds endearing and affectionate, possibly comparing the goddess' grief at the loss of her giant to the loss of a favorite pet. Yet, the poet points out that peacocks are "Unlucky things to bring into the house" perhaps suggesting that the eyes in their tails turn them into spies, "Still watchful" (89), and that they seem to attract misfortune considering the fate suffered by Argus.

Furthermore, in her poem "Sea Daffodils" published in *Sewanee Review* in 2019, Stallings compares the whiteness of these peculiar Mediterranean flowers not only to the souls of defeated heroes in the Underworld: "… like the wan shades of warriors sprung out / of battle" ("Echo, and: Letter, and: Sea Daffodils" 363), but also to Iphigenia's bridal dress, which was simultaneously her funeral dress:

> How they danced in bridal white on the beach, as awaiting
>
> the sacrifice
>
> That will unbridle the snorting winds, if it suffice. (362)

The "sacrifice" hinted at by Stallings refers to the murder of Iphigenia arranged by her father, Agamemnon, in Homer's *Iliad*. The terrible winds that the Greeks found at Aulis made their sailing to Troy impossible, and they were asked to sacrifice Agamemnon's eldest daughter in order to calm the wrath of the wronged goddess Artemis, responsible for the winds. In order to do so, Agamemnon deceived his wife and daughter by telling them that Iphigenia was to be married to the hero Achilles, and then killed his daughter as soon as she reached the altar in her wedding dress. Moreover, Stallings comments that the sea daffodils are "briefer than youth" ("Echo, and: Letter, and: Sea Daffodils" 362), possibly associating their short lifespan to that of Iphigenia, who was just a girl when this sacrifice took her life. Death is evoked once again by their pale color since it reminds the poet of "Archaic and infernal asphodel" (363), the sinister flower which can be found in the Underworld (Hamilton 37). As a result, Stallings manages to connect a terrible mythological filicide to a flower, which, however common, is "… older than any epic" ("Echo, and: Letter, and: Sea Daffodils" 362).

Sea daffodils are not the only natural elements that remind Stallings of mythology. In 2023, the poet published "Crown Shyness" in *Sewanee Review*; the poem's title refers to the peculiar pattern created in the sky by trees whose branches are so close to each other that they almost touch without ever physically connecting (MacDonald). Likewise, Stallings points out that "The ancient epics do not overlap" ("Crown Shyness" 352), proceeding to mention epic episodes told in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. For instance, the line "Hector dies. Achilles is a ghost" (352) alludes to the murder of Hector committed by Achilles and to the Greek hero's soul in the Underworld after Paris's arrow hit his heel, his only mortal body part. The lines "… A witch's trap / Turns men to swine …" and "A woman waits, and is no longer young" (352) point to the *Odyssey*, in particular to the episode in which Circe turned Odysseus's men into swine and to Penelope's 20-year-long agonizing wait for her husband. What is more, Stallings explains the need for the trees to keep their distance from one another as a matter of "courtesy" (353), noticing similarities with the "courtesy" which made "Achilles drew back from his savage brink" (353) when Priam, the Trojan king, visited Achilles to reclaim the disgraced body of his slain son Hector in Homer's *Iliad*. In "Crown Shyness", Stallings takes a moment to reflect upon

the unfairness of Helen's treatment in classical sources, as "Men blamed her for their bloody-minded slaughter" (355), describing her as "The beauty queen men later called a bitch / (She called herself that sometimes) …" (354), even though she never asked for a war in which innocents died and trees were felled in order to build ships, weapons, and funeral pyres (353-354). The poem continues in the Underworld, where Odysseus meets the shades of his dead parents and describes his wine as "…sweet and bright, like light through olive leaves)" (355), finally returning to the original subject matter of the poem, the tree's crown shyness. Moreover, trees play an important part in Penelope's identification of her husband Odysseus as, in the *Odyssey*, she tested him by pretending that their bed had been moved from its original spot, which was not possible as it had been carved from the trunk of an olive tree and was therefore rooted to the floor (Atsma, "Homer, *Odyssey* 23"). When Odysseus passed Penelope's test, he understood that she was the perfect intellectual match for him, "And knows they are well wedded in their wiles" ("Crown Shyness" 356). However, the poem concludes with a comparison between the finally reunited Odysseus and Penelope with "two oaks" (356), as their struggles and issues were so different in the twenty years of their separation that, although they sleep next to each other, they do not properly touch – there is a gap between them (356). Like the branches of trees that get close without touching, "Their ancient epics do not overlap" (356). Hence, in "Crown Shyness", Stallings manages to alternate observations about trees, branches, and leaves with references to the Trojan War and its aftermath, perceiving the ancient heroism which lies hidden behind ordinary natural elements and recounting in a few lines of poetry the main events of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Similarly, Stallings avails herself of episodes taken from Homer's *Iliad* in her poem "Visiting the Grave of Rupert Brooke", originally published in *The Formalist* and then collected in *Hapax*. In the poem, A. E. Stallings finds herself on Skyros, and she addresses the dead English poet, Rupert Brooke, explaining to him that his grave is situated precisely on the island in which the sea nymph Thetis was hiding her son Achilles. Thetis wanted to prevent him from being drafted into the Greek army against Troy in order to escape the prophecy of his death, which was bound to happen during

the war. To succeed, the nymph instructed Achilles to pass as a woman in the court of Lycomedes – a small task facilitated by Achilles's feminine features such as "… his smooth cheek and gold curls" (*Hapax* 20). These female-like attributes may have reminded Stallings of Brooke, since, not unlike Achilles, he was described as "a golden-haired, blue-eyed English Adonis" by Eder ("Rupert Brooke"). What is more, both Achilles and Rupert died as soldiers – although Brooke died of blood poisoning on a ship in the Aegean Sea ("Rupert Brooke"). Yet, both Achilles and Brooke knew the horrors of war, and both met with an untimely death. Additionally, Stallings, perhaps because she is herself a mother, seems to take Thetis's side, agreeing with her desire to protect her son, "As any mother might …" (*Hapax* 20). However, Odysseus discovered Achilles's identity by bringing gifts for the girls at the court of Lycomedes, secretly hiding among them some weapons, which immediately attracted Achilles's interest and exposed him as being an undercover boy. As Stallings points out, this is "A simple trap that might catch any boy" (20), possibly alluding to the appeal that war holds for men and boys and associating it with the fact that Rupert Brooke volunteered to serve in World War I ("Rupert Brooke"). In this way, Stallings manages to find connections and similarities between a poet and a mythological hero, highlighting her disapproval of war and mourning the lives which were taken too soon.

These analogies between ancient and modern can be drawn also regarding mundane tools such as pans and kettles. For example, in "Cast Irony", initially published in *Five Points* and then collected in *Like*, A. E. Stallings compares an overly scrubbed skillet which became "vulnerable and porous" (*Like* 16) to "… a hero stripped of his arms" (16). The erosion caused by the excessive scrubbing allows external agents to penetrate within the skillet in the same way in which the skin of a hero without his arms and armor can be easily pierced by weapons. Stallings describes the eroded skillet by writing that

> It lacks
>
> Internal consistency

As ancient oral epics (16)

In fact, the holes in the material created by vehemently scrubbing the tool may alternate its uniformity, which reminds Stallings that mythology is oftentimes inconsistent, and it can be anachronistic. Indeed, it may present in the same myth elements belonging to different eras – like the "… anachronistic heart of steel, / / Will of iron – …" (16) which frequently make an appearance in stories supposedly set during the Bronze era, when steel and iron were not yet in use, thus "No one has yet forged a weapon, / Much less pans or kettles" (16). However, Stallings recognizes the existence of an "awkward overlap" (17) between these two eras, as women belonging to different generations would fight with each other over which methods to use in the kitchen, trying to agree on whether to employ modern techniques or rely on tradition. As a result, she manages to carve out a space for women in ancient epics, finding a place for them in mundanity, far from the ever-celebrated wars and quests of heroes and gods, almost unnoticeable and yet still present. Interestingly, the similes of ancient epics would also shift the focus from heroic battles to mundanity (Stallings and Maa), paradoxically reversing Stallings's prevailing approach of comparing everyday life to mythology and legendary enterprises, for instance by being reminded of heroes while contemplating a ruined skillet. What is more, in an interview with the poet and translator Gerald Maa, Stallings claimed that "the domestic world is largely a woman's world. Even though the epics are vast and masculine, the similes, which are these lyric moments, tend to be domestic and feminine" (Stallings and Maa).

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Silenced, Shunned and Subdued: A. E. Stallings's Feminist Revisions

2.1.1 "Splash barefoot in our blood, and with delight": Poems Challenging Classical Androcentrism

The importance of contemporary reinterpretations of classical myths, which was asserted in the previous chapter of this thesis, seems to increase when ancient gender roles and patriarchal values are concerned. As Guest (4) points out, the countless sexual assaults and often misplaced harsh punishments against women featured in Greco-Roman mythology may easily displease modern authors and artists. In fact, women supposedly lacked qualities possessed by men, thus turning into "'the other' gender", a derogatory label indicating a weaker and less important version of their male counterpart (Kapoor 89). This social inequality was then mirrored by the majority of ancient myths, provoking the passing down of stories in which women were dismissed or mistreated. A. E. Stallings appears to be well aware of this unfair lack of balance, observing that "women's voices in ancient epic and lyric tend to be 'unrecorded' ... or fragmented" (Mishler). As a consequence, she seemingly tries to spread awareness about the treatment of mythological women by challenging the prevailing androcentrism of ancient myths in her poems and partaking in the movement of feminist revisionism. Hence, Stallings criticizes the patriarchal values promoted by mythology, reminding her readers that myths always allow alternative interpretations.

It is possible to detect Stallings's feminist inclinations already in her first collection, *Archaic Smile*, in which she published "Crazy to Hear the Tale Again (the Fall of Troy)". This poem is inspired by an excerpt taken from Virgil's *Aeneid* narrating the death of the king of Troy, Priam – a tragic topic which has possibly induced Stallings to employ In Memoriam stanzas, typically associated with grief. Stallings begins her poem by quoting the second book of the *Aeneid*: "… ferit aurea sidera clamor" (*Archaic Smile* 40), namely "Their shouting strikes the golden stars" (Horsfall 27). Yet, to fully understand Stallings's intentions, it might be necessary to take into consideration the context provided

by Virgil's complete sentence: "at domus interior gemitu miseroque tumultu miscetur, penitusque cauae plangoribus aedes femineis ululant; ferit aurea sidera clamor" (26). Horsfall translates this excerpt as "Into the heart of the building, the echoing courts cry out with women's howls. Their shouting strikes the golden stars" (27). Therefore, it is possible to argue that Stallings took inspiration from the pain and sufferings of women to write "Crazy to Hear the Tale Again (the Fall of Troy)". The lines she picked from the *Aeneid* may even go unnoticed among the tragedies and heroic enterprises of the men who were fighting the war, on whom Virgil focuses more strongly. What is more, in the final stanza of the poem, the speaker expresses their disillusionment with the gods and says, "And thought I saw our gods, of monstrous size, / Splash barefoot in our blood, and with delight" (*Archaic Smile* 40). In this way, the speaker, highlights the gods' sadistic abuse of power and their cruelties towards mortals – a power imbalance which resembles the inequality existing between men and women. Indeed, when the speaker mentions "our blood" (40), the personal pronoun "our" might refer to women, especially considering the allusion to Io made in the previous stanza: "(For Io, the stars grew gold and maddening)" (40), a line which also appears to hint at the initial "aurea sidera" – the golden stars. A version of Io's myth can be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As Hamilton (79) reports, Io used to be a happy princess, so beautiful that she aroused Zeus's sexual desire at first sight. However, Zeus was married to Hera, thus he transformed Io into a heifer to prevent his jealous wife from discovering his betrayal. Zeus's plan was unsuccessful, and the poor princess, in addition to being forced to live as an animal, was driven to madness by the stings of a gadfly sent by Hera. Thus, Io was punished twice for events she could not prevent and perhaps did not want to happen in the first place. As a consequence, it seems understandable that Stallings's Io is unable to find solace in the sky, and neither the "aurea sidera" nor the gods are bothered by her pain. It might be suggested that Io's overlooked sufferings in "Crazy to Hear the Tale Again (the Fall of Troy)" resemble the afflictions of contemporary women whose laments and pleas are still ignored by those who swore to protect them.

What is more, Stallings maintains a similar stance also in poems which are not involved with mythology, possibly proving that her sympathies lie with the feminist cause. For example, she identifies Evil with the male gender in "Apotropaic", a poem first published in *Poetry* and later collected in *Hapax*. Indeed, throughout the poem, she uses the personal pronoun "he" and the possessive adjective "his" when referring to this personified force (*Hapax* 50). Likewise, in "Bad News Blues", Bad News is in all likelihood a man since Stallings uses masculine pronouns: "He smiles like he could slice right through life" (64). This poem, in which Stallings takes on the blues stanzas, was originally published in *The Formalist* and subsequently collected in *Hapax*. Therefore, "Apotropaic" and "Bad News Blues" might help in shedding light on Stallings's ideas about men's roles in society, which perhaps reaffirm her need to shift the perspective of ancient myths in order to denounce the wrongdoings of men and gods.

In "Swallows", published in *The New Yorker* in 2018 and later collected in *Like*, the poet ponders over the mythological origins of these birds and says:

> …
>
> The origins of myth – a buried
>
> Secret, rape, a cut-out tongue,
>
> Two sisters wronged, where there's no right,
>
> Till transformation fledges flight. (*Like* 126)

The "Two sisters" mentioned by Stallings are Procne and Philomela, two women who suffered tragic fates because of King Tereus, Procne's husband. According to the myth, which can be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Tereus tricked Philomela into believing her sister died, thereupon forcing a union with Philomela and cutting out her tongue in order to silence her as soon as she discovered the truth. Stallings manages to summarize this tragic series of events in a sequence of appalling keywords "… a buried / Secret, rape, a cut-out tongue" (*Like* 126). Luckily, Philomela managed to weave her story onto a piece of cloth, which was later given to her sister. Upon discovering the truth, Procne swore

vengeance. She decided to murder her son and deceive her husband into eating him. Tereus, after realizing what he had done, chased the two sisters, but the trio were transformed into three birds by the gods. Hamilton points out that originally Procne was transformed into a nightingale destined to sing her grief for eternity, while Philomela turned into a swallow "which, because her tongue was cut out, only twitters and can never sing" (299). However, Roman writers mixed up the transformations and, as Stallings reveals, "It's Ovid's stories that prevail" (*Like* 126), in which Procne turns into a swallow and Philomela into a nightingale. Swallows, contrary to nightingales, "Spend no time mourning …" (126), displaying a pragmatic attitude which resembles Procne's, considering that she devised a plan instead of giving up and crying about her misfortunes. What is more, the line "Two sisters wronged, where there is no right" (126) may hint at the fact that, in antiquity, it was harder to establish whether a woman had been wronged or not since they had essentially no rights to begin with, and, without laws, there can be no crimes. As a consequence, Stallings is able to rekindle the memory of two sisters who suffered the cruelty and selfishness of a man who had respect for neither his wife nor her sister, including in her poem an instance in which a woman was physically silenced, demonstrating how easy it was for women to be deprived of their voices.

In "Sea Girls", published in *Poetry.org* in 2010 and then collected in *Olives*, Stallings seemingly comments on the ease with which, in mythology, women are transformed into other beings, regardless of how these transformations may impact their lives. To make matters worse, these metamorphoses are frequently caused by men and gods' transgressions. In the poem, however, Stallings exploits what appears to be her son's speech impediment, which causes him to mispronounce the letters 'l' and 'r', in order to highlight the similarity existing between the pronunciation of the words 'gulls' and 'girls'. Indeed, Stallings wonders whether the seagulls her son mispronounces as 'sea girls' might have formerly been girls transformed into birds by the gods – a circumstance far too familiar and plausible not to be taken into consideration. Stallings describes these sea girls as "Spellbound maidens, wild in flight, forsaken –" (*Olives* 61), initially imagining them as wronged girls who suffered even in their human forms. The more the poet observes the birds in front of her,

the more she appears to see a resemblance between seagulls and sea girls: "With their pale breasts, their almost human cries" (61) which would justify her hypothesis of "Some metamorphosis that Ovid missed" (61). Yet, she holds her son's speech impediment responsible for the transformation: "But you have changed them. You are the enchanter" (61). Thus, Stallings's tone appears to be affectionate rather than displeased, and she marvels at her son's ability to shape reality with his speech-defect, which almost turns into a magic spell. For this reason, Stallings warmly welcomes the possibility of the sea girls' innocent metamorphosis, distancing this transformation from the harsh punishments typically featured in mythology.

What is more, A. E. Stallings targets specific mythological men and gods, wittily commenting on their behavior towards women. For instance, the Olympian god Apollo is frequently addressed in Stallings's poems. In "Apollo Takes Charge of His Muses", a poem initially published in the *Beloit Poetry Journal* and then collected in *Archaic Smile*, the nine Muses are questioning the god's unforeseen and unsolicited interference in their business and "... his policies, his few minor suggestions" (*Archaic Smile* 39) appear to confuse and surprise them. Apollo's suggestions do not seem to admit alternatives, as they sound like orders rather than pieces of advice. Moreover, the title of the poem highlights Apollo's arrogant and patronizing attitude towards the Muses, as he appoints himself as their owner, identifying them as "his" moments after meeting them. In fact, the god believes he retains the right to place these nine goddesses, who were autonomous until this very moment, under his "charge", possibly insinuating that they would be unable to operate without his precious guidance. Although the Muses are understandably astonished by the god's insolence, they cannot find the words to interject, allowing their bewilderment to silence them:

> None of us spoke or raised her hand, and questions
>
> There were none; what has poetry to do with reason
>
> Or the sun? (39)

Yet, the final question appears to dispute the god's authority, suggesting that, being the god of Reason and the Sun, Apollo may not even be adequately equipped to help enhance the Muses' arts, let alone be instrumental to their development. Perhaps, their silence was mistaken for a sign of agreement by the god, and the Muse who manages to recount the events is only able to speak "softly" (39), possibly because she was shaken by the events. Ruby points out that Apollo's behavior resembles that of a new male CEO who introduces himself to his nine female employees, explaining – or rather, mansplaining – to them tasks they have been successfully doing for years on their own. Therefore, "Apollo Takes Charge of His Muses", while being rooted in mythology, is relevant to modern readers as well, as this "deeply ironic" (Taraskiewicz) poem appears to level criticism at all the men who believe themselves superior to their female coworkers solely on the grounds of their gender. In addition to this, Stallings defended the Muses even on her *X* account by replying to the question of a user asking which Muse is responsible for leading speakers to go overtime during poetry festivals with "Probably not a muse, because muses are female" (@ae_stallings). This witty reply may imply that only men can be so insolent and disrespectful, thus the Muses would not encourage such behavior – but Apollo might.

Stallings focuses once again on Apollo in "Cassandra", originally published in *Able Muse* and later collected in *Hapax*. With this poem, Stallings provides the cursed prophetess with the chance of freely expressing herself without being questioned or disputed by the readers, thus regaining her long-lost credibility for the first time after rejecting Apollo's sexual advances and facing his punishment. In fact, Cassandra was not only silenced, but also discredited, as she was doomed to predict the future and have her prophecies perpetually disbelieved. Hence, Stallings ingeniously chose the perfect mythological woman to make her readers ponder on the silence of women and on the unjustifiable punishments inflicted on them by men, which were frequently provoked by women's unwillingness to be controlled or abused. In the poem, Cassandra levels subtle criticism at the god, and she does so by relying on linguistic images. The prophetess calls attention to Apollo's selfishness: "For you, there is no second person" (*Hapax* 44), indicating that the god is only preoccupied with fulfilling his own

needs, therefore "I" is the only personal pronoun which features in his vocabulary (jjekel10). Cassandra goes as far as arguing that Apollo's insolence concedes "No mood but the infinitive" (*Hapax* 44), a verb tense which highlights his complete indifference to "first, second and third persons with which Cassandra has populated the poem" (Pillinger 232). Indeed, the prophetess makes sure to use an extensive range of personal pronouns throughout her "profoundly unselfish" (232) speech. Yet, she appears to be pessimistic: "The alphabet to which I go / Is suffering, and ends in O" (*Hapax* 44), a letter pointing to future anguish (Pillinger 230) – a distressing detail which becomes all the more tragic as soon as the reader acknowledges that she is doomed to be always right. Furthermore, while Cassandra seems to carefully choose her words – a decision which may be unnecessary considering her particular curse – Apollo manipulates their meaning in order to achieve his purposes: ""I want" the same verb as "must be," / "Love," construed as "yield to me,"" (*Hapax* 44), exerting his power even over the language he adopts, leaving nothing to chance. As a result, similarly to what happened in "Apollo Takes Charge of His Muses", the god appears to be a domineering "Lord" (44) who subjugates women and punishes them for his failures.

Likewise, Apollo's questionable conduct is targeted even in Stallings's latest collection of poetry, *This Afterlife*, in a previously uncollected poem titled "Daphne, After". In this poem, Stallings puts herself in Daphne's shoes, the nymph who was mercifully transformed into a laurel tree to ensure her safety while fleeing from the god Apollo, who wanted to assault her. However, Apollo's uncontrollable lust forced her to sacrifice her life, and she laments her loss: "Rooted in my shade so long, / I have forgotten dance, and song" (*This Afterlife* 191). Her living conditions, while granting safety, confine her to the ground, hence, although "No one pursues…" she is forced to "… stand all seasons in the sun" (191), which may well be painful for a tree, especially if it used to be an independent girl. It might be possible to suggest that "Daphne, After" brings attention to the fact that, even after successfully avoiding being sexually assaulted, the victims may still suffer lifelong consequences, either physical or psychological, while the perpetrator – in this case Apollo – is able to live a full life without facing any consequences.

2.1.2 “Slaying their own monsters, running free”: The Rising Voices of Mythological Women

Furthermore, A. E. Stallings appears to be interested in exploring the stories of specific mythological women, focusing on their experiences and validating their long-ignored sufferings. Indeed, they become the protagonists of her poems, finally using their voices to tell a different version of events typically only explored from the perspective of men. As a consequence, Stallings’s poetry offers illuminating insights into the minds and feelings of several overlooked mythological figures. For example, in “Aeaea”, a poem published in *Archaic Smile*, Stallings lends her voice to the nymph and witch Circe. The nymph was banished to the island of Aeaea, where she lived in isolation after using her magic against Scylla, turning her into a monster over a romantic rivalry (Hamilton 314). Stallings’s Circe notices that her island’s name resembles a cry “Dumb animals might howl or sigh” (*Archaic Smile* 48), clarifying that the animals’ dumbness is not to be associated with their inability to speak, but with their freedom from the constraints of human speech: “… “without syntax,” free / From consonants’ civility” (48) – a detail which perhaps highlights the independence and autonomy gained by Circe thanks to her exile. The poem’s final stanza may be referring to Odysseus’s abandonment of Aeaea after encouraging Circe to fall in love with him in spite of always intending to go back to his wife and son. The nymph behaved graciously, and she assured him there were ““no hard feelings”” (48), even offering advice for his future journey. Yet, perhaps inwardly, she might feel insecure, wondering if she lacks certain qualities that would have convinced Odysseus to stay, possibly comparing herself to Penelope and questioning Odysseus’s decision: “The (wh)y in you that is not I” (48). As a result, Stallings is able to dignify Circe’s pain, casting her as the main character rather than maintaining her role as a secondary character in Odysseus’s story. Stallings uses Aeaea to comment on men’s questionable behavior also on her *X* platform by comparing the social media platform *Facebook* to Circe’s island, noticing how men seem to turn into swine in both: “Yes, Twitter is the Isle of the Lotus-Eaters. Maybe Facebook is Aeaea, where men turn into swine” (@ae_stallings).

Similarly, in a further poem published in *Archaic Smile*, "Medea, Homesick", Medea, heartbroken after being abandoned by her lover Jason, is given the opportunity to express her sorrow in the first person by Stallings. Indeed, Medea's pain tragically resembles her aunt Circe's, and she laments the impossibility of changing her lover's mind in Stallings's sonnet:

> I cannot spell the simplest old potion
>
> I learned for love. As for the antidote,
>
> He discovered it himself, and is past harm. (*Archaic Smile* 41)

Medea is commonly believed to be a mad and violent woman who performed unforgivable actions with the help of her witchcraft. As Bethany Williams highlights, she has been cast as a villain because she murdered her two sons in a fit of rage, which originated from Jason's decision to leave her for a new wife. In addition to this, Medea took vengeance on Jason's new wife by gifting her a cursed wedding dress, burning her alive. However, Medea was a mere pawn in Jason's game plan. Indeed, Jason needed Medea's magical abilities in order to obtain the Golden Fleece; thus, he asked Cupid to shoot an arrow which would make Medea fall head over heels for Jason. To help her lover, the enchanted girl was forced to betray her entire family and assist in the murder of her own brother, although "she showed some last-minute regret and guilt" (B. Williams) – hence, she isolated herself from everyone except for Jason. Perhaps Stallings decided to title her poem "Medea, Homesick" precisely to emphasize the fact that Medea misses her family, her home, and the feeling of having a place to which she could belong. Her homesickness might be heightened by the fact that her mind was not lucid when she made the choices which led to her getaway, as it had been manipulated by the gods, possibly forcing her to take decisions she would not have taken otherwise. Thus, it is possible to consider Medea as a victim who suffered a terrible fate because her existence as a woman was reduced to the usefulness and convenience of her powers by the man who was supposed to love her above all else. To make matters worse, Stallings points out that Medea lost her relatives for a love which quickly became a "sudden foreigner" (*Archaic Smile* 41) since Jason left her as soon as he was

offered better prospects. For this reason, Jason's treatment of Medea appears to be crueler than Odysseus's attitude towards Circe because Jason, in addition to breaking Medea's heart, made sure she belonged nowhere, as she could neither go back nor move forward on her own. Her murderous behavior, then, might stem from her need to hold tight to the little power she had left, sacrificing her children in order to punish the man who ruined her life. Therefore, in "Medea, Homesick", perhaps Stallings suggests that Medea's perceived wickedness and uncontrollable madness can be traced back to the pain, disappointment, and shame she suffered because of Jason. What is more, Stallings manages to make Medea's laments relatable to modern-day women. Indeed, Medea begins her complaints by wondering

> How many gifted witches, young and fair,
> Have flunked, been ordinary, left the back-
> Stooping study of their art, black
> Or white, for love, that sudden foreigner? (41)

These lines appear to pertain both to antiquity and modernity, as several women are still enticed to abandon their studies or their careers in order to fulfil their lover's wishes, without expecting their partner to behave in like manner.

A. E. Stallings extends her interest also to Apollo's twin sister, Artemis. Yet, in spite of the gods' kinship, they are portrayed as polar opposites. In "Be Careful Whom You Patronize", a poem published in 1995 in *The Classical Outlook* which makes use of blues stanzas, Stallings deplores the mistreatment of mythological women by commenting on the myth of Actaeon, demonstrating that even Olympian goddesses were treated like the rest of womankind. According to the myth, which is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the young prince Actaeon spied on the goddess of Hunting, Artemis, while she was bathing. As soon as the goddess realized his violation, she transformed Actaeon into a stag and set his own hunting dogs against him – a severe punishment because Artemis protected her virginity and purity above all else (Atsma, "Artemis Wrath 1"). Stallings narrates the key points of

this story in her poem, aiming attention at Artemis's understandable rage, although the poet refers to her by her Roman name, Diana: "The naked goddess shone with wrath" ("Be Careful Whom You Patronize" 99). Perhaps her wrath made her insensitive to Actaeon's screams of help "(And then pretended not to hear)" (99) – a circumstance which seems to reverse the typical ancient roles since, in Greco-Roman mythology, girls and women are more frequently the helpless victims whose screams are willfully ignored by men. Actaeon's violation appears to be tragically modern, and his offense is summarized in the line: ""'You're pretty when you're steaming mad'"" (99), displaying the utter entitlement Actaeon believed he possessed in that situation. Indeed, this interaction does not stray too far from the unwanted catcalling or sexualization that women are still forced to endure on a daily basis, perhaps awakening in them a rage which resembles Artemis's. In her poem, Stallings does not seem to reproach the goddess, choosing to stand by her side without minimizing her experience and feelings, perhaps even relating to Artemis.

Stallings focuses on this myth once again in her poem "Actaeon", published in *Poetry* in 2003 and subsequently collected in *Hapax*. A. E. Stallings finally provides Artemis with the opportunity to speak directly to Actaeon, and the goddess appears to exploit this moment to mock the man who enraged her, stressing that the hounds which are tearing him apart piece by piece are the very same dogs he raised and was ever so fond of: "The hounds, you know them all by name" (*Hapax* 25). Indeed, Artemis notices the irony in the fact that Actaeon fed, trained, and loved these dogs just to be killed by them after being transformed into a stag by the goddess, who keeps taunting him: "You fostered them from purblind whelps" (25). As Ovid did in the *Metamorphoses*, Stallings uses the names of some of these dogs, possibly in an attempt to wound him even more deeply, adding psychological pain to the physical pain he is already enduring. Moreover, Artemis compares the hunting dogs' speed in tracking him and tearing him apart to the speed of words which are uttered before thinking, forcing the mouth to make inappropriate comments, which may lead to danger: "Like angry words you might have meant, / But do not mean, and can't take back" (25) – precisely what happens in "Be Careful Whom You Patronize". Artemis wonders whether Actaeon had ever suspected

that he was raising his dogs for the very purpose of having them take his life: “Did you know then why you bred them –” (25). In her speech, Artemis does not seem to admit traces of pity towards Actaeon or regret for her harsh punishment, perhaps deeming it well-deserved.

A further mythological figure who recurs multiple times in Stallings’s poems is Penelope. In “The Wife of the Man of Many Wiles”, published in *Archaic Smile*, A. E. Stallings captures the moment in which Penelope is finally reunited with her husband, Odysseus “of many wiles”, after twenty years of separation. However, Stallings characterizes her Penelope as a complex, independent woman who refuses to be reduced to her role as wife of Odysseus (Fiorini and Avataneo). Possibly to increase the readers’ level of indignation at this reduction, Penelope’s name is never mentioned, and she is only referred to as Odysseus’s wife, a label which seems to be mocked by Odysseus’s “wise infidelities” (*Archaic Smil*e 42). Yet, the queen of Ithaca displays strength and autonomy, disputing every hypothesis of her alleged passivity during these twenty years of solitude and disproving those who expected her to wither away while awaiting her husband. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that Stallings is using the term “wife” with a semi-reproachful intent, emphasizing its inability to encompass the entirety of Penelope’s being. In the poem, Penelope is finally allowed to speak in the first person. She decides to use her voice to ridicule her husband’s assumptions about her life during his long absence: “Believe what you want to” (42). This witty dismissal of his beliefs may be hinting at the fact that Odysseus constructed a narrative aimed at safeguarding his pride, arguing in favor of all the unrealistic theories in which Penelope tries her best to outsmart her suitors with the “nightly un-doings” (42) of her cloth to preserve her loyalty to her husband. Penelope’s tone is derisive, and she marvels at Odysseus’s confidence that she could really wield any power over her suitors, daringly addressing the issue: “How I kept them all waiting for me to finish, / / The suitors, you call them ...”, “Believe what you want to. That they never touched me” (42). Her harsh words may suggest unfaithfulness or sexual assault, especially considering that she refuses to acknowledge these men as her suitors – and twenty years of solitude may cause boredom or danger. In addition to disputing Odysseus’s assumptions about her life, Penelope appears to be equally skeptical of his own

extravagant claims and she challenges him by saying: “Believe your own stories, as you would have me do” (42). Penelope’s assumptions and suspicions, unlike Odysseus’s, are correct, and her husband, while relying on his wife’s loyalty and “… meticulous grieving”, was “… hip-deep in goddesses” (42), thus dismissing his wife’s plausible sexual desires but shamelessly satisfying his own. Therefore, in “The Wife of the Man of Many Wiles”, Stallings managed to set free a woman whose story has always been dependent on her husband’s, providing her with autonomy and independence, reminding her readers that the life of a woman does not pause when her man is not around to witness it. What is more, Guest identifies Penelope as an “origin figure”, going as far as describing her as the “core to the conceptualising of feminist revisionism itself, a metonym for the entire textual strategy” given that she also ‘revisions’ her work by repeatedly weaving and unweaving her cloth (5).

However, A. E. Stallings appears to admit different interpretations of the same myth in her poems, and she manages to rewrite the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope using a different tone. “Homecoming” was published in *Poetry* in 1997 and then collected in the same collection of poetry of “The Wife of the Man of Many Wiles”, namely *Archaic Smile*. Yet, the poet adopts a warmer attitude towards the couple, and she seems to place confidence in Odysseus’s love for his wife. In fact, “He loved to watch her at the loom” and he is happy to “… sit together in a room” (*Archaic Smile* 37), demonstrating that he is able to value and cherish Penelope. Be that as it may, Penelope’s point of view is not provided in the poem, thus it is not possible to know whether she shares Odysseus’s love and enthusiasm or whether she is inwardly thinking ill of him. Nevertheless, Stallings made her thoughts on the couple known on her *X* platform, in which she argued in favor of their compatibility: “Yes, but the Odyssey is arguably about this--Odysseus and Penelope are perfectly suited to one another, and Odysseus would rather return to her than accept eternal life with a goddess on an island, etc.” (@ae_stallings). The dichotomy existing between “Homecoming” and “The Wife of the Man of Many Wiles” serves to prove that mythological figures are open to countless plausible interpretations and that authors can simultaneously believe in contradicting versions.

Stallings takes on the character of Penelope once again in "Selvage", a poem she published in the *Beloit Poetry Journal* in 2016 and later collected in *Like*. This poem is a reference to an episode taken from the twenty-second book of Homer's *Odyssey*, which depicts Telemachus, Penelope and Odysseus's son, fulfilling his father's wishes by hanging the maids who slept with the suitors during Odysseus's absence (Atsma, "Homer, *Odyssey* 22"). In the poem, Stallings attempts to imagine Penelope's thoughts while witnessing such a scene, and it may be possible to read hints of irony in the first line, as Penelope wonders: "Who knew her son had salvaged so many hates?" (*Like* 110). This line seemingly frames Telemachus's act as heroic rather than criminal, justifying his murders because they served to right all wrongs. What is more, Penelope blames the women for their fates, and she reproaches them: "Modest now, the sluts, the dirty flirts, / Tongueless belles, spinsters of their own doom." (110). The ingenious title chosen by Stallings provides additional meaning to the poem, which begins with a definition of "selvage": "*the firmly woven edge of a fabric that resists unraveling*" (110). Stallings also provides its etymology: "self + edge" (110), which highlights how this edge of fabric is self-finished. Penelope evokes this textile image when she identifies the maids as "… spinsters of their own doom" (110), as they were murdered because they took decisions which could not be revoked – just as a selvage cannot be unraveled. Stallings plays with the historical meaning of the word 'spinster', which is used to describe a woman who spins "textile fibre into thread or yarn" ("Spinster, n., 1.a"). Moreover, Penelope uses additional textile references when she compares the hanging maids to "… a dozen ancient loom weights" hanging from the warp. Yet, she admits to feeling "a flutter of pity" (*Like* 110), possibly because she is inwardly aware that these maids were not fully in charge of their own destinies, as they could not refuse the suitors without risking their lives – a circumstance which perhaps no one knows better than Penelope herself. In fact, just as she tried to protect herself through her weaving, the maids also needed to listen to their instincts of self-preservation. Be that as it may, watching their corpses, she knows she could have done nothing to prevent this tragedy, hence she must accept and support Telemachus's deeds. Indeed, with the return

of her husband, Penelope loses the minuscule amount of power she managed to retain during his absence, and she is unable to speak her mind.

Penelope is not the only mythological figure who managed to capture Stallings's interest, as Ariadne appears to be a complex character explored in detail in Stallings's works. The myth of the Cretan Labyrinth frequently inspires her poems, and it is analyzed from a variety of perspectives and points of view, particularly drawing attention to the figures who are commonly overlooked. The main focus of "Ariadne and the Rest", a poem published in *Archaic Smile*, is precisely the Cretan princess, whose dreams and disappointments are finally given the space they deserve in a story she has been in the background of for far too long. Ariadne's desire for a happy ending encourages her to patiently endure the trials and tribulations of womanhood. In fact, Stallings's depiction of ancient gender roles appears to be rather bleak, given that boys were given toy swords in the hopes that they would become great fighters, while girls were to be preoccupied solely with their looks, as they were taught early on that their purpose in life was to be seen as desirable in order to secure a husband. In the poem, girlhood is painted as an indoor activity, where girls are kept "still" (*Archaic Smile* 43), a troubling adjective which suits the description of dolls or corpses as well. While boys were given blades, women were given their appearance, and Stallings uses an ingenious pun to demonstrate how women equated their looks with weapons and defense tools: "… being flustered can disarm" (43). For a woman, beauty was easily considered to be more important than health, and even "vital organs" (43) could not compete with the necessity of attaining a smaller waist "… two hands can close / Around …" (43), a beauty standard which dangerously increased women's vulnerability. With health in the background and beauty in the foreground, weakness became an attractive trait: "... to faint is feminine / And not, to men, without a certain charm" (43), a frightening ideal of beauty which seemingly promotes women's passivity and inability to defend themselves – an easy way for men to maintain control over their minds and bodies. Interestingly, Taraskiewicz suggests that Ariadne's "acceptance of such physical bonds seems instill an acceptance of narrative bonds", possibly implying that, by keeping up with the beauty standards forced upon her, Ariadne sealed her tragic fate as a woman in ancient

Greece. The Cretan princess, in fact, looked unhappy and her monotonous "labyrinthine days" (*Archaic Smile* 44) echoed those of the Minotaur, her half-brother, whose "deformity" (43) contrasts her beauty – although they appear to conduct similar lives regardless. In spite of her endeavors, however, Ariadne is still denied a happy ending, as she was abandoned on Naxos by her lover Theseus as soon as he deemed her useless, remaining alone "As the coward sailed …" (45). Consequently, the readers might question "That such rewards there are for prettiness" (43) given Ariadne's fate, especially when other famous mythological women such as Helen of Troy and Psyche suffered because of their beauty.

Theseus, commonly considered to be the heroic slayer of the dreadful Minotaur, is the villain in Ariadne's story, as he sought her help in order to kill her half-brother and then left her behind after forcing her to leave her family and home for a love that never existed, as Theseus only regarded Ariadne as a means to an end:

Better

Take her then, he thought, than have her spite

Raise up alarm… (44)

Thus, Theseus took her from one prison to another, and Ariadne was forced to face a fate which resembles Medea's. Immediately after leaving Crete with Ariadne, Theseus started thinking about the dancing girls, slaves and maids who were waiting for him in Athens and to whom he would have no obligations. Even Dionysus, her second lover, is not described as a loving partner, being "Invisible, smelling of trampled grapes" (45), and considering that he "pitied her" (45) instead of loving her. Additionally, the god of Wine "… took her for his own" (45) as though she were an object which could be possessed, similarly to what the poet implied in "Apollo Takes Charge of His Muses". The poem states neither whether Ariadne felt any real attraction towards the god nor whether she consented to being 'taken'. As a result, in "Ariadne and the Rest", Stallings dignifies Ariadne's pain and misery, and she acknowledges her role in the Minotaur's demise. Additionally, the title of the

poem appears to extend Ariadne's experiences to 'the rest', implying that Ariadne's misfortunes mirror those of countless women who were mistreated by the very men who promised to love them – a humiliation which was as frequent in antiquity as it is now.

Beauty standards and gender roles are pressing subjects in Stallings's works, and she also hints at them in two poems mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, namely "Visiting the Grave of Rupert Brook" and "For Atalanta". In the former, Stallings advances the suggestion that, in antiquity, women were thought to be interested only in frivolous things such as jewels and looks, which "Ariadne and the Rest" proved to be fundamental in women's lives. In fact, Odysseus is able to spot Achilles among the other girls because he shows no interest towards

> Stuffs no princess easily resists –
>
> Fine brocades, and bangles for the wrists,
>
> All manner of adornments, silver, gold, (*Hapax* 20).

In "For Atalanta", A. E. Stallings remarks:

> You'd come to like the stories
>
> Of princesses who weren't set on shelves
>
> Like china figurines. Not allegories,
>
> But girls whose glories
>
> Included rescuing themselves,
>
>
> Slaying their own monsters, running free
>
> But not running away. It might be rough
>
> Singled out for singularity.
>
> Tough.
>
> Beauty will be of some help. You'll see. (*Like* 47-48)

The princesses mentioned in this poem are seemingly much stronger and more independent than those described in “Ariadne and the Rest”. In fact, these princesses are not helpless, and they are allowed to wield weapons and fight their monsters with no external help. However, the importance of beauty is still heavily stressed, and Stallings appears aware that pleasant looks may help women to integrate into society without being ostracized for their oddness – emphasizing how beauty standards have not become any less influential.

Furthermore, Ariadne’s complexity has attracted the attention of several authors, who, like Stallings, attempted to rewrite the events of the myth of the Cretan labyrinth in order to explore her point of view, wondering how she might have felt while experiencing these traumatic events. For instance, Jennifer Saint, in her novel *Ariadne*, shares Stallings’s interpretation of the myth. Indeed, Saint meditates on the treatment of women in ancient Greece, whose value appeared to be linked to their usefulness for the men around them: “And what possible use could my father, King Minos of Crete, ever have for a treacherous daughter?” (*Ariadne* 2). What is more, similarly to what Stallings wrote in “Crazy to Hear the Tale Again (The Fall of Troy)”, Saint highlights the gods’ selfishness and sadism: “I could well believe the truth of it, for the gods did enjoy a prolonged spectacle of pain” (5). Finally, Saint’s Ariadne, just like Stallings’s, is a victim of the harsh beauty standards of ancient Greece and equates her self-worth with her beauty: “A bald princess would be useless” (14). Both Stallings and Saint recognize that Theseus only managed to kill the Minotaur thanks to Ariadne’s help, and Saint’s Ariadne is left in Naxos alone with her anger:

> ‘You would be dead if it wasn’t for me!’ I screamed at Theseus across the cliffs, over the indifferent ocean. ‘Your flesh would be rotting off your bones in the Labyrinth if I had not saved you! You are no hero, you faithless coward!’ (128)

Just as Stallings did with “Ariadne and the Rest”, Saint extends Ariadne’s adventures to ‘the rest’ of womanhood, encouraging Ariadne to wonder: “How many women had he left in his path before me?” (128). Perhaps Ariadne’s relatability to modern-day women is precisely the reason why the Cretan

princess is able to attract the attention of contemporary authors and artists, who are able to comment on the treatment of twenty-first-century women by reworking this ancient myth.

2.2 "Hungry in the dark beneath the stair": The Outcasts of Classical Mythology

Women are not the only silenced figures of classical mythology whose voices are given more importance in modern times. Indeed, mythological creatures, monsters, and beasts of all kinds have been villainized for years on the grounds of their peculiarity and oddity, serving as the antagonists of the designated heroes of the stories, regardless of their inner feelings and thoughts, which are frequently ignored and dismissed in the classics. For example, Medusa is generally considered to be the Gorgon monster whose petrifying gaze could transform any man into stone, therefore her death by the blade of Perseus saved countless potential victims. Yet, in recent times, Medusa has started to be recast as the victim rather than the oppressor. As Haynes points out, in fact, Medusa was once a young girl who was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. The goddess of Wisdom could not tolerate that such profanities could take place in her temple, and she punished the girl rather than Poseidon, "No one punishes the rapist god, of course, but Medusa is given snakes for hair" (Haynes). Hence, Medusa never chose to be a monster, and she became unable to look those who visited her on her isolated island in the eyes without ending their lives. For this reason, her character has been re-evaluated over the years, and her trauma has been acknowledged. According to Cixous, for example, Medusa's death is a symbolic attempt to silence women in favor of men (Kapoor 91). Even Saint comments on the Gorgon, and she forces Ariadne, the protagonist of her novel, to meditate on Medusa's misadventures:

> My tears had stilled now and I listened intently. I only knew Medusa as a monster. I had not thought she had ever been anything else. The stories of Perseus did not allow for a Medusa with a story of her own. (*Ariadne* 16)

Medusa is simultaneously a woman and a monster, consequently, she has been mistreated twice, initially by being mistaken for a sexual object by Poseidon, and later by being murdered for the crime of being uncommon. Ariadne, however, being a young girl who had already witnessed the gods' injustice – considering that both her mother and her monstrous half-brother suffered for the mistakes of her father– took Medusa's side, and embraced her story as a form of rebellion, as a symbol of strength:

> I would be Medusa, if it came to it, I resolved. If the gods held me accountable one day for the sins of someone else, if they came for me to punish a man's actions, I would not hide away like Pasiphae. I would wear that coronet of snakes and the world would shrink from me instead. (17)

As a result, it is possible to observe how a 'monster' has been re-cast first as a victim and then as a symbol of power which offers strength to all those who have been wronged and unjustly punished.

A. E. Stallings appears to acknowledge in her works the worth of the creatures who are commonly seen as dangerous and ugly, opposing their ostracism from the rest of society and their public scorn. For this reason, she encourages her readers to call into question their opinions of certain animals and living beings, opening up the possibility that they might be misjudging them, and hoping to find the origin of these prejudices. For instance, "RepRoach", a poem published in *Archaic Smile*, was written with the intent to redeem the cockroach, an insect which scares and disgusts those who encounter it, rapidly becoming identified as an unwelcome guest mainly because of its homely appearance and long-existing prejudices against it. Stallings is puzzled by the fact that she is able to feel love and compassion for any other creature or beast "Unloved by anyone but God" (*Archaic Smile* 28), yet she cannot help but loathe cockroaches, which have done nothing to earn this antipathy. Bridgford calls attention to the pun cleverly achieved with the title, given that Stallings is reproaching herself for not opposing the bad "rep" of the roach ("A. E. Stallings (1968-)"). Stallings's interest in unloved and allegedly unlovable creatures manifests clearly in her first collection of poetry, *Archaic*

Smile, as she titles the second section of the collection "A Bestiary", devoting her undivided attention to animals of all sorts, such as birds, turtles, monkeys, and disliked insects.

"Arachne Gives Thanks to Athena", contained in *Archaic Smile*, is a poem which draws on Arachne's myth, included in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Arachne was a gifted girl who dared challenge the goddess Athena in a weaving competition; her hubris enraged the goddess, whose wrath and cruelty led the girl to hang herself. Nevertheless, Athena did not allow death to relieve Arachne, and she transformed her into a hideous spider forced to weave for all eternity with the purpose of setting an example for those who feel brave enough to challenge the gods (Hamilton 320). Nevertheless, Stallings's Arachne starts off her speech by arguing "It is no punishment. They are mistaken– / The brothers, the father. My prayers were answered" (*Archaic Smile* 50), hence Athena's punishment is seen as a gift through Arachne's eyes. In fact, her 'curse' allows her to ceaselessly amuse herself with her favorite activity – weaving. What is more, her peculiar condition protects her from old age and "cowardly lovers" (50), notoriously the two biggest obstacles to a girl's career and success. Arachne even expresses a newfound respect for her altered body, which is now able to generate cobwebs, whereas before it could only produce menstrual blood:

> ….
> The moon once pulled blood from me. Now I pull silver.
> Here are the lines I pulled from my own belly –
> Hang them with rainbows, ice, dewdrops, darkness. (50)

The aforementioned "lines" may refer both to spider webs and the lines of a poem, as Stallings and Arachne are equally creators – the former of poetry and the latter of webs. Moreover, Stallings's notorious passion for knitting resembles Arachne's fondness for weaving; hence, the poet might understand Arachne's satisfaction with her new body. In addition to this, by transforming Arachne into a spider, Athena freed her from the necessity of meeting the beauty standards in place at the time. Thus, Arachne claims: "I, if not beautiful, am beauty's maker" (50), clarifying that her craft takes

precedence over all else. It is unclear whether Stallings believes that Athena gave Arachne this gift on purpose or whether her curse simply backfired. Be that as it may, Stallings managed to redeem a character often criticized for her hubristic behavior and ridiculed for her punishment which led to social alienation. Stallings, in fact, does not sound reproachful, and she seems to point out how the real curse is being born a woman in a society ready to interfere as soon as women start to thrive. Thus, Arachne can finally live a life which excites her, and she sounds glad that she failed to put an end to her life, an event hinted at in the final line of the first stanza: "At the end of my rope was a noose's knot" (50). Stallings argues in favor of this interpretation of Arachne's myth also in "XII Klassikal Lymnaeryx", a poem formed by twelve limericks originally published in *The Classical Outlook* and later collected in *Hapax*:

> *vii*
>
> Arachne, Athena beside her,
> Let her ego grow wider and wider.
>   "Let's see who's the winner –
>   The very best spinner!"
> Then she vanished, and nobody spied her. (*Hapax* 72)

As a result, Stallings appears to reiterate that Arachne gained her freedom thanks to her transformation, being now able to work on her craft away from indiscrete eyes, where "nobody spied her" – a clever pun on "spied her" and "spider". Similarly to Medusa's case, then, an unjust punishment has been transformed into a source of strength and power, and Stallings was able to bring forth Arachne's true feelings and thoughts, which have been long-ignored in favor of the more convenient cautionary tale.

As highlighted in the first section of this chapter, Stallings exhibits a particular interest in the myth of the Cretan Labyrinth, thus it comes as no surprise that the Minotaur is one of the mythological figures most frequently explored in her poems in spite of being the mythological monster par

excellence. The Minotaur, whose unused proper name is Asterion, etymologically "starry one" (Atsma, "Minotauros"), belongs to the group of characters who have been deprived of the opportunity to explain themselves. Stallings appears to look beyond the prejudices regarding the 'monster' imprisoned in the labyrinth of Knossos, adopting a maternal, warm, and even loving attitude towards him ("Faculty Reading" 26:02–26:16), perhaps trying to provide him with the affection which was denied to him throughout his life because of his abnormality. In fact, Asterion was cast as a villain immediately after being born, since even as a newborn his otherness was perceived as a dangerous threat, thus forcing him into captivity and giving him no other choice but to live up to his title of monster. What is more, his particular abnormality – a human body paired with a bull's head – rendered him unsuited for speech, making it impossible for him to explain his actual intentions, had anyone cared to listen. Additionally, Asterion's birth did not stem from an act of love but served as a punishment for Minos's arrogance. Indeed, Poseidon gifted a bull to the Cretan king with the purpose of having it sacrificed in his honor. Yet, Minos deemed the bull to be too beautiful and decided to keep it, provoking Poseidon's wrath. The god cursed Minos's wife Pasiphae, and she fell in love with the bull as a punishment, leading to the birth of the Minotaur (Hamilton 164).

Stallings's "Tour of the Labyrinth", which is also the title of the third section of *Archaic Smile*, depicts an archeological tour of a labyrinth after the occurrence of a natural disaster – possibly an earthquake – reduced it to ruins. The poem's incipit brutally introduces the focus of this tour: "And this is where they kept it, though their own" (*Archaic Smile* 47), immediately identifying this "it" as being "their own", perhaps hinting at its belonging to a family, suggesting that it might be a child. The last stanza describes the accidental discovery of its long-forgotten bones, and the readers may identify these remains with the Minotaur, although the bull-headed figure is never explicitly mentioned in the poem:

> They've unravelled the last days of the thing:
>
> It lived a while on rats and bitumen,

And played with its one toy, a ball of string,

To puzzle out the darkness it was in. (47)

Indeed, in spite of employing the word "thing" and the personal pronoun "it", the poet appears to be describing a small child, lonely and afraid, with only a ball of string to keep him company, which hardly qualifies as a "toy". In the poem, the thing is described as murderous, as it was fed virgins; yet, it was also fed apple cores, which may leave the readers wondering whether the human sacrifices were absolutely necessary, considering that it could apparently eat ordinary food as well. The poor creature, villainized since its birth, was left to live a lonely life, and its laments were justified to the guests as sounds coming from the earth. However, when an earthquake really occurred, they forgot to take care of the thing and left it to die. Furthermore, the reference to the ball of string evokes Ariadne's string, which helped Theseus bring about the Minotaur's demise. If Ariadne's ball of string was the only solace Asterion could find within the darkness and solitude of the labyrinth, then he was not given much time to play with his brand-new toy before being murdered by the hero of the myth.

These supposed references to Asterion and Ariadne seem to be well-founded considering that "Tour of the Labyrinth" presents similarities and connections with the poem which precedes it in *Archaic Smile*, namely "Ariadne and the Rest". For example, Stallings wrote the line "Hungry in the dark beneath the stair" (44, 47) in both poems; however, in "Ariadne and the Rest" it refers to "deformity", thus to the Minotaur, while in "Tour of the Labyrinth" it refers to the aforementioned unspecified "it". What is more, "Ariadne and the Rest" seemingly alludes to the murder of Asterion, which may then lead to the discovery of his ruins in the following poem. In fact, the line "But how the dawning emptied out the sky / Of stars…" (45) may be referring to the etymological meaning of Asterion's name, possibly indicating that his half-sister Ariadne is mourning his loss, for which she was at least partially responsible. Additionally, the last stanza of "Ariadne and the Rest" mentions a "broken toy" (46), perhaps foreshadowing the thing's "one toy" (47) introduced in "Tour of the Labyrinth". In addition to this, Taraskiewicz recognizes that "Having access to thread does not

guarantee one the capacity to find one's way or to weave a new plot, one must know how to use it". Therefore, the Minotaur might have seen the ball of string as a toy rather than a possibility to escape the labyrinth precisely because, having always lived in captivity, he was never given the possibility to understand tools coming from the outside world. As a consequence, after finding the string, he neither escaped from it nor followed it towards the exit. Hence, in "Tour of the Labyrinth", Stallings expresses her sympathy towards the Minotaur's conditions, and she assumes a protective tone towards what she believes to be a misunderstood, neglected boy. Perhaps, being a mother herself, she is unable to understand how a parent could treat their own offspring this harshly regardless of their appearance or capabilities.

Unlike the previously mentioned poem, "Art Monster", initially published in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* and later collected in *Like*, offers the Minotaur the opportunity to use his own voice. Asterion begins his story by mentioning his mother, Pasiphae, using the possessive adjective "my", thus acknowledging his belonging to her, possibly implying that, if he has a mother, then he must be a son. Indeed, Asterion uses the first two stanzas to retell the circumstances of his birth. Nevertheless, he also reveals: "No one called me my mother's son" (*Like* 7), exposing how his belonging to a family was denied, possibly because of his abnormal appearance. In fact, beauty standards seem to be as important for the Minotaur's story as they were for the Ariadne of "Ariadne and the Rest", given that Asterion was imprisoned, ostracized, and mistreated precisely because he was considered to be "… unnatural, grotesque" (8). Interestingly, however, in "Art Monster", beauty is associated with an animal rather than a pretty woman, as both of the following lines refer to the bull with which Pasiphae conceived Asterion: "My mother fell for beauty" and "Or beauty could not possess her –" (7). The Minotaur uses his brand-new voice to finally explain his versions of the events:

> ... I was fed
> On raw youths and maidens,
> When all I wanted was the cud of clover. (7)

Therefore, it may be possible to argue that the Minotaur turned into a monster in order to survive and avoid starvation since they only fed him boys and girls, whom he had to eat against his will for lack of better options. Additionally, A. E. Stallings plays with the word "maze" in the lines "I was born / / To be amazed" (7), seemingly acknowledging how he was born to be imprisoned within a labyrinth, with the only prospect of living a life of complete captivity inside the maze. Yet, Asterion was also literally "amazed" as Theseus surprised him with his fatal blow. Indeed, the word 'amaze' is formed by the word 'maze' and the prefix 'a' ("Amaze, v., Etymology"), which once again displays Stallings's knowledge of etymological matters. Interestingly, Stallings used the same wordplay in "Tour of the Labyrinth", in which she explains that the archaeologists were "amazed" (*Archaic Smile* 47) after finding the bones of the thing among the other ruins. Again, it is possible to argue that the archaeologists were both surprised at their findings and also literally inside a maze. Furthermore, in "Art Monster" Asterion claims that the rest of society only recognized him as a villain and a monster whose prophesized murder was not deemed to be a scandalous, brutal crime, but rather a heroic act worthy of praise: "A hero will come to slay you, a hero" (*Like* 8). It may be possible to recognize a hint of irony in Stallings's use of the word "hero", especially considering that the two following lines seem to question Theseus's heroism in light of his treatment of the Minotaur and Ariadne: "Who jilts princesses on desert islands. / It is heroic to slay, to break a heart" (8). As a result, Stallings seemingly links Asterion and Ariadne's fates in her poems, evoking either one of the two half-siblings in the poems centered around the other – a connection she makes even clearer by mentioning the "basement" (8) in which Asterion was kept, just as she did in "Ariadne and the Rest" and "Tour of the Labyrinth". Sadly, Asterion appears to look forward to the fulfillment of the aforementioned prophecy, patiently awaiting the moment in which he will be finally able to "De-monster the darkness" (8) with his death, which seems to be interpreted as a much-desired relief by the Minotaur. Indeed, after relentlessly being referred to as a monster and an abomination, Asterion starts to agree with the brutal external inputs, becoming certain of his evil nature and concluding that his absence would be better than his presence, arguably showing signs of low self-esteem and perhaps even depression.

This resigned attitude recalls that of Borges's Asterion in "The House of Asterion", which was first published in 1947. In fact, when Borges's Minotaur hears that a redeemer is coming for him, he is enthusiastic about meeting him: "Since then my loneliness does not pain me, because I know my redeemer lives and he will finally rise above the dust" (Borges 139). Like Stallings's Asterion, Borges's Minotaur does not fight for his life, as his dreadful solitude causes him to lighten up at the idea that Theseus might be his very first friend in a world in which he is neither loved nor understood. "Art Monster" cleverly also mentions the creator of the Cretan Labyrinth, Daedal, in the line "(O daedal mechanics!)" (*Like* 7), almost anticipating Stallings's poem "Daedal", published in *Poetry* in 2020. Daedal, the ingenious father of Icarus, was one of Minos's prisoners, suffering the same fate of the monster who was forced to live within his creation. Like the Minotaur, Daedalus was imprisoned with his son within the labyrinth he built. Stallings wrote "Daedal" in the form of a villanelle, perhaps using its typical repetitions to evoke the monotonous and repetitive nature of a labyrinth. Symbolically, the word "mistakes" is repeated four times in the poem, precisely pointing out how mistakes played an important role in the building of the labyrinth. Indeed, "Daedal" mentions "A lost child buried in its heart" which may well bring to mind Asterion or, as Garbutt suggests, Icarus ("A.E. Stallings Reads 'Daedal'" 08:26-08:50).

Additionally, Asterion features in Stallings's poem "Denouement", published in *The New York Criterion* in 2013 and later collected in *Like*. The poet declares that the only thing she managed to do throughout the afternoon "Is to untangle a wine-dark skein / And coil it into a ball" (*Like* 34), thus immediately evoking the infamous ball of string. What is more, she compares this process to the difficulty of finding the way out of a labyrinth: "… went / Brailling along the maze" (34). Stallings meditates on the possible uses of the string, concluding that it can be employed to

> …
>
> Tease the cat from her cradle, lead
>
> The minotaur by the nose

> Out of the labyrinth
>
> Through which all heroes travel,
>
> … (35)

Curiously, she draws a parallel between a housecat and the Minotaur, perhaps identifying him as a beloved pet rather than a child in this poem. Yet, in "Denouement" the ball of string appears as a salvation instead of an ill-omen, as it seemingly leads Asterion out of the labyrinth rather than towards his death. Hence, Stallings is able to create a different ending to Asterion's usual tragedy, and the bull-headed outcast escapes Theseus's heroism for the first time.

Asterion is a mythological figure whose conditions have attracted the sympathies of several authors and artists who, like Stallings, are able to look beyond his monstrous appearance, noticing his pain and acknowledging his needs. For example, Saint's Ariadne is able to perceive the Minotaur's humanity instead of exclusively focusing on his bestiality and she recognizes him as her brother: "He was not yet the Minotaur. He was just a baby. He was my brother" (*Ariadne* 20). Even her initial attempts at hating him seem to fail: "The infant was a monster and the mother a hollowed-out shell, but I was a child and drawn to the frail spark of tenderness in the room" (19). After discovering the death of her son, Pasiphae forgets about Asterion's monstrosity and is struck with grief: "Not caring for the foul streaks upon her hair, her breast, her face, she cradled it close, whimpering" (146), shocking Ariadne's sister, who agreed with the general public and saw the Minotaur as a beast: "'Did she really love that thing?' … 'How can she grieve for it like this, knowing what it was?'" (149). In the end, Ariadne's words effectively sum up the reason why the Minotaur's myth may be so moving and tragic, namely because he had no control over his life:

> It was not his fault, I thought fiercely, he did not choose to be this way. He was Poseidon's cruel joke, a humiliation meant to degrade a man who'd never even deigned to set eyes upon the beast. (22)

Similarly, Gospodinov's *The Physics of Sorrow* (2011) emphasizes the Minotaur's vulnerability by identifying him as a victim of his neglectful father (Siri 38). Stallings seemingly agrees with these views, and she goes as far as saying that:

> He's a monster, but he's also sometimes depicted in art as a kind of … almost relatable character even though he's a monster. I think I always just kind of felt sorry for him. He's this child in the basement that nobody really wants to talk about. ("A.E. Stallings Reads 'Daedal'" 00:33-00:52)

Such a shift in the general opinion of the Minotaur has been fundamental in exploring how, even in modern times, individuals may be ostracized from society due to their behavioral or physical otherness. Indeed, the monsters of Greco-Roman mythology may be seen as the misunderstood victims of a society which villainized them for their peculiarities and differences. These tendencies of social exclusion, however, have not disappeared yet, and both children and adults might find themselves isolated, scorned, or unwanted because of their uniqueness. Additionally, they may even be feared due to their unusual appearance – similarly to what happened to countless mythological monsters. For this reason, in recent times, Asterion has been associated with neurodiversity, which may explain why this child was constantly misunderstood and alienated due to his odd behavior, which ancient Greece had no tools to interpret. During a conversation on Liv Albert's podcast, the classicist Dr. Cora Beth Fraser explained:

> For myself, as an autistic person, I'm so drawn to the monster. I'm drawn to the Minotaur in this labyrinth who is pottering around all by himself and having a great time doing it; and he's kind of looked at in a strange way by the rest of the world. ("Conversations: Starry-Eyed Asterion" 00:43:54-00:44:13)

What is more, Fraser and Wolfenden chose precisely the Minotaur's name for their website *Asterion*, aimed at supporting neurodivergent classicists. Interestingly, A. E. Stallings promoted *Asterion* on

her *X* account, thus acknowledging this new reading of the figure of the Cretan monster and perhaps suggesting her agreement with this theory: "If you are interested in Classics, please follow this new journal of neurodiversity in Classics, Asterion:" (@ae_stallings).

CHAPTER 3

3.1 Stallings's Poems on Love and Death

3.1.1 "Or Strife Is My Muse, Isn't It?": A. E. Stallings and Love

As illustrated in the previous chapter of this thesis, A. E. Stallings's poems frequently tackle the complex topic of love without shying away from exposing its struggles. For instance, she discusses Ariadne, Circe, and Medea's abandonment by their partners, she writes about extramarital affairs and their consequences – as in the case of Procne and Tereus – and she offers valuable insight into long-lasting relationships which suffered countless misfortunes – suffice it to mention Penelope and Odysseus. In addition to this, Stallings's poems recurrently feature marital difficulties, arguments, and unhappy relationships. In an interview with Mike Trevor, Stallings declared:

> Someone has pointed out in an interview: "You have a lot of poems about marital arguments", and I had to think about that. It's true, and I think it's partly to do with [the fact that] an argument kind of puts you into that poetic frame of mind. You know, you have to stand back and sort of think about what was said and what was changed and, you know, you kind of go into that internal thing so, I guess. Or Strife is my muse, isn't it? ("PoetryEast with A.E. Stallings" 01:23:09-01:23:38)

For example, in "Where We Moved To", published in *Poetry* in 1999 and collected in *Archaic Smile* later that year, Stallings portrays an unsatisfied couple who are unable to evenly balance the distribution of house chores. Thus, the speaker is in charge of doing most of the work, while their partner relaxes and even judges the quality of the work done:

> I sweep and you find fault with sweeping:
> I have failed corners. Dust remains.
> But in your cup the tea is steeping, (*Archaic Smile* 74)

The existence of this imbalance within the couple may lead to frustration and anger in the long run. What is more, “Where We Moved To” appears to contain autobiographical elements as its epigraph reads “*on the occasion of our new address*” (74), inducing the readers to wonder whether Stallings experienced this lack of balance in one of her own relationships. Similarly, in “The Argument”, which lends its title to the first section of *Olives* and was initially published in *The Cortland Review* in 2006, the poet depicts a fighting couple. The poem partly shows how miscommunication might be a leading cause of arguments and resentment: “They stood divided by their eloquence / Which had surprised them after so much silence” (*Olives* 15), hence their words separate them rather than uniting them. Although this much-needed argument momentarily provides relief to the couple, encouraging the two partners “To be kind as sometimes strangers can be kind” (15), the idea that they are only capable of kindness when they act like strangers does not seem promising for the future of the couple. Furthermore, in this poem, love is described as a violent force by using war-related terms which recall a battlefield: “Machetes still in hand…” (15). At the end of the poem, the couple are filled with fear and hopelessness: “… they both were suddenly afraid / And there was no one now to comfort them” (15). Likewise, in the sonnet which opens her second collection, *Hapax*, namely “Aftershocks”, which was originally published in *The Yale Review* in 2001, Stallings chooses to discuss another argument. The poet likens the aftermath of an earthquake to the aftermath of a fight between two lovers who are left wondering: “Or have we always stood on shaky ground?” (*Hapax* 5). As a result, “The literal and metaphorical meet in the middle of the poem (ironic, given the poem's topic), almost with a linguistic kiss” (“A. E. Stallings (1968-)”). Just as in the afore-mentioned poem, “Aftershocks” draws attention to miscommunication issues, as the lovers are unable to articulate their thoughts and they are both too proud to apologize to each other. This behavior divides the two lovers, and they feel as if they were separated by a physical crack left by an earthquake:

> We fall mute as when two lovers come
>
> To the brink of the apology, and halt,

> Each standing on the wrong side of the fault. (*Hapax* 5)

In fact, Stallings cleverly uses the word "fault" to indicate both the lovers' individual responsibility for the fight and a geological fault, namely a fracture in the Earth's crust. What is more, in the poem, Stallings hints at Elizabeth Bishop's famous villanelle "One Art" by rhyming the words "disaster", "plaster", "master", and "vaster", perhaps suggesting that the lovers should prepare themselves to lose each other. Kim Bridgford calls attention to the fact that "One Art" and "Aftershocks" equally stress life's brittleness ("A. E. Stallings (1968-)"). In the same essay, she adds that Stallings's Spenserian sonnet might recall Bishop's villanelle thanks to its characteristic interlocking rhymes between the three quatrains and that her insistence on geographical imagery brings to mind Bishop's *Geography III*. Finally, Bridgford praises Stallings's skilled use of punctuation:

> It is unusual to use so many end-stopped lines; in fact, most of the lines in the poem are end-stopped. Such a strategy underscores the abrupt nature of change. At the same time the opening up of fluidity--and more enjambment--at the end of the poem shows the deceptive way in which we go on after a change, only to be stopped short by what has happened. ("A. E. Stallings (1968-)")

Stallings further explores this theme by drawing on ancient myths. For instance, in "Tithonus", a poem published in *Archaic Smile*, she makes use of the mythological love story between Tithonus and Eos to discuss the struggles of love. According to the myth, Eos, "the rosy-fingered goddess of the dawn", fell for the Trojan prince Tithonus and begged Zeus to make him immortal, neglecting to ask for his eternal youth (Atsma, "Eos"). Thus, Tithonus lived eternally as an old man who could no longer take care of himself and whose body and mind were failing him, until, eventually, Eos transformed him into a cicada out of mercy ("Eos"). As a consequence, although this couple does not suffer from a lack of love, the relationship of the two lovers still fails. In Stallings's poem, Tithonus speaks in the first person, and he feels ashamed of his condition. In fact, he feels insecure about his

aged physical appearance, and he sounds tired from enduring the aches and embarrassments of old age. He is no longer able to feed himself and his mind is forsaking him: "I will mutter nursery rhymes and drool" (*Archaic Smile* 51). Tithonus's old age is seemingly tearing the two lovers apart, and he does not want her to see him in such a state: "Do not look at me and let me turn away" (51). He notices how Eos winces when she looks at him and he is reminded of his mortal self, "(Once I too was beautiful.) …" (51). Consequently, he wishes to hide from Eos, who is conceivably still in love with Tithonus since she is willing to take care of him without complaints. In spite of her undying love, he would rather be dead for both of their sakes, saying "And I will convince us both that I am gone" (51). Alternatively, this line may suggest that he is only pretending that his mind is decaying alongside his body in order to alienate his lover and convince her to leave him, granting her a better life in which she does not need to take care of an old man. This suggestion appears to be supported by the fact that Tithonus is lucid enough to be the voice of the poem – hence, at least in Stallings's version, his mind has not completely forsaken him yet. Moreover, his "nursery rhymes" and "nonsense words" (51), in addition to indicating his alleged fragility of mind, may also allude to the cicada's chirrup. In the end, there is nothing left for Tithonus to do except watch Eos shining on the world: "I watch you as the world does, as I must" (51), but the horizon appears bleak to him, and he foresees neither happiness nor peace ahead of him. Therefore, it may be suggested that, in "Tithonus", love is not enough to make the relationship work, highlighting the fact that arguments, mistrust, and miscommunication are not the only factors contributing to unhappiness in love. What is more, it might be interesting to call attention to the fact that Tennyson published a poem titled "Tithonus" in 1860, of which Stallings was likely aware while writing her own "Tithonus". In Tennyson's poem, Tithonus is displeased with his immortality, and he desires death above all else. Indeed, Tennyson's Tithonus begins his monologue by complaining that all living beings are allowed to live and die, whereas he is forced to live and age eternally: "Me only cruel immortality / Consumes ….", meaningfully choosing the adjective "cruel" to describe immortality. He already identifies as a "shadow" although he has not died yet, and, as Weinfield (364) explains, "The fact that he continues to 'live,' that he has eternal

life, distinguishes him theoretically, or formally, but not actually, from the shades in Hades". As a result, similarly to Stallings's Tithonus, he appears to be in physical and psychological pain, and he begs Eos to put him out of his misery by granting him permission to finally die: "… Let me go: take back thy gift" (Tennyson). He stresses his belief that death is a source of happiness by talking about the "… happy men that have the power to die" and by depicting the dead as "happier" in the following line (Tennyson). In the poem, he also reminisces about his former mortal beauty, "… once a man— / So glorious in his beauty and thy choice", and he seems to envy Eos's eternal youth: "Immortal age beside immortal youth". Yet, while Stallings's "Tithonus" ends on a resigned note, Tennyson's "Tithonus" admits a glimmer of hope. In fact, Stallings's Tithonus does not bother pleading for death, whereas Tennyson's Tithonus sounds hopeful that Eos might listen to his pleas and end his life (Weinfield 365).

Pandora is an additional mythological figure employed by Stallings in order to comment on modern-day marriage and relationships. Pandora was believed to be the first mortal woman to ever exist. She was molded out of clay by the gods with the purpose of being offered to Epimetheus, the Titan god of Afterthought, as his bride to punish his brother Prometheus, the Titan god of Forethought, for providing the mortals with the fire he had stolen from the gods (Atsma, "Pandora"). Moreover, Zeus gave her the infamous jar, which, once opened, released the evil spirits that still plague mankind – with the only exception of Hope ("Pandora"). Stallings's "Ajar", published in *The Atlantic* in 2014 and later collected in *Like*, captures the moment in which Pandora opens the jar, cleverly using the title to play with the words "ajar" and "a jar". Stallings wrote this poem in rhyming hexameters with a rhymed middle caesura, thus visually dividing the poem in half, increasing the feeling of separation. In "Ajar", the poet discusses the tension caused by the broken door of a washing-machine, which, as a consequence, is left ajar, forcing the frustrated couple to handwash the dirty clothes. Stallings acknowledges that she frequently writes about laundry, particularly the 'dirty laundry' which should not be aired in public ("A. E. Stallings on "Ajar""). In the poem, the couple fail to communicate without starting to argue, preferring silence instead: "And sometimes when we spoke,   you said we

shouldn't speak" (*Like* 5). Stallings seems to compare the evil spirits contained in Pandora's jar to the "angers" (5) left soaking in the tub. In fact, as the headnote to the poem in *The Atlantic* says: "What if the box released not sickness, war, and pain, but words? Language is powerful, Stallings suggests, and recklessly wielded, it can wrench apart a relationship" ("Ajar"). Stallings manages to summarize the myth of Pandora in a few lines of poetry, acknowledging that "Whatever the gods forbid,   it's sure someone will do" (*Like* 5). Just as lovers peek into the angers to start a fight, "She peeked under the lid,   and out all trouble flew" (5). Yet, the poet emphasizes that Hope remains, and she ingeniously rhymes it with "cope" (5), perhaps suggesting that hope is the only solace to humankind and the only medicine in love. The poet admits to being unsure as to whether the fact that Hope stays in the jar should be taken as a good omen or not ("A. E. Stallings on "Ajar""). In the last line of the poem, Stallings explicitly connects Pandora's myth with the frustrations experienced by the couple: "But I say that the woes were words,   and the only thing left was quiet" (*Like* 5). Hence "quiet" seems to be equated with "Hope", which may explain why it is "lodged in the mouth" (5). While discussing the writing process of this poem, Stallings revealed:

> This poem came out of three aspects of my life at once—real frustration with a broken machine and a certain kind of uninspiring work, the tendency to look at that work through poetry, trying to make something out of that frustrated daily-ness, and simultaneously thinking through the problems of translation and interpretation. ("A. E. Stallings on "Ajar"").

Stallings published "Pandora" in *The Battersea Review* and later collected it in *Like*. In this poem, Pandora is sent by her drunken husband Hindsight and his brother Foresight – namely Epimetheus and Prometheus – to fetch more alcohol. Being the Titan god of Afterthought, Epimetheus did not think about the gods' intentions before marrying Pandora, and, as a result, "Hindsight, her husband, of course remorsed their marriage" (*Like* 84). However, his brother should have anticipated the situation, but he appears to be just as clueless as his brother. Indeed, after stealing the fire from the gods, he "… hadn't foreguessed, nickname aside, / The prank would backfire …" (84). While looking

for alcohol, Pandora opens a cask of wine, “But the wine had vinegared, or worse…” (85), and she is aware that her husband will get angry at her for opening it. In spite of the fact that Pandora is also drinking alcohol – possibly out of exhaustion – “There was just a dram in the drained keg, and that / She thought she’d drink herself, dregs be damned” (84), Stallings informs her readers that Pandora is pregnant. In fact, her fetus is kicking “Right behind where she would have had a belly button / / If she’d been born, instead of just made up by poets” (85). These lines refer to the fact that, since Pandora was created instead of born, she has no belly button. Yet, Stallings mentions poets rather than gods as her creators, emphasizing how, in the end, they were her ultimate inventors since mythology was passed on and written down by poets. Be that as it may, Pandora seems to deeply desire this child, and she wants to have a daughter so “She’d have some company…” (85), suggesting that she feels lonely and neglected. Symbolically, Pandora states that she would like to call her Hope, perhaps indicating that, just as Hope was the only good spirit to come out of the jar, her future daughter Hope will be the only good product of her marriage to Epimetheus. Interestingly, Pandora’s choice of the name “Hope” is an afterthought, considering that she initially thinks of “Heather” – a detail which calls to mind her husband Epimetheus.

Similarly, in “Vulcan’s Valentine”, a poem published in 1995 in *The Classical Outlook* which does not appear in any of the poet’s published collections, Stallings takes on the troublesome relationship between Vulcan and Aphrodite. Vulcan, whose Greek name is Hephaestus, was the Olympian god of Fire and Craftsmanship (Atsma, “Hephaistos Myths”). He was the god charged by Zeus to create Pandora, and he was the only ugly and lame Olympian (“Hephaistos Myths”). His mother, the goddess Hera, was ashamed of him, and she cast him from Mount Olympus; for this reason, Hephaestus took vengeance upon her by bounding her fast to a golden throne of his creation, subsequently obtaining Aphrodite’s hand in marriage in exchange for Hera’s freedom (“Hephaistos Loves”). Consequently, Aphrodite’s decision to marry Hephaestus did not stem from love, but from necessity, and she chose her lover Ares over her husband whenever she could. In fact, by mentioning “Valentine” in the title of her poem, Stallings evokes the figure of Cupid – or Eros – given that he is

commonly associated with Valentine's Day, and he is generally believed to be Ares and Aphrodite's son ("Eros"). In Stallings's poem, Vulcan is aware that Aphrodite does not care about his gifts, even though he worked on them his whole life. The god appears to be resigned to this situation: "I neither care nor understand. /   Not anymore" ("Vulcan's Valentine" 141). In the first line of the poem, he refers to her as "wife", but, by positioning the noun at the end of the line, it sounds almost challenging: "I have made you something, wife–" (141). Yet, the poet rhymes "wife" with "life", possibly adding importance to this label – at least in Hephaestus's eyes. In addition to making gifts for his wife, he makes one for himself: "For me I've made another one –" (141), indicating that he is not receiving gifts from Aphrodite, and he needs to take care of his own presents. What is more, the line "Or drop it down upon the floor –" (141) might be a reference to his fall from Olympus; in fact, it may be argued that his wife despises him just as much as his mother did. Stallings does not specify what the nature of Hephaestus's gift to Aphrodite is, although it may be suggested that the gift consists of the cursed necklace of Harmonia. According to the myth, Hephaestus took his revenge on Aphrodite by creating a necklace for Harmonia, an additional child born of Ares and Aphrodite's affair, dooming her and her descendants to misfortune (Atsma, "Hephaistos Works 1").

Nevertheless, Stallings also acknowledges love as a positive force in a portion of her poems. For instance, Stallings's "… in Love and War", published in 2010 in *Lavender Review: Lesbian Poetry and Art*, draws inspiration from Sappho's "Fragment 16". In "Fragment 16", the Greek poet declares that there is nothing more beautiful than what one's heart desires – in her case, Anactoria – stating that it surpasses even the beauty of armies (Sappho). In "… in Love and War", Stallings seemingly borrows Sappho's voice, rewriting her thoughts and explaining how, according to Sappho, the glories of war pale in comparison to the beauty of a loved one: "I say it's none of the above:/ *I say it is the one you love*" ("… in Love and War"). The poet further discloses that Anactoria occupies Sappho's every thought: "So Anaktoria, far away, / Haunts my thoughts today". By writing this poem, Stallings recognizes the strong feelings existing between the two women, choosing an instance of homosexual love to write about a love that knows neither arguments nor violence. There are other

poems celebrating homosexual love in Stallings's works. In fact, in "After Reading the Biography Savage Beauty", published in *Light* in 2013 and later collected in *This Afterlife*, Stallings pays homage to the openly bisexual poet Edna St. Vincent Millay after reading her biography, *Savage Beauty*, written by Nancy Milford (2001):

> I'd like to have lovers, both straight ones and gay,
> I'd like to hold *both* sexes under my sway
> And not give two figs about what people say
> Like Edna, Edna St. Vincent Millay. (*This Afterlife* 190)

However, in Stallings's poems, love is most frequently intertwined with death, and she turns the Greek Underworld into the setting of several poems which focus on love and relationships. For example, in "The Myrtle Grove", Stallings approaches the tragic topic of suicide instigated by love. The poem is dedicated to "R. W.", namely Rachel Todd Wetzsteon, a poet who took her own life shortly after a breakup (Behrens). "The Myrtle Grove" is formed by two elegiac sonnets, the first of which was published in *Able Muse* in 2010 and later collected in *Like* along with the second sonnet. In the first sonnet, Stallings expresses her fear that Wetzsteon's soul might reside "In some grey wasteland of the suicides" (*Like* 80), where the spirits live in the shadow, eternally regretting their mortal choices without any opportunity to change them. For this reason, Stallings hopes that Wetzsteon managed to find "… the moon-dim ladies of the dead–" (80) instead. Indeed, like Dido, who killed herself after Aeneas's abandonment, these spirits are located "… in the myrtle grove / Where dwell the shades of those who died for love" (80), as the myrtle was believed to be the sacred tree of the goddess of Love herself, namely Aphrodite (Atsma, "Aphrodite Estate"). In the second sonnet, Stallings admits that she "… dreamt about the suicide" (*Like* 81), curiously choosing to call it a dream rather than a nightmare. Thereupon, the poet mentions that, in the dream, the "suicide" offered to give her a tattoo of a heart which, however, looked like a hart, reminding her of "Whoso List to Hunt, I Know Where Is an Hind", a poem by Sir Thomas Wyatt. In Wyatt's poem, love is portrayed as a violent hunt in

which a man unsuccessfully attempts to seduce a woman who does not reciprocate his feelings. Perhaps, Wetzsteon struggled with a similar form of unrequited love and turned to suicide after giving up, although her suicide was likely caused by multiple factors (Behrens). In the dream, Stallings refuses the tattoo, which is conceivably what ensures the continuation of her life, as the final line of the sonnet mimics the sound of a beating heart: "What stops the heart's tattoo, the heart's tattoo" (*Like* 81).

3.1.2 "Where everyone must board the skiff": Death and the Underworld

A. E. Stallings's interest in death is so intense that it might be seen as an out-and-out obsession, considering that a great part of her works either meditates on the concept of death or is set in the Greek Underworld, a mythological place which never fails to arouse her curiosity. For example, the sonnet which opens her first published collection, *Archaic Smile*, namely "A Postcard from Greece", which was originally published in *Poetry* in 1996, depicts an autobiographical episode (Murchison) in which the poet almost died. In fact, Stallings was one the victims of a car accident, during which she had the time and lucidity to observe "That outer space through which we were to plummet" (*Archaic Smile* 3). Luckily, instead of falling into the void, the car crashed against an olive tree, saving the lives of Stallings and her husband (Gylys). The final line of the sonnet, "Surprised by sunlight, air, this afterlife" (*Archaic Smile* 3), is the inspiration behind the title of Stallings's fifth collection of poetry, *This Afterlife*. Indeed, the poet's surprise at her survival was such that she interpreted it as an extension of her life, a second life which she perceived as an "afterlife". This afterlife is portrayed as a gift, given that it is a part of her life which was not supposed to happen. However, Stallings's choice of the word "afterlife" to indicate the extension of her life is interesting because this term is frequently used to indicate the place to which souls travel after death – for instance, heaven or hell – hence, it makes it sound as though she died in the car crash and her soul kept on living, turning her into a "shade reborn" (Yezzi 110). Furthermore, Nathan points out Stallings's meaningful decision to open her collection with this poem, and he states:

> But it is the framing that I find most moving: that everything that came after that first poem, a survivor's postcard from Greece, has been an afterlife—a gift, a lagniappe—growing out of, and in the face of, its prospective nonexistence.

Similarly, in "Country Song", a sonnet originally published in *The Formalist* with the title of "Long Gone Lonesome Blues" and later collected in *Olives*, Stallings once again seems to be the protagonist of the poem. In the sonnet, the poet is driving while listening to a country song titled "Long Gone Lonesome Blues" by Hank Williams, which tells the unhappy story of a man who is contemplating suicide after being mistreated and abandoned by a woman. Stallings begins her poem by clarifying that "Death was something that hadn't happened yet" (*Olives* 26), but the readers are left wondering whether she is referring to the song, the singer, or her own life. What is more, Stallings even explicitly mentions parts of Hank Williams's song: "The voice came from beyond the muddy river– / You know the one, the one that's cold as ice" (26), evoking the original lyrics "I'm gonna find me a river, one that's cold as ice" (H. Williams 01:30-01:35). Although Hank Williams did not commit suicide, he tragically died at thirty years of age, and, while listening to his voice on the radio, Stallings meditates on death: "I'm older than Hank Williams ever was" (*Olives* 26). This idea can be connected to the first line of the poem, as this means that, luckily, "Death was something that hadn't happened yet" (26) to Stallings. As a consequence, this poem illustrates how even mundane circumstances – such as listening to an old record on the radio – might be enough for the poet to deeply think about death and the fleetingness of life.

In addition to this, Stallings's thoughts about death are frequently connected to the animal kingdom. For example, "A Lament for the Dead Pets of Our Childhood", published in *Poetry* in 1996 and later collected in *Archaic Smile*, is a commemoration of Stallings's childhood pets and beloved animals. The poet suggests that the death of a pet might be a child's very first contact with death and mortality: "That's how we found out death…" (*Archaic Smile* 33). This experience leaves children with an uncanny feeling: "But a cold thing in the image of a warm thing, / Limp as sleep without the

twitch of dreams" (33). In an interview given to *The Cortland Review*, Stallings asserted the importance of including death in stories and poems for children, stating that it is beneficial for them to come into contact with the real world:

> Children are aware that bad things happen, that people die and animals die, and when that's incorporated into something like a story or a poem, where it's put into some sort of order, where it's controlled, it becomes less threatening, and they know they're dealing with the truth, that we're not hiding things. But when death isn't mentioned at all, when the monster is only a monster because he is lonely and wants to make friends, we offer a false sense of security. (Murchison)

In order to further explore her interest in death, Stallings heavily relies on mythology, making ubiquitous allusions to the Greek Underworld in her poems, so much so that the first section of *Archaic Smile* is entirely dedicated to the Underworld. In fact, the poet admits to finding "the pagan concept of the underworld and afterlife almost more believable — more human — than the Christian heaven and hell thing" (Murchison). When asked about this morbid fascination, she humorously claimed that it may be connected to depression, but, most importantly, it might depend on the fact that she wrote most of her Underworld poems in a bleak basement apartment, which perhaps inspired thoughts of death ("Seriously Entertaining" 8:14–8:40). Moreover, the poet identifies the Underworld as a place which allows her to explore her imagination and creativity: "I think I'm attracted to it partly because there are no rules, you can kind of make up your own Underworld" ("PoetryEast with A.E. Stallings" 00:08:21-00:08:27).

Stallings's Underworld, like her mundane thoughts about death, is also connected to the animal kingdom in her poems. In fact, as seen in the first chapter of this thesis, the poet equates the souls roaming about in the Underworld with faithful and loyal dogs. In "The Dogdom of the Dead", published in *Poetry* in 1997 and later collected in *Archaic Smile*, Stallings argues that dead people, like dogs, are "Always with you…" (*Archaic Smile* 16), and not even sleep can free the mind of them.

She mentions that the dog-like souls spend their time sniffing memories "But always losing the scent when it crosses the Styx" (16). Additionally, she points out the utter lack of novelty which characterizes death by writing about the souls' inability to learn: "They are creatures of habit and cannot learn new tricks" (16). In "An Ancient Dog Grave, Unearthed During Construction of the Athens Metro", a poem published in *The Hudson Review* in 2002 and subsequently collected in *Hapax*, the poet imagines a dog's journey to the House of Hades. Stallings pays attention to the collar found inside her grave, whose protective beads were meant to "… ward off evil …" (*Hapax* 24), wondering why her master felt the need to protect her in the Underworld: "But what evil could she suffer after death?" (24). Therefore, Stallings is encouraged to consider the countless misfortunes which may affect the dog on her journey, given that she could be trampled by the countless souls who daily reach the shores of the Underworld due to famine, old age, and war, or she might be unable to jump onto Charon's boat on her own. What is more, the poet wonders: "What stranger pays her passage? ..." (24), explaining that, now that the dog is "…bereaved of her master" (24), only the kindness of strangers can ensure her safe arrival in the House of Hades. Moreover, Stallings meditates on the dog's encounter with the three-headed Hound of Hades, Cerberus, which possibly represents a threat. In fact, the description of their meeting is at once tender and terrifying, given that Cerberus's intentions appear unclear: "And then, that last, tense moment — touching noses / Once, twice, three times, with unleashed Cerberus" (24).

Stallings's thoughts about the Underworld are occasionally provoked also by her surroundings. Indeed, in her poem "Asphodel", collected in *Hapax* but originally published in the *Beloit Poetry Journal* and *The Best American Poetry 2000*, Stallings reminds her readers that asphodels were typically associated with the Underworld in ancient times. In the poem, Stallings looks back at a tour she took while visiting Nymphaion, and she thinks about the words of her tour guide, Penny Turner, whose voice she borrows almost for the entirety of the poem. Turner describes asphodels as: "The flower native to the plains of hell" (23), proceeding to mention the episode in Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus travels to the Underworld and is met by Achilles's shade "…

who had preferred a name / And short life to a long life without fame" (23). However, after dying, Achilles's opinions on fame and death appear changed, and he advocates for a long, peaceful life: "… 'Better by far to be a slave / Among the living, than great among the grave'" (23), which is a direct reference to Homer's *Odyssey*. Moreover, Turner explains that she understood the reason why asphodels became associated with death after smelling their fragrance: "… It was sweet, / Like honey – but with hints of rotting meat" (23). The poem eerily ends with the words: "An army of them bristled at my feet" (23), almost as if, for a brief moment, the guide found herself in the Underworld. Hence, the poet is extremely fascinated by the words of Penny Turner and by these peculiar flowers which seem to connect two different eras and two different worlds. "Asphodel" is ingeniously written in rhyming tercets, which easily recall Dante's *Divine Comedy*, even though Dante chose to use terza rima instead of triplets. Yet, both in Stallings's "Asphodel" and in Dante's *Inferno*, a guide – Virgil or Turner – takes the readers on a journey from the upper world into the Underworld. This form also adds emphasis to certain words and sounds. For instance, Stallings rhymes "spell", "asphodel", and "hell" (23), pushing forward the idea of death already in the first stanza. Again, the poet rhymes "bloom", "tomb", and "gloom" (23), evoking somber and ominous feelings. Additionally, in a reply to one of her readers, Stallings clarifies what she believes asphodels to be: "Scholars, of course, claim that asphodel is an 'unidentified' flower from the ancient world. But I am convinced it is the same flower that we know by that name today" ("Asphodel"). She alludes to these flowers also in her article for the *London Review of Books*, "Halcyon Days in the Saronic Gulf", in which she marvels at their ability to collect moisture during the dry winter.

Yet, flowers are not the only natural elements connected to the Underworld. In fact, in *This Afterlife*, she published "Song: The Rivers of Hell", a poem which first appeared in *River Styx*. In the poem, Stallings admits to knowing four out of the five rivers of the Underworld perfectly well, and she proceeds to name them: "river Hate", "river Woe", "river Burning", and "river of Tears" (*This Afterlife* 183). The rivers she describes are respectively the Styx, the Acheron, the Pyriphlegethon, and the Cocytus, and perhaps she claims to know them because she has experienced the negative

emotions they represent. However, there is an additional river of the Underworld with which she is not yet acquainted:

> Kneeling at its brink,
>
> Still I could not drink
>
> The waters of Forget.
>
> At least not yet, not yet. (184)

Her unfamiliarity with the river Lethe appears to separate her from the possibility of dying, luckily realizing that her time to go has not come yet before drinking from it. In fact, its waters would make her forget her mortal life in preparation for the Underworld (Atsma, "Lethe").

Furthermore, "Eheu", published in *Like*, is a poem which addresses the inevitability of death, stating that death does not care about wealth or social rank, as all mortals are destined to reach the shores of the Underworld: "Where everyone must board the skiff / And everyone must cross" (*Like* 38). In spite of the countless possible precautions, death is unavoidable:

> In vain, we run away from battle,
>
> In vain, avoid the sea,
>
> The treacherous sea, and autumn's rattle–
>
> The wind won't let us be. (38)

This poem takes inspiration from the fourteenth poem of the second book of Horace's *Odes*, "Eheu, Fugaces", an expression used to regret the passing of time, in which "eheu" might be translated into "alas" or "ah". The man addressed in the poem, Postumus, carries an interesting name which seems in harmony with the content of the poem, as it evokes the death of his predecessor. This concept seemingly reappears in the last stanza, given that his possible successor is mentioned, indicating that Postumus will be dead when this scenario takes place:

Someday a more entitled heir

Will broach your cellar door

And swill the costly wine you spare

And stain your marble floor (*Like* 39)

Hence, Postumus appears to be mocked for his extreme precautions, which prevent him from living his life to the fullest. For this reason, the wine he bought and kept unopened becomes the property of his successor, who drinks it without regrets, aware of the fact that he will soon be one of the several shades populating the Underworld with no material possessions.

Additionally, in "Lost and Found", a poem written in ottava rima which she published in *Poetry* in 2012 and later collected in *Like*, the poet makes numerous references to death. However, the poem, which follows one of her dreams, does not take place in the typical Greek Underworld, but in outer space – more precisely, on the moon, echoing Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. In fact, her guide Mnemosyne, the goddess of Memory and the mother of the nine Muses, explains:

… "This is the valley on the moon

Where everything misplaced on earth accrues,

And here all things are gathered that you lose" (61)

Be that as it may, the poet appears to treat this place as a type of Underworld, and Mnemosyne admonishes the poet "… "Do not wet / Your lips here with the waters of Forget."" (71). Therefore, she essentially tells Stallings to steer clear of death, since forgetting her mortal struggles would lead her one step closer to the House of Hades, regardless of how peaceful a life without memories might sound. Thereupon, Mnemosyne proceeds to list a number of methods used by poets to forget their lives: "By sex, by pills, by leap of doubt, by gas, / Or at the bottom of a tilting glass" (72). Thus, this poem illustrates how Stallings unleashes her creativity while creating her Underworlds, breaking free from the typical descriptions offered by ancient myths.

In her poem dedicated to Rachel Hadas "Visiting a Class on Zoom to Talk about the "Nekyia" in the *Odyssey*, Book 11", which was published in *Bad Lilies*, Stallings connects the ancient times with modernity by equating the platform *Zoom* to the Greek Underworld. In this poem, Stallings joins a *Zoom* meeting to talk to her students about the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*. In this book, which is also known as *Nekyia*, Odysseus travels to the Underworld and interacts with the shades of the dead heroes (Atsma, "Homer, *Odyssey* 11"). Like the shadows who mentor Odysseus, Stallings acts as a guide for her students:

> A ghost among the ghosts who meet on Zoom,
> I am the guide, and I must read the room,
> Explaining the underworld to these fresh shades, ("Three Poems by A. E. Stallings")

What is more, she wittily writes: "I hope my speaking will be understood" ("Three Poems by A. E. Stallings") not because she is cryptic or mysterious, but because there might be issues with internet connection. The poet proceeds to mention the various ghosts who meet Odysseus in the Underworld as though she were lecturing her readers. She speaks of the "hazed frat boy" Elpenor, who died after getting drunk and falling from Circe's roof, Agamemnon, who notoriously "… did not get the welcome home he wanted", Achilles, "Who'd rather be alive without the story", and Ajax "Whose huge resentment no one can unmute" ("Three Poems by A. E. Stallings"). In fact, Odysseus obtained Achilles's armor dishonestly, infuriating Ajax, who remained silent during Odysseus's stay in the Underworld. Ingeniously, the poet connects this instance with the present by using the word "unmute", commonly used to indicate the activation of the microphone on *Zoom*. Hence, Stallings's Underworld appears to be connected to the animal kingdom, to nature, and to modernity. Nevertheless, love is the element most commonly associated with death in her poems.

3.2 “That love has made me see-through as a cave-fish”: Three Couples and Their Experiences with Death

3.2.1 Hades and Persephone

The mythological couple which features most frequently in Stallings’s works is the one formed by Hades and Persephone, the king and queen of the Underworld. In fact, she admits to finding the couple universally appealing due to its creepiness (“A.E. Stallings: Writing Poetry” 00:45:16-00:45:19). Persephone was kidnapped by her uncle Hades with the approval of her father Zeus, and she was taken to the Underworld for the purpose of becoming Hades’s wife (Atsma, “Persephone”). Her heartbroken mother Demeter convinced Zeus to let her daughter return to her; however, Persephone ate pomegranate seeds in the Underworld, thus she was doomed to spend a half-year with Hades – namely autumn and winter (“Persephone”). As the first chapter of this thesis has attempted to illustrate, it is possible to look at the relationship existing between Hades and Persephone from several different perspectives. In fact, Persephone might be seen as the consensual lover of Hades, who, after falling for him, decided to abandon her mother and follow him into the Underworld. Alternatively, it may be argued that she learned to love him after her brutal kidnapping in order to adapt to her situation. Be that as it may, the couple dynamic most commonly featured in Stallings’s poems sees Persephone as Hades’s helpless and unhappy victim.

In “Hades Welcomes His Bride”, published in *Archaic Smile*, the god of the Dead gives Persephone a tour of the Underworld, emerging as a loving, compassionate husband (Podolsky). The poem offers a physical description of Stallings’s Underworld to her readers, which is depicted as a dark and claustrophobic place. Similarly to what happens in “The Wife of the Man of Many Wiles”, Persephone’s name is never used, and she is identified only as Hades’s “bride”, a label which possibly indicates her belonging to the god and her loss of personal identity after the kidnapping. What is more, Hades refers to her as “child” (*Archaic Smile* 4) or “sweet” (5), thus using endearing terms, which, however, sound patronizing when uttered by the god. While giving his tour, Hades frequently

uses the imperative form, a verb tense which highlights his authority and makes him sound somewhat threatening. For instance, he says: "Come now", "turn here" (4), "come, come", and "do not fear" (5). Moreover, he announces the plans for their future without bothering to ask for Persephone's ideas and preferences. In fact, he presumptuously chooses the location of their thrones and of her loom, which – Hades has decided – Persephone will be pleased to use in her free time: "Such pictures you shall weave! Such tapestries!" (4), a certainty which seems to be at odds with the lack of proof that she enjoys weaving. He even picks Persephone's new friends: "For you I chose those three thin shadows there" (5), reassuring her that

> … They have
> Not mouth nor eyes and cannot thus speak ill
> Of you … (5)

As a result, these shadows lack the ability to interact with Persephone at all. Additionally, Hades is convinced that he can understand his wife's thoughts and feelings, thus he is sure that the rooms he built for Persephone will comfort her until she fully adapts to the Underworld:

> …This is the greatest room;
> I had it specially made after great thought
> So you would feel at home … (5)

Persephone, however, shares neither his enthusiasm nor his extravagant taste in interior design. In fact, the goddess is used to a completely different environment, which cannot be replaced by a poor imitation of the evening sky "… without the garish stars and lurid moon" (5) – in other words, a black ceiling deprived of any light. This Underworld is steeped in absolute darkness, and Hades comments that "…sight / Is here a lesser sense…" (4), hence, even with less austere decorations, Persephone would not be able to appreciate her surroundings. Furthermore, although Hades is confident of rightly

interpreting his wife's behavior, he mistakes her unhappiness for solemnity – or at least he pretends to: "… No smile? / Well, some solemnity befits a queen" (4). Thereupon, he questionably tells her:

> …Come now,
>
> Down these winding stairs, the air more still
>
> And dry and easier to breathe… (4)

Considering that Persephone used to breathe fresh air, the air described by her husband is probably harder to breathe for her, which might be useful to finally stop her pulse. In the final lines of the poem, Hades comments on her tremor: "Ah! Your hand is trembling! I fear / There is, as yet, too much pulse in it" (5). However, this tremor likely signals fear rather than liveliness. Therefore, "Hades Welcomes His Bride" portrays the couple as dysfunctional and depicts an inner power imbalance which allows Hades to behave like Persephone's master. In one of her speeches, Stallings admitted that she was curious to finally explore the perspective of the "crazy perpetrator" ("Seriously Entertaining" 09:16-09:27).

In addition to this, Stallings provides her readers with Persephone's own impressions of the Underworld in "Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother", in which the goddess appears to be unhappy and unsatisfied. The goddess symbolically refers to her surroundings as "hell" (*Archaic Smile* 6), explaining that "… hell is not so far underground–" (6), offering a geographical location of the House of Hades to Stallings's readers. Similarly to the previous poem, Hades's name is never mentioned, and Persephone refers to him only as her "husband" (7-8). Her dissatisfaction with the Land of the Death manifests in her desperate longing for news from the upper world, a need which the "burrowing animals" (6) of the Underworld are unable to fulfil. She deems the dead to be "dull" (6), and she laments that "The weather is always the same. Nothing happens" (7), bemoaning the utter "idleness" (8) in which she is forced to remain. She uses the term "abroad" (6) while referring to the upper world, possibly acknowledging the fact that she will never fully belong there anymore. Moreover, Persephone uses a number of similes to make her mother understand what the dead are

like. For instance, she compares their loyalty to dogs, she claims that they are “moth-like” (6), and she thinks that they resemble the bulbs of daffodils because they replicate “Without sex or seed – …” (7). In addition to this, she seemingly equates them with children, explaining that “They come back startled & singed, sucking their fingers” (6), and that “They pester you like children for the wrong details –” (7) while listening to stories. As a result, Persephone feels lonely, and Hades does not seem to get involved: “My husband, bored with their babbling, neither listens nor / speaks” (7). While “Hades Welcomes His Bride” contains several imperative forms, “Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother” contains various negative words, which accentuate the sense of loss and nothingness within the poem. In fact, she uses the word “nothing” six times throughout the poem, and the word “no one” twice. Additionally, the list of negative words and phrases includes: “not so far” (6), “don’t remember anything”, “they cannot attend”, “they pay no attention”, “neither listens nor speaks”, “Without sex or seed” (7), “no wives”, “no lives”, “no motives”, “He does not understand”, “you will never get them”, and “No ink but blood” (8). The goddess only expresses love and affection for her mother: “I miss you and think about you often / Please send flowers. I am forgetting them” (7), an interesting lapse of memory considering that Persephone was the goddess of Spring before becoming the queen of the Underworld (Atsma, “Persephone”), suggesting that she is starting to forget her former identity. What is more, Persephone points out that “… fall changes to winter, winter to fall” (*Archaic Smile* 8), signifying that spring and summer do not exist in this reality, hence she never leaves the Underworld. In spite of the fact that Persephone writes to her mother that Hades is “...a kind, kind master” (8), the fact that “He asks nothing of us, nothing, nothing at all–” (8) makes him sound distant and uncaring, although Persephone seems pleased with her privacy. He does not understand her, and he believes that her “… effort is futile …” (8) because Demeter will never receive the letters which Persephone wrote with her own blood. Once again, Persephone shows signs of fear, and she is worried that Hades might grow angry at her, leaving the readers to wonder which types of punishment she had to endure. Therefore, in this poem, Persephone continues to be Hades’s helpless victim. In a reply to one of her readers, Stallings wrote:

> The poem does seem to be about grief, with Persephone as grieving rather than grieved for, and about the absolute break between the world of the living and the dead (even the letter rots, and can communicate nothing). ("Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother")

In "First Love: A Quiz", a poem published in *Hapax*, Stallings uses the form of a magazine quiz to bring the mythological couple closer to current times. The poem is formed by four stanzas, each containing a question and four possible options, with the exception of the last one, for which there is also a fifth option. Typically, the first three options are somehow related to modern times: "a. in his souped-up Camaro" (*Hapax* 28), "b. dinner and a movie, with a wink at the cliché", "c. an excuse not to go back alone to the apartment with its /   sink of dirty knives" (28). The option "d.", instead, refers more explicitly to myth of Persephone's abduction. For example, to the question "I went with him because:" (28), the option "d." reads: "d. he was my uncle, the one who lived in the half-finished / basement, and he took me by the hair" (28). The final stanza of the poem is unlike the others, as it wholly applies both to the myth and to contemporary times:

> The place he took me to:
>
> a. was dark as my shut eyes
>
> b. and where I ate bitter seed and became ripe
>
> c. and from which my mother would never take me wholly
> back, though she wept and walked the earth and made
> the bearded ears of barley wither on their stalks and the
> blasted flowers drop from their sepals
>
> d. is called by some men hell and others love
>
> e. all of the above (29)

Indeed, these options may refer to the fact that Hades took Persephone to the Underworld, where she ate the pomegranate seeds, forcing her to see Demeter only in summer and spring. Alternatively, this

stanza may refer to a girl who was taken to a club or a basement where she performed sexual acts – either willingly or unwillingly – and was forever changed by the experience, so much so that her mother was unable to get her daughter fully back. In this poem, love and hell are intertwined, and Persephone's misfortunes are not so far removed from the experiences of twenty-first-century girls.

In spite of the fact that Stallings typically portrays Persephone as Hades's victim, the goddess is also depicted as jealous and protective of her husband. In "Mint", a poem published in *Hapax*, Menthe recounts how Persephone punished her by turning her into a mint plant for falling in love with Hades (Atsma, "Persephone"). Unlike Persephone, Menthe deems Hades to be the "King of the appetites" (*Hapax* 30), proceeding to say that she "… met him at the cross- / Roads of love and lust" (30). She refers to Persephone as "pale Jealousy" (30), explaining that the queen of the Underworld trod her heart into the ground. Menthe bled "… pungent and sweet" juices, which might remind the readers of mint. As a mint plant, she is still devoted to Hades, and Stallings wittily points out how mints are commonly used to get rid of bad breath, which, in the worst cases, might recall the scent of death:

> Now I mask and flavor
>
> Decay beneath the breath,
>
> Consecrated ever
>
> To the King of Death (31)

As a result, Persephone's counter-productive punishment ensured Menthe's eternal devotion to Hades.

3.2.2 Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus and Eurydice's love story, which partly takes place in the Underworld, is also examined in Stallings's works. A version of this myth is told in the tenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which narrates that Eurydice was killed by the bite of a snake soon after her marriage to Orpheus, one of the most talented musicians among the mortals. After desperately mourning her

death in the upper world, he travelled to the Underworld – a feat only a few living mortals and deities managed to accomplish, such as Odysseus, Psyche, and Dionysus – to persuade the Underworld sovereigns, Persephone and Hades, to revive Eurydice. After moving the spirits of the Underworld with his song, the king and queen of the Underworld accepted his plea on the condition that Orpheus should not look back at Eurydice while leaving the Underworld. However, he was overcome with fear of losing her, and so he looked back at her, killing her for the second time. Ovid reports Eurydice's feelings before returning to the Underworld:

> And she, dying again, made no complaint
> (For what complaint had she save she was loved?)
> And breathed a faint farewell, and turned again
> Back to the land of spirits whence she came. (Ovid 226)

Thus, Orpheus and Eurydice, unlike Persephone and Hades, loved each other so deeply that Orpheus was ready to risk his own life by travelling to the Underworld in order to save the life of his wife. Nevertheless, Stallings's reading of their relationship appears to be more complex and multifaceted.

In "Eurydice Reveals Her Strength", a poem published in *Archaic Smile*, Eurydice is able to express her own thoughts on death and on the Underworld, which sound strikingly different from Persephone's impressions of the House of Hades in "Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother". In fact, Eurydice does not feel trapped in a claustrophobic place, but rather calm and peaceful, claiming that "Dying is the easy part" (*Archaic Smile* 10). Moreover, she equates death with "… an easing of the heart", preferring "… this clarity of mind…" which comes after the "… death / Of all the body's imperious demands" (10) to the life she was living in the upper world. She does not seem happy to see her former lover in the Land of the Dead, asking him "As you still live, my dear, why did you come?" (10), possibly because she cannot fathom out why Orpheus feels the need to resuscitate her. While referring to the song Orpheus sang to convince the rulers of the Underworld to give her a second chance as a living woman, Eurydice says: "They say that it is beautiful" (10), excluding herself

from the group, perhaps indicating that she did not enjoy his music. Curiously, Eurydice describes love as "… a complicated lust" (10), and she gives a violent description of the sexual act:

> …you pushed me down upon the grass and stones,
> Crushed me with your kisses and your hands and took
> What there is to give of emptiness, and moans. (10)

Hence, Eurydice uses verbs which could also be used to describe physical fights, such as "pushing", "crushing" and "taking", and she cannot comprehend how she could possibly prefer this to the "… calm of being dead" (11) experienced in the Underworld. Orpheus abhors her logic because they already belong to two different words, and they are unable to understand each other. Perhaps, Eurydice does not want to go back to the world of the living because she cannot remember her mortal life after drinking the waters of the river Lethe, which transformed her into one of the dog-like loyal shadows populating Hades. However, while at the beginning of the poem Orpheus is the only singer: "You sing to me, you sing, you sing" (10), at the end of the poem Eurydice seemingly takes his place: "Singing to myself, not looking back" (11). In fact, she does not seem to mind dying for the second time, and, unlike Orpheus, she does not turn to look at him because she does not feel a connection to the world of the living anymore. Thus, death parted the former lovers, and Eurydice, as stated in the title, discovered her strength and steadiness in the Underworld. As a result, Stallings's Underworld is versatile, as it feels like a prison for Persephone, but it offers peace, calm, and clarity to Eurydice.

Similarly, in "Eurydice's Footnote", published in *Poetry* in 1995 and later collected in *Archaic Smile*, Eurydice again speaks in the first person. The epigraph of the poem contains a quotation by the literary critic C. M. Bowra, in which he explains that, in the original version, Orpheus managed to save Eurydice. Yet, "a single Hellenistic poem" turned her recovery "into a tragic loss" (12). In the poem, Eurydice seemingly comments on the fact that she essentially died to make the myth more interesting and entertaining: "Disappointment in the end was more aesthetic / Than any merely felicitous resolution" (13). Moreover, she says that "Love, then, always was a matter of revision"

(12), perhaps because the fact that Orpheus could not help looking back at her has been interpreted as a sign of the deep love he felt for her. However, the word “revision” is also used to indicate the literal revision to which the original myth of Eurydice was subjected, allowing Orpheus to perform the tragic act which popularized the myth. Eurydice’s tone sounds almost accusatory, as though she blamed her former husband for killing her a second time even though he could save her, claiming that he was looking for a tragedy: “When nothing was so difficult as you had wanted” (12). As a result, Eurydice appears to be disillusioned with love, declaring that “Life proved fickle as any lover” (12). Unlike the previous poem, Eurydice glorifies neither death nor the Underworld, but it may be suggested that she has lost love and respect for Orpheus due to his mistakes.

“Vale” is a further poem inspired by the couple, and it was published in *Archaic Smile*. The first line of the poem clarifies that the rest of the poem is a description of a dream: “I woke with longing from a dream of shoes” (52). In fact, in the dream, the speaker is wearing snake-skin shoes which “… walked over hearts …” (52). Suddenly, the shoes turn into real snakes which bite the speaker’s ankles, killing her with their venom: “& I relived the last of my blue-sky moments–” (52). The circumstances of this death might bring to mind Eurydice’s very last moments in the world of the living. Indeed, it may be suggested that, in the dream, Stallings either becomes Eurydice or takes her place in her own myth. In the dream, she speaks directly to Orpheus, mentioning Aristaeus, a man who, according to certain versions of the myth, chased Eurydice with the intent of abusing her, making her trip on the snake which caused her death (Madeleine). Mockingly, Stallings refers to Aristaeus as Orpheus’s friend, describing him as the wiser of the two for immediately accepting Eurydice’s death, unlike Orpheus:

> Your friend, red faced with lust and futile pursuit,
> Stooped over where I had stumbled and understood,
> Unlike you, he could not follow where I fled to. (*Archaic Smile* 52)

Similarly to what happens in “Hades Welcomes His Bride” and “Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother”, Eurydice provides Stallings’s readers with a description of the Underworld, which, however, is not as idyllic as the one she described in “Eurydice Reveals Her Strength”. This Underworld resembles a workplace in which “The souls, in grey, carrying briefcases, / Glide iron escalators into the ground” (52) while reading the newspaper and “Not looking back …” (53), a trait they share with the Eurydice of “Eurydice Reveals Her Strength”. In fact, like her, the souls cannot “… remember longing any longer” (52), thus they are not interested in the upper world. What is more, while Persephone was advised to adjust her eyes due to the absolute darkness of the Underworld in “Hades Welcomes His Bride”, in this poem, the shades are “… adjusting their eyes to the buzz of fluorescent tubes” (53). The poet stresses the capitalistic nature of the Underworld, stating that the souls are expected to “…pay their tokens…” (53), alluding to the fact that corpses were buried with an obol in their mouths in order to afford Charon’s fee: “The dead have no pockets, must carry coins in their mouths, / Till everything, even saliva, tastes like money” (53). Again, Eurydice addresses Orpheus, harshly pointing out that he does not belong in the Underworld: “You crashed the witty soirée of little black dresses / And black tie…” (53). Therefore, the souls appear to be dressed in funeral attire – perhaps the clothes they were wearing when they were buried – whereas Orpheus is “… Too vivid …” (53), possibly because he was wearing bright clothes and he was the only living individual, recalling the etymology of the adjective. Eurydice’s observations about Orpheus’s liveliness might remind Stallings’s readers of Hades’s remarks about Persephone’s tremor in “Hades Welcomes His Bride”. To make matters worse for Eurydice, who seems annoyed at Orpheus’s presence, his music turns the Underworld, which was previously in black and white, into a colorful place. Moreover, unlike Stallings’s other versions of Persephone, in this dream the queen of the Underworld laughs thanks to Orpheus’s music, showing signs of joy even though she is “*Drifting down the river Liquor*” (53). Like the Hades of “Hades Welcomes His Bride”, who believes that a black ceiling might resemble the evening sky, Eurydice unsuccessfully attempts to find similarities between the elements contained in the Underworld and those which can be found in the upper world: “This room looks like

a Cathedral when it's lit, / Except without stained glass, or pews, or doors" (54) – hence, it does not look like a Cathedral at all. She blames love for her death, considering that, the first time, she died because she was fleeing from a man who desired her, and, the second time, Orpheus's fear of losing her killed her, turning her into a shadow of her mortal self: "That I am slowly gone invisible / That love has made me see-through as a cave-fish" (54). She almost resents Orpheus, and she accuses him of destroying even the little beauty she had found in the Underworld: "You held a lantern murderous to moths, / Which are for me the only butterflies" (54). In the end, the poet wakes up with "longing" (53), a feeling which can only be experienced in the world of the living. Therefore, in this poem, Eurydice does not seem to be satisfied with the Underworld to which she belongs, yet she would rather remain there than follow her former lover into the upper world.

Furthermore, in "Song for the Women Poets", originally published in *Pivot* and later collected in *Hapax*, Stallings revisits the couple one more time. This poem is formed by five ballad stanzas written in alternate rhyme. The stanzas' steady rhythm and repetition of sounds enhance the poem's musicality, possibly reminding the readers of music and singing. Thus, the poetic form perfectly suits the title of the poem, which labels this work as a "Song", perhaps also hinting at Orpheus – the mythological musician par excellence. In the poem, Stallings directly addresses Orpheus: "Sing, Sing, because you can" (*Hapax* 76), proceeding to hint at the mistake which cost him his wife: "*Don't look back*. But no one heeds" (76). According to Dr. Kenneth Clarke, the presence of an imperative form in the opening line of "Song for the Women Poets" suggests a note of urgency, and the verb "Sing" evokes the incipit of ancient epics such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* (00:44-00:53). The final stanza of the poem seemingly explains the title chosen by Stallings:

> And part of you leaves Tartarus,
>
> But part stays there to dwell –
>
> You who are both Orpheus
>
> And She he left in Hell. (*Hapax* 76)

Indeed, "Women Poets" – a category to which A. E. Stallings belongs – may identify both with Orpheus, the poet and artist, and with Eurydice, the woman whose life was at his mercy. Interestingly, in this poem, Eurydice dwells in Tartarus, a place whose typical inhabitants consist of the damned souls who are eternally punished for their mortal crimes. Therefore, after exploring several poems in which Stallings references Orpheus and Eurydice, it is possible to suggest that, although their love was deep and passionate in the upper world, it did not survive death.

3.2.3 Eros and Psyche

A further unhappy couple featured in Stallings's works is the one formed by Eros and Psyche. While the pair did not suffer from a lack of Love, the two lovers had to face several challenges before being able to peacefully spend their lives together. The story of this mythological couple is most famously told in the Roman writer Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, also known as his *Metamorphoses*. In fact, Psyche, before becoming the goddess of the Soul, used to be a mortal girl whose extreme beauty infuriated Aphrodite. For this reason, Aphrodite sent her son Eros, also known as Love or Cupid, to strike Psyche with one of his arrows to force her to fall in love with "some creature cursed by Fortune in rank, in estate, in condition, someone so degraded that in all the world he can find no wretchedness to equal his own" (Apuleius 60). However, upon seeing her, Eros fell in love with her. Without showing himself to Psyche – as he was disobeying his mother's orders – he became her invisible husband. Indeed, he took her from a mountain to which she went on the advice of an oracle, and he brought her to his divine abode. Psyche reciprocated Eros's feelings, but since she did not know who he was or what he looked like, she was convinced by her sisters, who were jealous of Psyche's wealth and successful marriage, to break her promise to the god. Thus, they persuaded her to take a peek at him during the night using candlelight in order to make sure that she was not married to a monster. As a result, Psyche accidentally burnt the god of Love with hot wax, who abandoned her for breaking her promise to him. In order to win her lover back, Psyche asked for Aphrodite's help, who gave her a list of quasi-impossible tasks to perform, including visiting Persephone in the Underworld to ask her to lend some of her beauty to Aphrodite. When Psyche opened the box Persephone gave her, she

fell into a profound sleep, from which Eros, who had forgiven her, woke her up, thereupon convincing Zeus to make his lover immortal in order to spend the rest of his eternal life with her.

A. E. Stallings's "Three Poems for Psyche", which form the third section of *Olives* and were originally published in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, summarize Psyche's myth by exploring her conversations with one of her sisters, Charon, and Persephone. In these poems, Psyche never speaks, and the poet explores the perspective of her interlocutors. The first poem, "The Eldest Sister to Psyche" is written in the form of a line palindrome, meaning that the second half of the poem mirrors the first half. Yet, although the two stanzas use exactly the same words, their tone appears to be different on account of the changed punctuation. In the first stanza, Psyche's eldest sister is instilling doubts into Psyche, prompting worries about her husband and the child she is carrying:

> Perhaps a monster, face-to-face,
>
> With scales and fangs and leathern wings.
>
> What of the fetus that you carry?
>
> For certain it is human? Very? (*Olives* 41)

These lines, when mirrored in the second stanza, sound like Psyche's own doubts after the conversation with her sister:

> For certain, it is human, very.
>
> What of the fetus that you carry,
>
> With scales and fangs and leathern wings
>
> Perhaps? A monster… (41)

Additionally, Stallings mentions the moment in which Psyche accidentally burns Eros while spying on him: "Doubt burns like hot wax; it stings" and "Doubt burns. Like hot wax, it stings" (41).

The two remaining poems of the "Three Poems for Psyche", unlike the first, take place in the Underworld. In "The Boatman to Psyche, on the River Styx", Psyche is chatting to Charon while

traversing the river Styx in order to comply with Aphrodite's request. Charon holds her in high esteem, as he recognizes that travelling to the Underworld is a difficult and dangerous task for a living mortal. He tells her that "Only a few have come here still alive" (42), seemingly mentioning Orpheus and his inability to accept Eurydice's death: "Lovers who refuse to grieve" (42). Psyche's situation is even more delicate because she is a "Gravid girl …" (43). In fact, Stallings admitted to being fascinated by the concept of a bearer of life travelling to the Land of the Dead ("Seriously Entertaining" 13:00–13:12), defining pregnancy as a liminal space between life and death ("PoetryEast with A.E. Stallings" 00:28:44-00:28:56). As Hades did with Persephone and Eurydice did with Orpheus, Charon observes that Psyche's liveliness is noticeable among the shadows of the Underworld:

> Perhaps you thought
> No one would notice you among so many,
> But you are not the shadow of a doubt,
>
> You are the thing itself… (*Olives* 42)

As a consequence, Stallings manages to use the literal meaning of the clichéd expression "shadow of a doubt", considering that Psyche is clearly not one of the shadows of the Underworld. The capitalistic nature of the Underworld is stressed once again by the Boatman, who requires his fee, adding that "… it should be double" (42), suggesting that, if he could, he would make her unborn baby pay as well. In addition to this, he comments on Persephone's appearance, knowing that Psyche needs to ask for a part of her beauty: "It's true that she has stayed just seventeen: / The sun can't spoil her looks – " (43), which might indicate that Persephone has never left the Underworld. At the end of the poem, Charon ominously warns Psyche against opening Persephone's box, which he eerily describes as being "... scarcely big enough for an infant –" (44), a detail which recalls a grave.

In the last poem of the trio, “Persephone to Psyche”, Charon’s previous warnings appear to be justified. In fact, Persephone laments her inability to become pregnant in the House of Hades, revealing that she pretends to be the mother of stillborn babies to overcome her lonesomeness: “… When I am lonesome, well, / I rock the stillborns in my arms” (45). Persephone’s confession might be threatening to Psyche’s unborn child, as Persephone might decide to kill it and keep it with her, especially because she sounds jealous of Psyche’s pregnancy. In fact, in this version, Persephone might wish to put an end to Psyche’s life with the contents of her box, a possibility that Stallings does not exclude because she chooses to omit Psyche’s final adventures from the trio of poems. Thus, the readers do not know whether the poor girl awakens from her sleep or not. Curiously, the goddess offers “pomegranate arils”, and a “Virgin Suicide” (45) to Psyche, knowing that accepting food or drinks would prevent her from leaving the Underworld – a lesson Persephone has learnt the hard way. McAlpine (409) highlights that this Persephone appears to be a more mature and darker version of the girl portrayed in “Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother”. The poet makes her readers aware that the goddess’s boredom has not left her yet “This place is dead – a real dive. / We’re past all twists, rewards and perils” (*Olives* 45), sounding nostalgic even for the dangers which made life worth living in the upper world. What is more, the queen of the Dead is annoyed at the absolute darkness in which she has been forced to live for all these years: “The dawn’s always about to break / But never does…” (45). Hence, although Psyche and Eros are profoundly in love with each other, their story is steeped in death.

CONCLUSION

The current thesis has attempted to discuss the nature of Stallings's references to ancient myths in her works, suggesting that she alludes to classical mythology to explain current events and understand her surroundings more clearly. In fact, thanks to Greco-Roman mythology, the poet manages to write on diverse and complex topics. For instance, Stallings avails herself of ancient myths to draw a parallel between epic and the mundane, spotting potential mythological connections even when taking into consideration basic objects and ordinary activities. Moreover, she calls attention to the experiences of the secondary and background characters of ancient stories and epics, addressing the misogynism and androcentrism present in classical mythology. Her mythological women sound tired of falling victim to gods and men's manipulation and mistreatment, finally finding the strength to challenge them – suffice it to mention the Penelope of "The Wife of the Man of Many Wiles". The poet also revisits the role of various mythological outcasts, arguing that their otherness makes them neither frightening nor inherently evil. In particular, this thesis has shown Stallings's compassion for the Minotaur, which highlights her willingness to employ mythology to sensitize her readers to the difficulties atypical individuals were forced to face in ancient times – and perhaps still endure in the twenty-first century. Classical mythology is also the tool through which Stallings examines the two interconnected spheres of love and death. After investigating three of her mythological couples, it has been possible to recognize Stallings's Underworld as flexible and multifaceted, as it is simultaneously the ideal place for Hades's kingdom, the cause for Persephone's agony, Eurydice's source of peace, and a threat to Psyche and her unborn baby. Thus, it is possible to conclude that Stallings filters her reality through mythology, proving the continuing relevance of ancient myths time and time again in her works.

What is more, Stallings is unequivocally a twenty-first-century poet, and her affinity with the present time shows itself both in her works and her daily life. In fact, this thesis has shown that the poet is very active online, considering that she frequently gives interviews, posts on blogs, and uses social media platforms such as *X*. Whilst she certainly takes advantage of her *X* account to keep in

touch with the latest news and literary updates, she also uses it to share her worries about her upcoming deadlines and to announce her coffee breaks, emerging as a highly relatable poet. Additionally, Stallings maintains close contact with her readers, whose questions she commonly answers on *X* or online forums, illustrating how the Internet can help twenty-first-century poets forge a stronger bond with their readership. On the other hand, the fact that she chooses to write several of her poems in fixed form appears to be an unusual choice for a contemporary poet. However, she demonstrates that form can be freeing rather than oppressing, and she successfully includes sonnets, villanelles, and poems written in ottava rima in her collections, revitalizing these forms just as she does with classical mythology. The poet manages to draw fixed form closer to the general public, overcoming the stigma attached to it. Indeed, even though form has sometimes been deemed to be conservative and elitist, Stallings exploits rhymes and repetitions to make her poems more accessible to her readers, simultaneously using form, rhyme, and meter to enrich the content of her works – suffice it to think about "Ghazal of the Fiftieth Danaid" and "Ajar". Moreover, Stallings asserted that

> … tradition and form were not about exclusion or elitism or who owns or is allowed to do what. It was about inclusion and access and taking all things human as belonging to everybody, about the ongoing conversation, dialogue really, of the dead and the living, about owing the canon not an obligation of respect and deference, to put it in a museum, but an obligation to pass it forward, to add to it, enrich it, keep it alive, take it into the future. ("Afro-formalism")

Although Stallings's enthusiasm for Greco-Roman mythology is unlikely to wane, McAlpine highlights that her references to mythology have become subtler with the passing of time (401) and that the adopted perspective in her works has become more mature (404). In fact, in her first collection, *Archaic Smile*, she dedicates entire poems to classical myths, frequently adopting the point of view of specific mythological figures. For instance, in the previously mentioned "Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother", "Medea, Homesick", and "Tithonus", Stallings lends her voice to

three mythological characters, who use this opportunity to lament their misfortunes. In this collection, Stallings's mythological references are explicit, and she seems intent on inquiring into the characters' experiences in order to offer innovative readings of popular myths. In *Hapax*, published only seven years later, she already develops a slightly different approach. While this collection still features various poems wholly dedicated to ancient myths – such as the previously explored "Actaeon", "Mint", and "Cassandra" – Stallings starts to include subtler mythological references to enhance her poems and strengthen the message she wants to convey. For example, in the poem examined in the first chapter of this thesis, "Visiting the Grave of Rupert Brooke", Stallings mentions Homer's *Iliad* to draw parallels between Achilles and Rupert Brooke, keeping the focus of the poem on the poet rather than the hero. In *Olives*, the subtler mythological references become far more common than the retellings, with the exception of her "Three Poems for Psyche". Yet, even in these three poems, it is possible to observe how Stallings's poetry has evolved over the years. For example, the Persephone of "Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother" and the Persephone featured in "Persephone to Psyche" are considerably different, the latter sounding more mature. In fact, while the Persephone of *Archaic Smile* misses her mother, the Persephone of *Olives* wishes to be a mother herself, mourning the impossibility of bearing children in the Underworld. In *Like*, Stallings finds additional purposes for her mythological references. As illustrated, for instance, by "Pandora" and "Art Monster", the poet still enjoys rewriting and reworking ancient myths, but she seems to favor subtler allusions – such as those made in "Cast Irony". In addition to this, she begins to place classical mythology and contemporary events side by side, expressing a growing preoccupation with the world in which she lives. For example, she avails herself of mythology to discuss Rachel Todd Wetzsteon's suicide in "The Myrtle Grove". What is more, she opens up a dialogue on the ongoing refugee crisis by mentioning Charon in "Refugee Fugue", highlighting the brutality and unfairness with which refugees are treated by the ferrymen who allow them to cross the sea. Consequently, the poet proves that poetry and mythology can be used to raise awareness about contemporary difficulties.

Even though Stallings herself admitted to slightly changing her approach to classical mythology after moving to Greece ("The Courage of Poetry" 11:31–11:43), she appears unwilling to abandon the ancient world. After all, she declared, "The ancients taught me how to sound modern" ("A.E. Stallings on Power Ambition Glory").

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