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**‘You Seemed the Goddess Incarnate’: Echoes of Greek Mythology in Djuna
Barnes’s *Nightwood***

Jako bohyně ztělesněná: ozvěny řecké mytologie v díle *Nightwood* od Djuny Barnes

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Abstract

The thesis aims to analyse the echoes of chosen aspects of Greek mythology in *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, which are still being largely omitted by the academy. Mythological narrative in this work serves as a key to unravelling a variety of thematic layers of the book and offers new insight into the behaviour of the characters and their psychology, specifically concerning sexuality and gender as main topics of the book. The first chapter deals with concise contextualization of sexuality in the 20th century with a peek into ancient Greece. The second chapter focuses on juxtaposing the archetypes of gods with the characters of *Nightwood*. First it focuses on Robin Vote and her relationships that are contrasted to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, while discussion in greater detail is then dedicated to the union between Robin and Nora Flood, which reflects a subversive mother-daughter relationship dynamic. Further, the chapter explores the juxtaposition of deities and mythological characters that evince signs of gender fluidity – Tiresias and Agdistis – with Doctor Matthew O'Connor and Robin; the thesis will also touch upon a comparison to the gender-iconic deities Artemis and Aphroditos. The last chapter discusses metamorphoses, a phenomenon typical for Greek deities and mythological characters, specifically those related to animals and mythical beasts.

Key words: Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, Greek mythology, myth, modernism, sexuality, gender

Abstrakt

Práce si dává za cíl analyzovat ozvěny vybraných aspektů řecké mytologie v díle *Nightwood* od Djuny Barnes, které zatím byly ve větším měřítku akademiky opomíjeny. Mytologická rovina v tomto díle slouží jako klíč k rozluštění mnoha tematických vrstev knihy a nabízí nový vhled do jednání jednotlivých postav a jejich psychologie, zvláště co se týče sexuality a genderu jako hlavních témat knihy. První kapitola se věnuje stručné kontextualizaci sexuality ve 20. století s náhledem do starověkého Řecka. Druhá kapitola se zaměřuje na porovnání archetypů božstev s postavami v románu *Nightwood*. Nejprve pojímá ústřední postavu Robin Vote a její vztahy, které kontrastuje k mýtu Demeter a Persefony, zvláštní pozornost je pak věnována vztahu mezi Robin a Norou Flood, který archetypálně odráží subversivní vztahovou dynamiku matka-dcera. Dále se kapitola věnuje porovnání božstev a mýtických postav, které vykazují známky genderové fluidity – Tiresias a Agdistis – s doktorem Matthewem O’Connorem a Robin Vote; v rámci této analýzy práce také krátce pojednává přirovnání postav románu k genderově ikonickým božstvům Artemidě a Afroditovi. Poslední kapitola se zaměřuje na metamorfózy, jevy typické pro řecká božstva a mytologii obecně, spojené se zvířaty a mýtickými bytostmi.

Klíčová slova: Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, řecká mytologie, mýtus, modernismus, sexualita, gender

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Introduction

The era of modernism served as a playground for diverse approaches to works of literature, the persistent goal, according to one of its most prominent figures, Ezra Pound, was to “make it new,” in other words it encouraged the authors to be innovative and break the standard expectations concerning form and style while also honouring and incorporating the elements of the cultures of Antiquity in present contexts. Thus, the mythical in literary modernism serves as a very potent device that challenges and recasts accepted notions of both the traditions of Antiquity and the contemporary discourse of modernity.

The fictionalising process of connecting the text of a novel set in contemporary 1920s Europe and America with the intricate symbolism of the mythical is particularly striking in Djuna Barnes’s 1936 masterpiece of queer literature *Nightwood*, where the world of Greek myths and sexuality, gender and desire connect and intertwine to present a powerful tangle of tales of love, loss, and passion. As Joseph Campbell, specialising in comparative mythology and religion, states: “it appears that through the wonder tales—which pretend to describe the lives of the legendary heroes, the powers of the divinities of nature, the spirits of the dead, and the totem ancestors of the group—symbolic expression is given to the unconscious desires, fears, and tensions that underlie the conscious patterns of human behavior.”¹ This thesis aims to introduce and discuss in detail further possible readings of echoes of Greek mythology in *Nightwood* that have not yet received a great deal of critical attention. Through the reading of mythical deities and bestial symbolism of selected creatures and their juxtaposition to the main characters of Barnes’s novel, the thesis will show the novel’s intricate uses of the innate connection of myth and sexuality, gender and desire, and how the combination of these creates its own underlying subversive narrative. It is also worth noting that the scope of mythological

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 237.

symbolism in *Nightwood* is limitless, thus, for the sake of clarity, the thesis describes only the most relevant to its argument.

The first chapter will be concerned with establishing some of the key background for the thesis, such as briefly outlining the meaning of myth in theoretical terms with further focus on Greek mythology in the context of literary modernism, and the exploration of sapphic relationships and gender identity and expression in early 20th century with a relevant call back to the complex gender dynamics in ancient Greece. Last but not least, the introduction will also list the relevant biographical events that lead to the creation of *Nightwood* and it will detail the key themes that will be discussed later in the following chapters.

The second chapter will focus on the comparison of selected Greek deities to the main characters in Barnes's text and how those contribute to the notions of sexuality and gender of the resonant characters. In particular, the myth of Persephone and Demeter will be discussed as a parallel to the relationship of Robin Vote and Nora Flood, also reflecting their subversive mother-daughter dynamic. Furthermore, the fluid gender expression and identity of Dr Matthew O'Connor and Robin Vote, their essential queerness and timelessness, invite a comparison to the mythical figure of Tiresias and to the lesser-known goddess Agdistis – also including a brief mention of the Bearded Aphrodite and of Artemis as further relevant mythological touchstones.

The final chapter will explore the animalistic features and instincts in comparison to some of the creatures of Greek myth through the use of metamorphoses as one of the most striking abilities of Greek deities. The changing mental states of Barnes's characters are evocative of the figurative metamorphoses of Greek gods and their subservient beasts and serve as a set of powerful symbolic devices. The chapter will focus primarily on the mythological canines and on chimeras as the representations of embodied queerness whose symbolism

resonates deeply with Barnes's bespoke imagination.

The conclusion will provide a comprehensive reading of *Nightwood* as a narrative that draws on its many mythical references in crucial symbolic ways and while using them, serves to emphasize the main psychological and social aspects that constitute the central driving force of Barnes's gender-challenging novel.

Background

Modernism's turn to (Greek) Mythology and sexuality

Ancient civilizations and myths in general formed a crucial part of the vast substrate of Modernist literature. Ezra Pound, one of the most prominent figures of modernist poetry, drew heavily from myths, and his imperative was to “make it new.”² According to Richard Lehan, myth as such has two sources, nature and human consciousness.³ Many times myths from different cultures share the same or similar universal characteristics – it is “a matter of archetypal meaning and of shared consciousness.”⁴ It was thanks to scholars such as James George Frazer, Jane Ellen Harrison or Sigmund Freud that ancient myths became a key concern to theoretical explorations of emergent modern scientific disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Works by these authors and their growing influence on scholarly and popular discourse and debate then prompted modernist writers to draw from ancient mythologies because “engagement with the archaic world – with all its mythic and ritual components – not only allowed for the existence of modernist art but has enabled critics to process modernism's relevance to contemporary intellectual history.”⁵ Thus, myth became more of a gateway to understanding the broader historical and social trajectory than only a means to learn about classical civilizations. These authors were going back to the ancient myth and used their gained knowledge to investigate various aspects of contemporary society and the human mind further in innovative, groundbreaking ways. As Freud famously put it, “the present is always infused with past.”⁶ This movement of “regression ad infinitum” is, as Jacques Rancière states, “an elemental feature of modern projects.”⁷

Djuna Barnes was surrounded by modernist masters that frequently used myths in their work; she interviewed James Joyce in Paris and became his friend. She published *Nightwood* with the help of T. S. Eliot whose use of myth in *The Waste Land* is profound and multifaceted – he aimed to “reinterpret myth and then go beyond myth altogether.” Edna St. Vincent Millay

² Michael North, “The Making of ‘Make It New’,” *Guernica* (15 August 2013), accessed January 1, 2021, <https://www.guernicamag.com/the-making-of-making-it-new/>.

³ Richard Lehan, *Literary Modernism and Beyond: The Extended Vision and the Realms of the Text* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 75.

⁴ Lehan, *Literary Modernism*, 76.

⁵ Shanyn Fiske, “From Ritual to the Archaic in Modernism: Frazer, Harrison, Freud and the Persistence of Myth,” in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 173-174.

⁶ Lehan, *Literary Modernism*, 81.

⁷ Jacques Rancière, “The Archeomodern Turn” in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 28.

Sapphic love and gender identity

The complex dynamics of gender and sexuality is a prominent feature in *Nightwood*. In order to emphasise in full how progressive the incorporation of such topics was at the time of publication, and to provide a more solid background knowledge that will prove useful in the interpretation of the text in the later parts of this thesis, let us now focus briefly on the relevant aspects of sexuality and gender in ancient Greece, as well as on the situation in the first half of the 20th century. Because the thesis centres mostly on women and gender-fluid characters, this chapter will deliberately not engage in detailed descriptions of male homoerotic relationships and will use them only in contexts that are relevant to this particular study. This is maintained because the conceptualisation of female homosexuality had a different sociocultural trajectory and did not occupy the same historic position as male homosexuality in law and medicine, for instance; one flagrant example that documents such difference is that some Anglophone judicial systems declared male homosexuality illegal whilst ignoring even the potentiality of female homosexuality or indeed its potential for moral corruption in society at large.⁸

Contextualizing Sexuality

The rather detailed delineation of and wide range of references to homoerotic relationships in ancient Greece generally yields a distinct lack of sources describing the female experience in comparison to that of males. The erotic female relationship in ancient Greece in written texts, especially those intended for the broader public, is mostly connected with the figure of Sappho and the location of Lesbos. She is compared to a “mythical prototype” as her work is the most well-documented source that describes the woman loving women tendencies while also being written by a woman which is striking in a world where everything was masculine oriented.⁹ While the Greek word *Lesbiades* served only as a geographical term,¹⁰ the verb *lesbiazein* referred to fellatio.¹¹

It is necessary to be detached from the reality of today’s world because sexuality in the ancient world was not regarded in the same way and the current categories therefore cannot be used in the same sense. Looking at the first records of homoerotic sentiments, before Sappho,

⁸ Annamarie Jagose. *Queer Theory*. (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 13.

⁹ Christine Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 20, no. 2 (1994): 175–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41298993>.

¹⁰ later towards the end of 19th century the word *lesbianism* started to appear in the English language with its specific modern homoerotic connotations (Online Etymology Dictionary, term “lesbian”)

¹¹ Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” 170.

there was a girl choir in Sparta in the 7th century BCE that sang poems by Alcman that celebrated “the grace (*charis*) of their choral leader, a young woman who inspires them with modesty, admiration, and at the same time erotic emotion.”¹² In both Alcman and Sappho, there are no hints that would indicate an “otherness” of those participating in such relationships.

In the later periods of Antiquity, many texts deal with the relationships between men, but the works that describe the possibility of an erotic relationship between women are sporadic because female sexuality was culturally repressed.¹³ Even the first medical record of female sexual relations is of Roman origin and from the fifth century CE.¹⁴ What was important in ancient Greece was the idea that sexual relations were divided into active and passive roles. Active were the adult men and passive were the women and young boys.¹⁵ Furthermore, women were socioculturally and politically inferior, and it seems that when such cases of female loving female relations emerged, they were deemed unimportant, irrelevant, and not significant enough to be explored by the ancient norms. Notable Classical exceptions include a brief hint in the *Symposium*, and the aforementioned work of Sappho. In the case of young boys (eromenoi), there were supposed to be no sexual feelings on the part of the receptive party, and if they enjoyed it, they were compared to prostitutes.¹⁶

The question of when homosexuality as a modern term started to form is tricky and there is no consensus as to a specific date, let alone a century. In the *History of Sexuality*, a touchstone of modern gay and lesbian studies, Michel Foucault attributes the year of 1870 to the formation of the homosexual as a type of individual that starts to be dealt with in numerous medical discourses.¹⁷ Annamarie Jagose in her chapter “Theorising Same-Sex Desire” states that a homosexual is “no longer simply someone who participates in certain sexual acts, the homosexual begins to be defined fundamentally in terms of those very acts.”¹⁸ Sexologists first termed women with homosexual tendencies as “abnormal” or “men trapped in woman’s bodies.”¹⁹

¹² Boehringer, “Female Homoeroticism,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014) 155.

¹³ Nancy Rabinowitz, “Introduction” in *Among Women: From the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World*, ed. Nancy Rabinowitz and Lisa Auanger (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 2.

¹⁴ Boehringer, “Female Homoeroticism,” 157-161.

¹⁵ Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” 172.

¹⁶ Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” 174.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980), 43.

¹⁸ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 11.

¹⁹ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 3.

By the early 20th century instances of romantic friendship between women (a tradition that can be traced back to the Renaissance) were normal and so-called “Boston marriages” started occurring in the East.²⁰ It was a union between two women who chose to live together in order to gain independence from men. The 1920s in America saw a slightly more open, but many times still secret, proliferation of female loving female tendencies. The essential factor was the influence of Freud that sparked interest in and started to overcome traditional taboos about sexuality and the sexual drive. Great help in this process was the U.S. publication of Marguerite Radclyffe Hall’s ground-breaking lesbian gender-inversion novel *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, and the new wave of urban bohemians that lived in the epicentre of creative power that was Greenwich Village,²¹ where Djuna Barnes also lived. “The era saw the emergence of little areas of sophistication or places where laissez-faire ‘morality’ was encouraged, such as Harlem and Greenwich Village, which seemed to provide an area in which like-minded cohorts could pretend, at last, that the 1920s was a decade of true sexual rebellion and freedom.”²² In the 1920s, Barnes was frequently travelling between New York and Europe (Paris in particular). She gained financial stability from the income from her writing, which allowed her to live freely and independently. She engaged in various relationships with both men and women, and it was while she was in Paris that she met Thelma Wood.²³ Wood was Barnes’s great (and turbulent) love and served as inspiration for the complicated central character Robin Vote in *Nightwood*. Barnes herself was overly private and resented questions about her sexuality and gender. Later in life she claimed that: “I’m not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma.”²⁴

By the 1930s lesbians could exist more freely in places such as Greenwich Village, but society at large still viewed them with ambivalent opinions. Stereotypes of various kind abided well into this time, and even masculine-looking women were regarded as homosexuals. It was also harder for open lesbians to support themselves financially as the Great Depression was surging and the medical discourse still regarded the love between women as abnormal.²⁵ Often, lesbians chose to live in heterosexual marriages to secure stability and a place in society instead of only engaging in homosexual affairs, as was famously the case of artists and socialites such as Edna St. Vincent Millay.

²⁰ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 15.

²¹ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 63-66.

²² Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 67.

²³ Philip Herring, *Djuna: Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Penguin Group, 1995), 156.

²⁴ Djuna Barnes, quoted in Susana S. Martins, “Gender Trouble and Lesbian Desire in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 20, no. 3 (1999): 108.

²⁵ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 93.

Contextualizing Gender

In ancient Greece gender did not include the same characteristics as it does today – it was closely connected to social status, age, wealth, race. Males were considered superior to females, to the extent that in some instances females were viewed almost as forces of nature or beasts that needed to be tamed.²⁶ Gender expression that did not pertain to the norm of female or male binary was regarded as unnatural and problematic. In 19th century America, similarly to sexuality, gender and gender expression saw some changes from the stereotypical portrayal. It was easy and advantageous for a woman to pass as a male as it could bring her more wealth and stability and rather than being men trapped in women’s bodies they were “women in masquerade,”²⁷ though it was illegal in many US cities to dress in contrast to one’s gender. Later in the same century drag balls started to be organised in large cities and were granted dispensation. These drag events attracted many participants, who were mostly male-assigned individuals in New York in the 1920s and the 1930s.²⁸ Early 20th century then saw the coinage of the term transvestite.²⁹

It is worth mentioning that a new feminine subculture called the flappers gained popularity in the 1920s. In contrast with the traditionalist view of how female gender expression should look, flappers were women who had short hair, wore short skirts, enjoyed jazz music, frequented clubs and smoked cigars. The newspaper issue *The Evening World* from 1920 mockingly calls them “The demi-dame[s] who [are] too young to marry and too old to believe in Santa”³⁰ and asks their readers if they would prefer this liberated woman or the traditional wife. Clearly, the modern era of the 1920s and the 1930s in certain places allowed for more progressive behaviour and formerly taboo topics concerning gender and sexuality to emerge into mainstream society.

²⁶ Lin Foxhall, *Studying gender in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 70.
²⁸ Genny Beemyn, “Transgender History in The United States: A special unabridged version of a book chapter” in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 8, https://www.umass.edu/stonewall/sites/default/files/Infoforandabout/transpeople/genny_beemyn_transgender_history_in_the_united_states.pdf

²⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

³⁰ *The evening world*. [volume] (New York, N.Y.), 20 April 1920. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1920-04-20/ed-1/seq-21/>>

Juxtaposing deities

This chapter will focus on myth-critical analysis. As established earlier, myth has a variety of modern functions, mainly its ability to provide archetypes for disciplines such as psychology, which will serve as an important tool. For the purposes of this thesis the crucial role that myth occupies in the argument is that it brings new possibilities of interpretation. Specifically, this chapter will focus on the archetypes present in Greek mythology, juxtaposing them with the characters in Barnes's *Nightwood*. The aim is to showcase the relevant relationship dynamics, sexual expression, and desire of Barnes's characters. While illuminating key aspects of the primary modernist text, this chapter will also highlight the continuing relevance of ancient myth and help to clarify some of the perhaps more enigmatic features of *Nightwood* in a different light. The scope of Greek mythology and its archetypal appearances in Barnes's *Nightwood* are, given its cryptically allusive and highly metaphoric nature, boundless. However, there are a few more prominent and more crucial deities that illuminate how the world of *Nightwood* follows (and challenges) patterns set by the original myth(s) re-presented in the novel.

The universality and interpretative functionality of myths is evident in the fact that not only writers but also many famous psychologists, like Sigmund Freud or Carl Gustav Jung, used myth on their scholarly journeys to uncover the human psyche. Jean Shirona Bolen, Jungian psychiatrist and the author of *Goddess in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women*, argues that Greek myth is still current because it talks about a shared human experience that is relevant to this day.³¹ With her views as a feminist and Jungian scholar, she was able to compile a comprehensive study on female psychology. In this book, she understands women as humans influenced by archetypes (in this case connected to Greek goddesses) and also humans influenced by stereotypes, or rather the roles women are expected to have according to societies and their specific rules and customs. She adds that: "I see every woman as a 'woman-in-between': acted on from within by goddess archetypes and from without by cultural stereotypes."³² Thinking about deities as archetypes invoked, echoed or recast within *Nightwood* is the method explored in this chapter.

³¹ Jean Shirona Bolen, *Goddess in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 6.

³² Bolen, *Goddess in Everywoman*, 4.

The myth of Persephone and Demeter

Some of the more prominent features in *Nightwood* involve sexuality and power dynamics within lesbian relationships. Sappho was the lesbian “foremother”³³ and some critics see the dynamics of lesbian relationships as a sort of coming back to the motherly love that was there in the beginning, or in other words – an unending compassion of a woman for another woman.³⁴ It is clear that Demeter and Persephone as the mother-daughter archetype is worth exploring in the context of *Nightwood*. Christine Downing states that “much of the intensity, the emotional intimacy, women discover in one another comes from the Demeter-Persephone dimension of their bond.”³⁵ Precisely this bond is crucial in understanding the relationship dynamic of desire in *Nightwood* as the characters follow an evolved variation of the myth which connects it with the typology of characters and remains true even in the early 20th century and maybe even today.

In order to be able to delve into the myth-critical analysis of the characters, it is essential to briefly summarise the parts of the original myth of Persephone and Demeter relevant to this study. The best source for this analysis is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*³⁶ as it tells the whole myth. Demeter (goddess of harvest and agriculture) is the mother of Persephone, whom Hades abducted from the garden. Demeter, struck with her daughter’s disappearance, suffered from this sudden separation and went on a quest to find her daughter. While she was gone from Olympus, the Earth started wasting away as Demeter could not fulfil her duties as the goddess of harvest and agriculture. Persephone’s captor, Hades, allowed Persephone to see her mother, under the condition that she will have to return to him. Persephone reunited with her mother, and the Earth started to prosper again. In order to at least partially satisfy the needs of Hades and Demeter, it was established that Persephone was to spend a third of the year in the Underworld with Hades and the rest with her mother.³⁷ Generally, this myth is interpreted as the explanation for the cycle of seasons and the allegory of a seed that “must descent into the earth and disappear in order to germinate and reappear as a grain crop.”³⁸ This forever-changing renewal of living things will play an important role in describing the archetypes relevant to Barnes’s central characters, Robin and Nora.

³³ Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” 170.

³⁴ Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” 183.

³⁵ Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” 183.

³⁶ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, trans. Gregory Nagy, Harvard University, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5292>.

³⁷ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, trans. Gregory Nagy, Harvard University, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5292>

³⁸ Lesley Adkiss & Roy A. Adkins, *Ancient Greece: A Handbook* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998), 326.

In *Nightwood* the power of love and desire is indeed a powerful motif, intimately tied to the adverse side of this dynamic, namely particularly neurotic manifestations of jealousy and a sense of an essential lack or loss. All of the main relationships revolve around one woman in particular, Robin Vote. She does not seem to want to settle down but keeps getting caught up in relationships that for a while fulfil her needs but soon those unions start to feel like a prison to her, and it ends with her urge to flee the arms of her lovers to roam free. This is most prominent in the case of one of the lovers, Nora Flood, whose only intention is to surround Robin with attention and care. While those are specifically the qualities that eventually turn her into a possessive lover, she keeps on chasing Robin even after she has left. The relationship between Robin and Nora resembles in this and other respects the dynamic of a mother-child relationship – in psychology it is common that a lesbian relationship functions based on those dynamics)³⁹ and thus the myth of Demeter and Persephone presents itself as a possible reading of lesbian relationships in *Nightwood*. It also serves as a powerful tool that helps to make sense of Robin Vote's inner processes that are unavailable to the reader due to the lack of Robin's point of view – while central to the plot and observed and analysed by all the other central characters, often in retrospect and in interaction with one another, Robin's inner feelings are never revealed – she does not have a voice and is therefore essentially unknowable.

This way it sheds more light onto why the characters are acting the way they are and what instincts drive them, as the reiterations of the myth of Demeter and Persephone seem to be a recurring pattern in *Nightwood*. It is worth mentioning that the world of *Nightwood*, according to Jane Marcus and her “Laughing at Leviticus: ‘Nightwood’ As Woman’s Circus Epic” is important for its profound queer representations, which was especially important given the time when it was published, stating that “*Nightwood* reveals that gays and outcasts have a culture, a linguistically and philosophically rich culture, encompassing high and low art, opera and circus, psychoanalysis and religion, and that this culture is a vital political force.”⁴⁰ While Marcus focuses on the carnivalesque subversiveness of this queer culture in Barnes’s novel, comparing the outcasts of society to Greek deities is a method which also aims to erase the stigma of queer people being marginalised by mainstream society.

³⁹ Carolyn Allen, *Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 28.

⁴⁰ Jane Marcus, “Laughing at Leviticus: ‘Nightwood’ As Woman’s Circus Epic,” in *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 247.

The godlike qualities of Robin should be addressed first. During her meeting with Baron Felix Volkbein, her future husband, she is described as someone of a very unusual appearance that distinguishes her from others. She is “newly ancient”⁴¹, evoking a new, restored or recalled version of something old, and along with her wearing clothes that “were of a period that he could not quite place” (38) serves to emphasize an image of an immortal quality about her, indeed something reminiscent of or embodying myth itself. While Persephone is not only a goddess of grain seed, but also a queen of the Underworld, this duality is also reflected in describing Robin:

Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water – (...) – the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds – meet the child and the desperado. (31)

On the one hand she is seen as someone that elicits agricultural imagery and vitality, but on the other hand, there is an underlying dark undertone that hints at decay and (eternal) sleep or rather in the context of ancient Greece – the Underworld. Living in two worlds means being in a state of constant disharmony; Robin is torn between those two completely opposite sides of her. Persephone as the queen of the Underworld and goddess of spring must juggle between those two characteristics, same as Robin. Robin thus reflects both of Persephone’s key personalities, and this dichotomy is explicitly addressed in the phrase “meet the child and the desperado” (31), hinting that there are further conflicting layers to Robin’s personality, one of vulnerability and the other of recklessness or untamed courage. She is, like Persephone, a symbol of both generation and destruction. Living in this constant insecurity means that she has to walk on a tightrope that is the unstable border between those two states.

Robin, read as the Persephone of this novel, goes through the metaphorical abduction a few times, always when a new lover comes into her life, almost replaying the myth over again. In the beginning when Robin appears, she is “surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers” (30), which evokes the image of Persephone in the garden before she was abducted. She also “seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room” (31). Interestingly enough, the focalizer of this chapter of the book is Baron Felix, the future husband of Robin, who instantly starts desiring Robin. This is the first step in his “abducting of Robin” in the form of marriage, akin to the myth of Hades’ and Persephone’s union. A few pages later, the imagery

⁴¹ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 38. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated in the text in parenthesis.

of garden is still present, hinting at her future of being a captive, following the same trajectory as the Greek myth sets out.

She was gracious and yet fading, like an old statue in a garden, that symbolizes the weather through which it has endured, and is not so much the work of man as the work of wind and rain and the herd of the seasons, and though formed in man's image is a figure of doom. (37).

From this excerpt, two conclusions can be made: firstly, the act of fading and resembling a statue means that Robin's level of freedom is decreasing because of the growing commitment towards Felix, and secondly the suggestive elemental imagery hints at the Eleusinian mysteries. Eleusinian mysteries were yearly initiations celebrating the myth of Demeter and Persephone that symbolized the idea of rebirth of humans and grain seeds. Paralleling it with the fate of Persephone who after being gone to the Underworld came back to Earth, and with her came the fertility of the grain, representing cosmic mutability in fixed earth-bound cycles. Thus, Robin's story hints at the cycle of seasons and the cyclical nature of human life. During autumn and winter the Earth becomes barren so that it can come back in full strength in spring and summer. More broadly, the cyclical nature also hints at the Persephonian loop – Robin will habitually feel trapped and will try to escape, only to again come back to the emotional captivity her lovers present. While Persephone's captivity is literal, Robin's is figural in that she feels trapped in the romantic union she forms with people.

When Felix decides to marry Robin, he feels that there is no other choice than feeling completely drawn to her, feeling as though loving her “was not in truth a selection” (38) and Robin's acceptance was as though her “life held no volition for refusal” (38). It seems they were destined to end up together but because it is so abrupt and there is no place for a rational decision, they are doomed to separate, as the archetype of Persephone is not one that is likely to remain trapped for long. Commenting on the topic of marriage, Bolen writes that “marriage is something that often ‘happens to’ a Persephone woman. She gets ‘abducted’ into marriage when a *man wants to get married*⁴³ and persuades her to say yes.”⁴⁴ Bolen then connects the Persephone woman archetype with a chameleon-like quality that can fit into what other people expect from her in the beginning phases of a relationship.⁴⁵ This is what seems to be happening in *Nightwood* – Felix desires Robin, though he does not really know her very well, but he created an idealised image of her, transforming her (and hence trapping her) into a work of art, lifeless and fixed. This goes against the core personality of Persephone as she cannot stay at one

⁴³ [emphasis added]

⁴⁴ Bolen, *Goddess in Everywoman*, 212

⁴⁵ Bolen, *Goddess in Everywoman*, 201

place for long –she represents the myth of rejuvenation and change. The fluidity of Robin’s character and indeed the very prose of Barnes’s experimental fiction is replete with suggestive parallels and echoes of this very mythical substrate, both as a symbol of feminine writing in general.

The figurative abduction of Robin lies in the forming commitment that happens when she is in a stable relationship. After the marriage, reflecting the heteronormative patriarchal frame of conjugal existence, Felix put upon her the duty of bearing him a son and heir, the next baron. Robin is seen distancing herself more and more from her husband and her responsibilities; she frequently goes out wandering (presumably to other lovers), not being able to keep herself committed to her family life in a heteronormative monogamous relationship. Bolen would see this behaviour as a typical Persephone archetype, mentioning that it is hard for Persephone women to stick to the commitment: “From the standpoint of Persephone, marriage was an abduction by Hades, the death-bringer.”⁴⁶ Felix with his idealized devotion to Robin did the only thing that he as a man was stereotypically supposed to do – marry her and have a child with her but he did not realize that it would mean that he will lose her all the sooner. One day Felix finds Robin sleeping with a book she was reading and there is an underscored French line: “Et lui rendit pendant sa captivité les milles services qu’un amour dévoué est seul capable de rendre” (42). In English, this line would correspond to: “And in captivity she provided him with thousands of services that only devoted love can provide.” This allows Felix to look into the mind of the enigmatic Robin – if she sympathizes with this passage, it could mean that she feels trapped in this union. In the end the marriage does fail, Robin proclaims that she did not want the child (that could be one of the services provided) and she leaves. The next time she is seen in the novel, it is with Nora.

Nora shares key characteristics with Demeter, the mother of Persephone, and the Greek goddess of agriculture and fertility – her motherly qualities resonate in the *Hymn to Demeter*, where she is seen as “the nurturer of many.”⁴⁷ Nora can take care of people and take on many responsibilities, which is evident by the fact that she is the proprietor of a salon in America which fills her need to provide a venue for others, specifically others that society has cast out. She was able to breathe new life into a once decaying place and turned it into a salon open for everyone irrespective of their social status, job, or religious beliefs, and she provided them with a place to stay and a fire, which suggests a crucial homely characteristic to her salon. The

⁴⁶ Bolen, *Goddess in Everywoman*, 216

⁴⁷ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, trans. Gregory Nagy, Harvard University, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5292>.

narrator even explicitly mentions this attentive nature of hers, stating “Nora had the face of all people who love the people – a face that would be evil when she found out that to love without criticism is to be betrayed. Nora robbed herself for everyone; incapable of giving herself warning, she was continually turning about to find herself diminished” (46-47). Nora’s giving nature and her “look of compassion” (45) causes that other people sometimes take advantage of her. Considering that she is always caring and offering unbound affection, it leaves her vulnerable at the mercy of being exploited by others. However, she still had no preconceptions and people came to confide in her, because “to ‘confess’ to her was an act even more secret than the communication provided by a priest” (48). In this respect she seems to take the role of a deity that habitually takes care of people and is the object of their trust and worship. Furthermore, Nora is surrounded by dogs, oaks and is at one point even compared to a tree; all these in Jung’s *Four Archetypes* are symbols for the mother archetype.

It is in the moments where Nora is with Robin that the Demeter persona of Nora awakens fully. She provided a temporary home for Robin, and in contrast with Felix, she tried to really understand Robin and put Robin's interests before hers. What Barnes seems to be doing here is contrasting and challenging the gender-specific roles that society imposes on men and women. Felix acted on what society expected of him – to marry and have children and Robin was the one he chose to follow this pattern with. Nonetheless, he probably did not expect that Robin would escape from her role as a woman, as a mother, and as a wife. She liberated herself from the constraints of society and moved on to a relationship with another woman who did not expect her to fulfil a stereotypical role and tended her with care and concern, as opposed to a somewhat shallow portrayal of Felix as a failing archetypal patriarch.

Moreover, in the relationship with Nora, Robin allowed herself to imagine a reality of commitment, even though Nora was aware that it might not last and that it would be up to her to maintain. This is evident in “Robin told only a little of her life, but she kept repeating in one way or another her wish for a home, as if she were afraid she would be lost again, as if she were aware, without conscious knowledge, that she belonged to Nora, and that if Nora did not make it permanent by her own strength, she would forget” (50). What is striking is Robin's desire for a stable home and someone to care for her, which does not seem to match with her need to never stay in one place committed to one partner. Various psychoanalysts attribute the mother-child relationship to lesbian desire resulting from “repressed longing for the mother.”⁴⁸ This might hint at the unconscious need of Robin for a safe place found in Nora. It can be deduced that Robin is aware that she needs to stop her nightly wanderings in order to gain the stability and care the delicate part of her personality desires. However, this does not last, and Robin once again starts going out at night, just as she did when she was with Felix, presumably because she starts feeling trapped again (this time not in a marriage, but in a relationship) and leaving Nora alone. These nightly wanderings trigger further aspects of the Demeter personality in Nora. The Demeter archetype “can dictate the course a woman's life will take, can have a significant impact on others in her life, and can predispose her to depression if her need to nurture is rejected or thwarted.”⁴⁹ Therefore, when Robin leaves, Nora loses her purpose in life, which is to take care of Robin. When Demeter lost Persephone, she started grieving and the earth suffered on a cataclysmic scale; here it is Demeter–Nora, who is suffering. Suffering, because she not only lost all motivation but also because she failed as a mother archetype, she could not keep her protégé with her, and it was exactly the overabundance of care, the essence of Nora's

⁴⁸ Allen, *Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss*, 28.

⁴⁹Bolen, *Goddess in Everywoman*, 171.

personality, that pulled Robin away.

During Robin's nocturnal wanderings and even longer trips, Nora was meticulous not to change anything in their home, being afraid that Robin, like some sort of pet, "might lose the scent of home" (50). Nora's motherly instincts are visible in her fears, for instance that Robin is "alone, crossing streets, in danger" (51), like an anxious mother fearing her child might get hit by a car or lured by a stranger. The absence of love was for Nora like a "physical removal, insupportable and irreparable. As an amputated hand cannot be disowned, because it is experiencing a futurity, of which the victim is its forebear, so Robin was an amputation that Nora could not renounce" (53). For Nora, Robin is indelibly engraved into her body and mind, the relationship had become organic, symbiotic. Bolen describes how the Demeter archetype acts in a relationship with a Demeter woman as follows:

Lesbian couples sometimes fit a Demeter-Persephone pattern, in which a Demeter woman's well-being depends on the intactness of a relationship with a younger or less mature lover. As long as they are together, the Demeter woman feels productive and fertile. Her work and her creativity thrive as a result of being with a woman who is like a goddess to her. She may be possessive of her Persephone if she fears that she may lose her. And she may foster dependence and exclusiveness, which eventually harms the relationship.⁵⁰

The reverberation of Persephone's abduction happens when Nora tries to find Robin during her typical wanderings, and she finds her in the garden. There she sees Robin with her new lover – Jenny. In that particular scene, Jenny is like Hades, snatching Persephone from her mother's embrace. This is one of the instances where Barnes bends the original myth – the usurper here is a woman Hades instead of a male Hades. This different reimagination generates an important finding, Hades for Robin is not a person but rather a quality – it is always someone who desires her and who wants to engage in a relationship with her or possess her either in a marriage or in a figurative union.

Once Nora is genuinely left alone, she goes to visit Doctor Matthews with a request to "tell [her] everything [he] knows about the night" (71). The night for Robin is a safe space, because of its dark nature she is hidden from others and she is able to live freely as she pleases and can act as she wants. Being a night person allows her a sense of liberty that her day life (the life where she was "tied down" in a relationship) could not provide. For Nora, night is a place where Robin is lost and where she was abducted. Nora wants to find her and bring her back, like Demeter trying to bring Persephone from the Underworld. The problem is that this Persephone

⁵⁰ Bolen, *Goddess in Everywoman*, 181.

does not want to come back from her own personal Hades, in other words, her personal Underworld. Similarly to the original myth where Persephone's fluctuations between the Underworld and the Earth signalize the change of seasons, here Robin's fluctuation between her life in the night and in the day symbolizes the changing days. The changes of the days are then more frequent than the changes of the seasons. This is mirrored in the fact that while Persephone was abducted only once, Robin on the other hand goes through the metaphorical abduction various times. Barnes bends the original myth to show that the changes are more quick and unstable which makes it thus also more traumatic for Robin and other characters.

Matthew realizes that the only possibility for Robin and Nora is to be together in death: "And where you go, it goes, the two of you, your living and her dead, that will not die; to daylight, to life, to grief, until both are carrion" (80). Carolyn Allen *In Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss*, describes their relationship as a "dramatic struggle between mother and child."⁵¹ Nora even realizes those patterns later on when she explicitly expresses her motherly instincts towards Robin "I saw her always like a tall child who had grown up the length of the infant's gown, walking and needing help and safety; because she was in her own nightmare" (131). This is in line with the theory of Christine Downing that the mother-daughter dynamic is evocative of some lesbian relationships as she notes that there is a certain need to go back to the origin – to the original embrace felt after birth.⁵² For Downing, though, it is the Persephone (daughter) who, before she is abducted, loses her identity and becomes an "extension of the mother."⁵³ Downing does not explore what happened to Demeter (mother) and in the case of Robin and Nora it is both who happen to lose themselves in the relationship, only at a different time. Robin sensed that she was losing her own integrity and her carefree self, which frightened her and caused her to run away with Jenny (which in turn gave her back her liberty for a while); this triggered Nora's worries, and she began to lose herself in the constant cyclical motherly obsession over Robin. While the original Demeter-Persephone myth is bound to the natural cycles of rebirth, rebirth seems to be an impossibility in Barnes's novel – like many other modernist texts, the post-WWI ethos markedly present is one tied inextricably to decay and senseless repetition without remedy or goal.

In the chapter "Go down, Matthew" Nora is seen at her lowest, she is grieving and wants to desperately find Robin and bring her back from Hades (Jenny) and the Underworld (Robin's careless self), she even travels through Europe in a quest to find her, in an echo of Demeter who

⁵¹ Allen, *Following Djuna*, 22

⁵² Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," 184.

⁵³ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," 183.

travelled all over the world to find Persephone. Nora's grieving is visualised in her worsening depression because she is unable to take care of herself without Robin and Demeter's grieving is seen in the deterioration of the world around her as she is unable to fulfil her duties on Olympus. Nora says that: "I can only find her again in my sleep or in her death" (116). With that, she realizes the impossibility of bringing Robin back but at the same time desperately clings to the inconsistent behaviour of Robin: "Sometimes Robin seemed to return to me (...) for safety, but she always went out again" (125). Allen summarizes the power struggle of their relationship as follows:

Robin has the most visible power because she initiates action and Nora responds to it. At the same time however, Nora provides Robin with safety. No matter how often Robin wanders, she returns to Nora – returns to a faithful lover who will keep her safe. So, despite Robin's more obvious command, Nora's power balances Robin's because Nora is the guarantor of stability.⁵⁴

Nora is finally able to reflect and sees herself as the one who made Robin run away by the amount of love and care she provided and realizes that her love for Robin is unsustainable:

"It was me made her hair stand on end because I loved her. She turned bitter because I made her feel colossal. She wanted darkness in her mind – to throw a shadow over what she was powerless to alter – her dissolute life, her life at night; and I, I dashed it down. We will never have it out now," Nora said. "It's too late. There is no last reckoning for those who have loved for too long, so for me there is no end. Only I can't, I can't wait forever!" she said frantically. "I can't live without my heart!" (140).

Nora's nurturing personality did indeed make Robin feel better, "colossal" even, and it disrupted the power Robin had over herself and her darkness. It was Nora who kept bringing her back, similarly to Demeter wanting so desperately to bring Persephone back from the Underworld. Both saw those dark places (literal or figurative) as a threat to their loved ones. The separation makes Nora want Robin even more because "Robin's absence heightens Nora's desire."⁵⁵ But the more Nora tries to pull Robin back to her, the more Robin distances herself and the more she falls into her pattern of frivolous acts because with all the love and care Nora tries to give Robin, Robin's personality and perhaps sexual freedom feels more and more chained. The mother-daughter dynamic and its possessive nature are heightened when Nora acknowledges it: "but all I knew was that others have slept with my lover and my child. For Robin is incest too; that is one of her powers" (141). But even after the uncertainty and the complicated nature of their relationship, and perhaps exactly because of that, the prediction of Matthew will come true –in a conversation with Matthew, he says of Nora and Robin: "but

⁵⁴ Allen, *Following Djuna*, 29.

⁵⁵ Allen, *Following Djuna*, 22

though those two were buried at opposite ends of the earth, one dog will find them both” (95). As the absence of Robin awakens more desire in Nora, the option of letting go is not possible. This again mirrors the original myth of Demeter and Persephone, there is not an option that includes letting go. Both Nora and Robin are caught in the co-dependent spiral their relationship presents and, Nora at least, feels the bond between them as so powerful that it resembles a sacred union. The ending of the novel, as we shall see, brings this dynamic between Robin and Nora to a dramatic close, involving Nora’s dog.

Meanwhile, we learn that Jenny has become annoyed with Robin, admitting that “she did not understand anything Robin felt or did” (151) –once again, this demonstrates the isolated and unstable nature of Robin that only Nora was able to understand, at least partially. One night, Robin, having been roaming the countryside for weeks in a progressive feral state, follows the barking of Nora’s dog. The two finally meet in a chapel, where Robin is again seen in the presence of flowers and toys, evoking the child imagery and the garden combined. She suddenly goes down on all four, approaching the dog as if she herself were a beast, and starts fighting the dog, suggesting an inner fight with herself, as if the dog was her own Underworld personified. “The veins stood out in her neck, under her ears, swelled in her arms, and wide and throbbing rose up on her fingers as she moved forward” (152). In the end, she defeats the dog, thus defeating the Underworld in herself, and comes back. The novel ends with the dog and Robin lying on the ground, exhausted. The ending of Barnes’s novel is famously unsatisfying and cryptic, inspiring various readings of the sexual elements in this bestial encounter, which Barnes herself staunchly denied. We may speculate that after that fight, Robin goes back to Nora, and after that, she wanders somewhere again and then comes back to her, repeating a cycle, but this time, maybe, she will be able to spend more time with Nora, as in the myth where Persephone spends two-thirds of the year with Demeter and a third of the year in the Underworld.

What is evident is that Robin desires freedom, this freedom to her is mirrored in her nightly wanderings, and the idea of settling down with someone is the thing that causes her to habitually run away, avoiding the possibility of a stable relationship. Liberty for Robin is reflected in her sexual freedom. She is free if she is not bound to any serious lover but once the commitment starts to form on either side, she simply walks off. Like many modernist texts *Nightwood* explores the idea of isolation and dissociation from society, as can be seen in the complex character of Robin. She left her child and her marriage. In this way she is like a

Persephone, trapped in a relationship with Hades (who for Robin is everyone she starts to feel a commitment to) and trapped in the Underworld that is her personality and the side of her that wants to wander and engage in relationships without the need to settle down. But the more vulnerable side of Robin actually desires a stable home. The only person she felt a deeper connection with was Nora, who as Demeter provided her with a home. A home that for Robin became a symbol of something she needed and hated at the same time. Nora's desperate desire for Robin caused that in Robin's eyes Nora transformed from the caring mother into another Hades possessing Robin.

Gender trouble

Existing research recognises the critical role of gender identity and its essential fluidity played out in *Nightwood*. Andrea L. Harris describes its complex gender depiction in her essay "The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*" as "a free-floating range of possibilities: one is neither masculine nor feminine, but both masculine and feminine to varying degrees and in various combinations."⁵⁶ Seeing the academic potential of this remarkable gender fluidity and its implications for the formal and thematic aspects of the novel, this subchapter serves to broaden the existing field of queer reading of *Nightwood* by adding another layer, namely that of Greek mythology, to its gender-fluid characters: Robin Vote and Matthew O'Connor. Considering the androgyny of the former evokes similarities between Robin and Agdistis, a hermaphrodite goddess of Greek and Anatolian myths, sometimes associated with the perhaps more widely known cult of Cybele. The gender ambiguity of Matthew in turn evokes similarities with the prophet figure of Tiresias. In addition to his, the resemblance of Matthew to the so-called Bearded Aphrodite and Robin to Artemis will benefit from a brief mention.

Tiresias, the blind seer of Thebes

Essentially, Robin possesses tendencies towards traditionally masculine characteristics even though she is a woman, and on the other hand, Matthew is a man with a prominent longing to be a woman, but this distinction is a bit more complicated, as will be discussed later. What is striking about these two characters in particular is that they seem to be in polar opposition to

⁵⁶ Andrea L. Harris, "The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," in *Eroticism and Containment: Notes from the Flood Plain*, ed. Ann Kibbey and Kayann Short (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 235.

one another not only in terms of gender. Michael Davidson in his article “Pregnant Men: Modernism, Disability, and Biofuturity in Djuna Barnes” establishes that Matthew’s main characteristic is his ability to speak, while Robin’s is her inability to speak.⁵⁷ Which interestingly hints at the traditional gendered roles where the masculine is the one who is active and the feminine the one who is passive. In this case, though, it could be argued that by her silence Robin gains the power, she is in control of the situations and conversations and thus indirectly rules them. The other characters do not have insight into her mind, it is in her hands to control what she lets them know. This “masculine” quality is possessed by Matthew, but here it is in his rhetoric ability. He is so skilled in his use of words that he also gains control of the narrative, though in a completely opposite style to that of Robin. It is precisely this ability of Matthew’s that makes him a fitting candidate for the Tiresias figure of *Nightwood*.

Barnes was not the first modernist to employ a Tiresias-like figure in her novel. Her contemporaries, like James Joyce or, perhaps more famously, T. S. Eliot, used this mythical seer to appear in their works in order to perform specific narrative functions.⁵⁸ Whether Eliot inspired Barnes in his use of Tiresias is up for debate, but it is probable. According to Greek myths, Tiresias was a blind man of Thebes that was given a gift of prophecy.⁵⁹ He got turned into a woman after he wounded copulating snakes⁶⁰ and later he was again turned back into a man,⁶¹ thus making him a person who experienced both and thus possesses experience with both genders and their performance. This ambiguity is also what largely characterises Matthew.

Matthew is a complex character constituted by a contradictory set of features that remain hidden under a public façade. He is seen as a doctor – a gynaecologist who wears a tie (stereotypically masculine attire), and whose knowledge is broad and not confined to his expertise as a medical doctor; he knows Latin, Shakespeare, frequently quotes Montaigne or Donne and is even skilled in Greek and Roman history. That façade comes down, however, when Nora seeks his counsel, shattered by the separation from Robin. Contrary to his outward appearance and performance of civilised order and erudition, Matthew’s flat is a tiny and filthy place that is disorganized, and even Nora, who knows him, is surprised, stating “She had not known that the doctor was so poor” (70), indicating that he was able to deceive even his close

⁵⁷ Michael Davidson, “Pregnant Men: Modernism, Disability, and Biofuturity in Djuna Barnes,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 2 (July 2010): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-2010-001>.

⁵⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 159.

⁵⁹ Luke and Monica Roman, *Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Facts On File, 2010) 492.

⁶⁰ The details of the myth vary.

⁶¹ Roman, *Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology*, 492.

friends. The contrast of Matthew's public performance and private squalor speaks volumes about the identity crisis we are about to get to grips with. What she also finds is Matthew "in a woman's flannel nightgown" (71), dressed as a woman, in full drag, describing him as follows:

The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gunmetal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders, and falling back against the pillow, turned up the shadowy interior of their cylinders. He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted. (71)

Harris talks about the concept of femininity employed by Barnes here saying that: "Matthew is deprived of a 'natural' femininity, yet Barnes suggests through the concept of femininity as a façade or a masquerade that femininity does not exist in a natural state. Thus, it is available to Matthew to the same degree that it is available to any woman."⁶² This thought is out of its time as it closely resembles the works of future queer theorists like Judith Butler, who saw gender as a performance.⁶³ This scene where Nora sees Matthew dressed as a woman ultimately uncovers his secret. She might be surprised at first, and Matthew correspondingly embarrassed, but no one seems to be making a great deal of it; Nora simply accepts it as a new reality, which is a significant silent commentary on Barnes's part, not staging a scene of habitual outrage at what could traditionally be viewed at the time as abject queer spectacle. Another important thing is the insight with which Nora describes the flat as it seems to mirror and indeed perform Matthew's inner personality and the struggle concerning his identity as a man wanting to be a woman.

A pile of medical books, and volumes of a miscellaneous order, reached almost to the ceiling, water-stained and covered with dust. Just above them was a very small barred window, the only ventilation. On a maple dresser, certainly not of European make, lay a rusty pair of forceps, a broken scalpel, half a dozen odd instruments that she could not place, a catheter, some twenty perfume bottles, almost empty, pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs. From the half-open drawers of this chiffonier hung laces, ribands, stockings, ladies' underclothing and an abdominal brace, which gave the impression that the feminine finery had suffered venery. (71)

A few things can be deduced from this fairly long and detailed description. Every part of Matthew's personality and his inner experience of his life seems to be present in this passage in the form of related objects in a kind of disturbing material portrait, resembling an installation reminiscent of Tracy Emin's famous 1998 piece 'My Bed'. There is his gynaecologist's praxis represented by medical books and surgical instruments that are either broken or neglected and

⁶² Harris, "The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," 240.

⁶³ Harris, "The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," 254.

not in proper shape or condition, indicating that nothing is as it seems. Even though he might look like a well-adjusted doctor and function as such outwardly, in society, he is also suffering and broken in a similar way his masculine biological gender is because of the rupture between his anatomy and the way he feels. Worth noting are also the feminine products like perfumes and creams, and there seems to be an abundance of them – from a previous incident we also know that the doctor steals these feminine objects from scenes he is called to in his medical capacity. It appears that his feminine side is stronger and manifest only in his private life, as is indicated by the difference between having one broken scalpel versus twenty perfume bottles. It seems that the perfume is of a greater importance than a scalpel. In “The Third Sex” Harris mentions another important factor about this particular passage, stating: “Just as Matthew’s sex, gender, and sexuality are incongruent – they form no logical, intelligible order – so is the assortment of objects in his private space incongruent. The result of this confusion of objects – feminine/masculine, cosmetic/medical, whole/broken – is that the privileged objects are contaminated by the very nearness of the others.”⁶⁴ Matthew is torn between all the conflicting sides of his personality and at the same time he manages to keep all of his struggles private, which inevitably leads to existential isolation.

Matthew experienced the war, yet the only thing he wanted was to be a girl in that situation, saying “if I had to do it again, grand country though it is – I’d be the girl found lurking behind the army, or up with the hill folk” (81). This passage expresses his desire to free himself of some of the duties of a man at that time. His deepest desire is to be the most stereotypical woman he can be, performing traditional female roles in everyday situations, stating: “for, no matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man’s potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar” (82). Thus, we clearly see that Barnes’s portrayal of gender fluidity goes deep – beyond outward tendencies of drag or transvestite, which the initial view of Matthew and his room might also suggest at first. Barnes explores the issues of transsexuality here and the ways in which this is largely an impossibility to be lived at the time.

Thanks to his ability to see the world through the prism of male but also a female point of view the doctor acts as an all-knowing adviser to all of the characters, with the exception of Robin, which is key. This ability to closely interact with both genders makes him comparable to Tiresias who experienced living as a male and a female throughout his life. Though gender fluidity is a significant part of Tiresias’ and Matthew’s identity, there are other things that speak

⁶⁴ Harris, “The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” 240.

to their similarity, most notably their ability to predict future events. Matthew's knowledge and the fact that he refuses to admit his age make him timeless, almost as if he had the experience of a few centuries. Perhaps this is the quality that also helps him predict the future. There are three prominent examples of his "clairvoyant" power. He predicts that a dog will connect Robin and Nora in the end, he predicts that Robin will leave Jenny, and he predicts that in the end, in line with his suitably oracular identity, there will be only "wrath and weeping" (149), which forecasts the final scene of the novel where Robin is fighting Nora's dog. It could be said that Matthew possesses a Tiresias-like quality in the novel, but not only that – his claim that "[He is] the bearded lady" (90) also evokes, since we are pursuing the parallels with Greek myth here, an interesting similarity to the Bearded Aphrodite of Cyprus.

The Bearded Aphrodite

This Bearded Aphrodite, also referred to as Aphroditos, was a male version of Aphrodite. He "was portrayed as having a female shape and clothing like Aphrodite's but also a beard and penis, and hence, a male name."⁶⁵ Crossdressing was a frequent occurrence as males worshipped the god by wearing female attire and vice versa.⁶⁶ Matthew's way to connect with his femininity is through crossdressing and also through his praxis of a gynaecologist. Those are the only instances where he can feel the closest to female beings without raising too much suspicion. However, it is shattering that he must hide a part of himself under a disguise of being a privileged doctor and seeing all the women he cannot become. Isolation is a trend in modernist literature generally and Matthew is isolated from his gender. Unlike Robin who does not seem to hide her personality once she goes out, his wish to become a woman is complicated by the fact that he would be ridiculed if he went out in full drag so he must keep his identity a secret. Matthew's speeches centre on love which elevates him to the position of a love specialist, not merely a physician concerned with tending the intimate parts of the female body. Matthew's Aphroditos characteristics are thus also reflected in the way he functions in the novel, influencing his interactions with other characters.

Agdistis

⁶⁵ Vern L. and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 29.

⁶⁶ Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 29.

On the other side of the spectrum is Robin Vote. She is a female with significant masculine manifestations, and this principal characteristic makes her comparable to an androgynous goddess, namely Agdistis. Agdistis was born with both sexual organs, a natural hermaphrodite, which felt like a threat to other gods who in the end decided to cut off her penis, thereby locking her in one sexual and gender identity.⁶⁷ Even though she then possessed only one sexual organ, she could still maintain her “ambiguous sexual elements.”⁶⁸ Again, this is another deity that can be characterized by their essential androgyny as she maintained a part of her masculine personality and in this case the androgyny of Agdistis led to the idea of her being uncontrollable: “Whatever the process may have been that led to the concept of Agdistis as androgynous, it is a symbol of wild and uncontrolled nature, which is ended by the joint decree of all the gods.”⁶⁹ This performance of essential uncontrollability based on essential androgyny is particularly fascinating in the context of Robin, as we shall see.

Robin is many times described as having an “iris of a beast” (33) or as Matthew describes her in one of his speeches: “Robin was outside the ‘human type’ – a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain” (131). This could hint at her androgyny, but also other things. She does show her inclination towards both genders in the way she dresses when she goes out at night, which is something she does not share with Matthew as he expresses his desire to be a woman through crossdressing in private. She only incorporates parts of the masculine attire and goes out freely to perform her gender-fluid self. She is often seen in boy’s clothes (133), and Nora remembers her as “a girl who resembles a boy” (123). Harris notes about the complexity of Robin that: “[She] is not a man in a woman’s body, but a woman who loves women, who seems masculine, and whose very body and self-presentation also seem masculine.”⁷⁰ In this way, Barnes’s take on Robin’s gender fluidity and its manifestations also comments on the essential need for queer identity, unconfined by a trans-trajectory or indeed any clear-cut identity politics. While there certainly is evidence to prove Robin’s masculine tendencies, it is worth noting that she also gives birth to Guido, son of Felix, and pregnancy is a state biologically connected with women’s bodies.

Motherhood is something stereotypically connected to women’s role in society and giving birth is especially laden with restrictive qualifying categories of what a ‘woman’ means by reducing her to her biological functions. Unsurprisingly, in Barnes’s novel, the pregnancy of

⁶⁷ Robert E. Bell, *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1991), 15.

⁶⁸ Maria Grazia Lancellotti, *Attis: Between Myth and History* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 23.

⁶⁹ Lancellotti, *Attis: Between Myth and History*, 92.

⁷⁰ Harris, “The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” 248.

Robin is not completely of her own will, moreover, she even states that she did not want the child, and she does see it as a “lost land in herself” (41). This might hint at the fact that Robin lacks maternal instincts, but the matter is not as straightforward as it seems. There is a scene where she is holding Guido, her son, and Felix is afraid she is going to dash him down. “One night, Felix, having come in unheard, found her standing in the centre of the floor holding the child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down; but she brought it down gently” (43). Though the situation looks tragic in the way Felix perceives it, instead of hurting the baby, she brought him down “gently” in the end – indicating a sort of maternal care in her, after all. Later she is seen in a bar drinking and not fulfilling the expectations of a mother. The maternal love is present, but so is the carelessness and “her head bent over her glass” (44), which suggests post-partem depression or indeed depression caused by the restrictive roles prescribed Robin by her social identity as a married mother. There is, however, also a possibility to read the unwanted pregnancy of Robin as a way to regain her power, similarly to the myth of Agdistis.

In this myth, when Agdistis is deprived of her male sexual organs, an almond tree sprouts from the severed phallus and impregnates a girl who later gave birth.⁷¹ After this event Agdistis takes care of the child as a mother and according to Avi Baumann’s “The Hidden Faces of Mother Love”: “Emasculation, the loss of power and the transformation into a woman, and the possibility of regaining power through her son are central in this story.”⁷² Bearing a child is something that is expected of Robin in marriage, and by finally giving Felix a son, she fulfilled this commitment that was placed upon her by society and by Felix as the performer of patriarchal order. It was a commitment that she indifferently accepted at first, until it started to suffocate her. Thus, ironically and significantly, by delivering the child she also liberated herself from the expectations of society appended to a married woman’s role and was able to leave Felix, thus regaining her power and earning her freedom. She was able to leave her child because he was perhaps ultimately seen as a gateway to her liberty. A part of her refuses motherhood that is part of stereotypical concepts of femininity because “maternity is not an expression of her gender identity.”⁷³ Matthew’s rhetorical question: “Very well – what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl?”, describes her as a person having both the characteristics of a male and a female and marks her as an invert.

⁷¹ Lancellotti, *Attis: Between Myth and History*, 92.

⁷² Avi Baumann, “The Hidden Faces of Mother Love,” accessed March 28, 2021, <http://jung-israel.org/the-hidden-faces-of-mother-love-avi-baumann/>.

⁷³ Harris, “The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” 236.

Continuing his key speech characterising non-binary existence and essential queerness, Matthew states: “The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace – neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan!” (123). This inverted version of the traditional folk-tale gender trope-heavy description sums up the situation of Robin. The tension between the forces of genders as she oscillates between both but cannot be completely defined by neither is at least in once sense what defines Robin’s endless wandering. According to Harris, “Matthew uses the term “invert” to describe a state of vacillation – a blurring and confusion of genders within the subject – not a simple predominance of feminine over masculine or masculine over feminine.”⁷⁴ This makes Robin’s resemblance to Agdistis stand out, similarly to the parallels between Tiresias and Matthew, she also experiences a close connection to both genders and is seen as blurring in significant ways the line between traditional heteronormative gender binaries.

Artemis

Furthermore, it is not only Agdistis that could be used to better understand Robin’s androgyny but also a more famous goddess representing androgyny in the Pantheon – namely Artemis. This similarity appears explicitly in *Nightwood* when Matthew compares Robin to Diana, the Roman recreation of the Greek Artemis, widely associated with metamorphic myths and their literary representations from Antiquity on. “And Diane, where is she? Diane of Ephesus in the Greek Gardens, singing and shaken in every bosom” (124). Artemis was the goddess of many concepts, but the most important is that she was the goddess of animals, the moon and virginity, but also, perhaps surprisingly, childbirth.⁷⁵ There are several key instances in which Robin, given her wild and untameable nature, is seen as very close to animals, in a confrontational, hierarchic manner. “Robin walked the open country in the same manner, pulling at the flowers, speaking in a low voice to the animals. Those that came near, she grasped, straining their fur back until their eyes were narrowed and their teeth bare, her own teeth showing as if her hand were upon her own neck” (151). This closeness to animals and her apparent power over them which she all-too-eagerly uses, allows her to communicate with them, and even the fact that she is described as a beast could hint at the fact that animals respect her not only because she is higher in the food chain (after all, animals would normally hide from a predator rather than

⁷⁴ Harris, “The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” 242.

⁷⁵ Bell, *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary*, 70.

come to be petted and subdued at will). This aspect of Robin's association with animalistic aspects of her own personality and her performance in society and in nature will be explored in more detail in the last chapter.

Going through the possible parallels between Robin and the Greek goddess of the hunt, Artemis's association with the moon is comparable to Robin's association with the night in general. The night is the time of the day when Robin is most active and where she goes wandering to explore, feeling at liberty. As Jeanette Winterson crucially states in the preface to this edition of *Nightwood*: "It is to this world that Robin Vote is drawn; the night-time world, where she will not be judged, and where she can find the anonymity of a stranger's embrace."⁷⁶

Artemis is said to possess a tendency towards masculine expressions. "Artemis certainly had an undeniably masculine nature in all her manifestations,"⁷⁷ and this did not stop the men from pursuing her as "even so she was an object of male desire on more than one occasion."⁷⁸ Compared to Robin, her gender expression did not stop Felix from desiring her. Her inclination towards masculine objects is visible in the passage relating her fluid identity: "Sometimes she would sit at home all day, looking out the window or playing with her toys, trains, and animals and cars to wind up, and dolls and marbles and soldiers" (133), indicating her interest in what is perceived as stereotypically boy's toys, such as soldiers and trains and cars.

Tiresias and Agdistis and their associated myths both challenged the heteronormative understanding of the gender binary. Similarly, in *Nightwood*, it is Matthew and Robin whose androgyny is a prominent feature of their characterisation in the way they both blur the lines of stereotypical gender identity. Crucially, the novel predicts the future progress in contemporary gender studies as it "anticipates the theorization of gender as performance."⁷⁹ The comparison with both Tiresias and Agdistis then help in understanding the complexities of both Robin and Matthew and their tropical parallels with the substrate of Greek myth, and also show that in ancient cultures there were instances of queer identities – therefore making the vital point that gender fluidity is not by any means a construct originating from or isolated in our own contemporary age. Matthew is born a male who also wants to express himself without the constraints placed upon his appearance and assigned sexual and gender identity, and his crossdressing in private is the only way he can fulfil his longing for femininity. This experience

⁷⁶ Jeanette Winterson, foreword to *Nightwood* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), xi.

⁷⁷ Bell, *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary*, 72.

⁷⁸ Bell, *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary*, 72.

⁷⁹ Harris, "The Third Sex: Figures of Inversion in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," 254.

of having lived in multiple genders links him to Tiresias, and it is also the thing that helps him understand the complex problems of people around him independently of their gender. His knowledge and experience then elevate him to the position of the seer of *Nightwood* as his counsel and foretelling abilities are comparable to the ones of the seer of Thebes.

Robin experiences a similar characterisation but with significant differences. She also blurs the line of stereotypical gender identities but does so in a way that is not similar to Matthew. She does not hide her inclination towards masculinity in the same way Matthew does hide his inclination towards femininity. Furthermore, there is no insight into what Robin is feeling, it can be only estimated that she does not care so much for the gender constraints concerning her clothes. She cares about the role of a mother that is placed upon her because of her anatomical constitution and the pressure of society. Paradoxically, the way to free herself from those pressures is by giving birth to a child, thus fulfilling the task expected of her by her husband, and then leaving and gaining liberty. Agdistis experienced living with both gender identities and also regained power through her child though in a more mythical enmeshed manner based on her curtailed hermaphrodite identity. Moreover, her androgyny is seen as something of a wild and beastly nature. In a key point of comparison, those two last words, “wild” (33) and “beast” (33) are also used when Barnes describes Robin.

Metamorphoses

The last chapter will deal with the evaluation of how the aspect of metamorphosis manifests itself in *Nightwood*. Metamorphoses are a process that is very much connected to the abilities of the deities, furthermore the characters of *Nightwood* undergo frequent changes of state and mental state that can be interpreted through metamorphoses. The focus here will be on a phenomenon called therianthropy – the ability to change from human form to animal form. In Greek mythology this type of metamorphosis occurs frequently and represents a fundamental part of the abilities of the gods. Greek gods were connected to animals, controlling and wielding their various faculties in tricking their fellow gods and controlling humanity (Europa and the bull and Leda and the swan are just the most famous examples of Zeus’ amorous escapades in animal form), and the gods were mostly the ones that had the power to shapeshift.⁸⁰ There are two main modes of metamorphoses – one happens without the subject’s knowing, and the second one is a deliberate and conscious metamorphosis of the subject.⁸¹ Metamorphoses in

⁸⁰ Chiara Thumiger, “Metamorphosis: Human into Animals,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classic Thought and Life*, ed. Gordon Lindsay Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 384-5.

⁸¹ Thumiger, “Metamorphosis,” 385.

Nightwood fall under the category of the first mode. In view of the fact that the subject of metamorphosis here is Robin Vote, whose thoughts are inaccessible to the reader, the only glimpse of figurative metamorphosis is presented through the eyes of other characters who perceive Robin's changing animal-like features. It is important to investigate these changes as they are complementary to understanding the psychology of characters, as Chiara Thumiger in her chapter on the subject included in *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classic Thought and Life* writes: "In an existential or psychological perspective metamorphosis is shaped both as a form of constraint and condemnation, and an opening, a revelation of hidden sides of one's personality."⁸²

Robin, even though she is manifestly human, is throughout the book described with increasingly animal attributes such as having the "iris of a wild beast who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye" (33). For Laura Oulanne in "Affective Bodies: Nonhuman and Human Agencies in Djuna Barnes's Fiction," Robin is a mixture of a plethora of different atavistic attributes. She states that "Robin could be read as symbol of the animal, non-linguistic, and unconscious sides in the human, or as a catalyst for other characters' desire and pain – or as a type, of perhaps a decadent modern 1920's bisexual."⁸³ Juliana Schiesari in her book *Polymorphous Domesticities: Pets, Bodies and Desire in Four Modern Writers* tries to describe the symbolic importance of these bestial descriptions.

More than the mediator of desire, the beast in *Nightwood* is a powerful transformer of social, sexual, and psychical identity. [...] Robin is that beast, figured as what de Lauretis describes as "an excess of affect or unbound psychic energy... a figure of sexuality as an undomesticated, unsymbolizable force."⁸⁴

Robin is not only untameable, and undomesticated, as Schiesari suggests, she is also unattainable for the other characters. She is always on the move from one place to another. She is in a "constant flight like the bird signalled by her first name."⁸⁵ As her name suggest, she symbolizes a bird, most probably *Turdus migratorius*, the American robin. The name even accentuates her behaviour of changing places and partners. Throughout the book Robin

⁸² Thumiger, "Metamorphosis," 385.

⁸³ Laura Oulanne, "Affective Bodies: Nonhuman and Human Agencies in Djuna Barnes's Fiction," *On_Culture*, no. 2 (Dec 2016): 14.

⁸⁴ Juliana Schiesari, *Polymorphous Domesticities: Pets, Bodies and Desire in Four Modern Writers* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 30.

⁸⁵ Schiesari, *Polymorphous Domesticities*, 30.

migrates from one lover to another, unable to settle down in one spot with one person. Furthermore, the possible relationships with Felix, Jenny, and Nora, as described in the earlier chapters, seem to be a series of cages that entrap her every time she enters a relationship with any of them. In Greek mythology, birds were a frequent object of metamorphoses.⁸⁶ Robin is seen in the company of “unseen birds” (30) right in the first instance where the text introduces the reader to her character. Apart from the bird imagery which, broadly speaking, symbolizes flight, flightiness, mobility and fluidity in the novel, Robin is compared to a beast, as she is a “beast turning human” (33), which presents a complex set of further questions.

Being a “highly aestheticized beast,”⁸⁷ there are hints at her similarities with animals, thanks to her untameable and feral nature. Schiesari states that “Robin as a principle is precisely what resists domestication of any kind, as undomesticable as the wild eland or mythical unicorn.”⁸⁸ In *Nightwood* she is not only compared to animals like an eland, a type of antelope (34), but also compared to mythical creatures, such as a unicorn (34). This means that her character evokes the sense of exotic and skittish, elusive animals, suggesting her marked difference in society and her private and solitary nature. She invariably stands out among the rest. This is clearly emphasized by the fact that the second animal comparison is to a mythical, unreal and elusive creature. The fact that she emits this “one of a kind” characteristics of a mythical being might give reason as to why all the characters are so drawn to her presence – her essential difference, imbued with a series of complex mythical allusions, is compelling. As in metamorphosis myths, animals, too, seem to be completely drawn to Robin, not only humans.

The devotion of wild, rare animals to Robin is clearly visible in the scene where she first meets Nora, in a circus.

Then as one powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite the girl, she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface (49).

The lioness focuses on Robin and the fact that the eyes of the lioness “flowed in tears” might suggest a silent communication between the two – their brief encounter is marked by intimacy and shared suffering. Robin almost infects the animals with the same passionate and instinctual desire as she does infect the humans.⁸⁹ This is not the only instance of her communication with,

⁸⁶ Thumiger, “Metamorphosis,” 389.

⁸⁷ Schiesari, *Polymorphous Domesticities*, 30.

⁸⁸ Schiesari, *Polymorphous Domesticities*, 31.

⁸⁹ Schiesari, *Polymorphous Domesticities*, 31.

but also her implacable control over, animals – towards the end of the book there is an even more explicit example of such capability:

Robin walked the open country in the same manner, pulling at the flowers, speaking in a low voice to the animals. Those that came near, she grasped, straining their fur back until their eyes were narrowed and their teeth bare, her own teeth showing as if her hand were upon her own neck (151).

Not only is this the showcase of her possible ability to communicate with animals, but it also demonstrates how her physical expressions appear to be similar to those of animals. She is showing her teeth, which suggests a feral demonstration of anger and her dominance over the realm of animals – she behaves as a mixture of a guardian and a predator. Those fleeting animalistic metamorphoses are mostly figurative, serving a symbolic purpose, but towards the end of *Nightwood* there is a famous instance of cyanthropy that hints at a metamorphosis in a psychological, literal sense.

In the last chapter where Nora's dog reunites Nora and Robin in a chapel, Robin turns into a dog. This scene is usually interpreted through the psychoanalytic lens, but the instance of shapeshifting is certainly not negligible. Robin starts approaching and then fighting the dog in a way that animals do, on all fours. "And down she went, until her head swung against his; on all fours now, dragging her knees. The veins stood out in her neck, under her ears, swelled in her arms, and wide and throbbing rose up on her fingers as she moved forward." (152) While fighting him, she "began to bark" (152) which hints at a possible species dysphoria, where she chooses to limit her human side and lets the animal side take over. Michael Davidson in "Pregnant Men: Modernism, Disability, and Biofuturity in Djuna Barnes" mentions that Robin blurs the lines between human and animal and notes that "Robin's much analysed imitation of a dog seems less a sign of her lesbian abjection, as critics have said, than a fulfilment of O'Connor's injunction to Nora to 'bow down' to an animal nature her rational human nature repudiates."⁹⁰ The book then ends with wrath and weeping, as Matthew O'Connor predicted (149), with Robin and the dog lying on the ground, completely exhausted. What is happening in the scene with the dog is the process of change into an animal – she goes back to some primal innate state that is completely unchained (unlike her human form). Being a feral animal helps her unleash a certain part of her personality that stayed hidden to the reader and perhaps to the other characters as well, potentially unknown even to herself. As mentioned earlier, Robin does not present herself as a very active person – she almost does not speak, there is very little if any

⁹⁰ Michael Davidson, "Pregnant Men: Modernism, Disability, and Biofuturity in Djuna Barnes," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 2 (July 2010): 220, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-2010-001>.

insight into her feelings, but this instance shows her in a completely different light.

This last scene emphasizes the powerful ambiguity of Robin's personality – throughout the novel, she blurs the line between sexes and genders, and on top of that, the line between human and nonhuman. Schiari calls her a transgendered, transgenerational and trans-species being.⁹¹ Oulanne argues that this proximity of human-nonhuman can be seen as an “empowering gesture” that shows the emerging proximity of the two and their “affective potential.”⁹² For Ovid and his principal text *Metamorphoses* the changes in form mean “an ultimate interruption of communication with the world outside, and a sense that being an animal is, ultimately, a ‘being in a foreign place’.”⁹³ This reality resonates in the solitary nature of Robin and provides possible clues as to why the other characters are unable to make sense of her. She is a sort of shapeshifter in almost every aspect of her personality, she is simply “outside the ‘human type’” (131). The famously shocking conclusion of Barnes's novel could hint that Robin is thus a hybrid, or rather a chimera.

The chimera was a hybrid creature in Greek mythology – in the *Iliad* she is described as a being “of divine stock, not of men, in the fore part a lion, in the hinder a serpent, and in the midst a goat, breathing forth in terrible wise the might of blazing fire.”⁹⁴ Thanks to her distinct hybrid features, the chimera soon became a general term denoting a heterogeneous being.⁹⁵ Most importantly for this chapter, the word chimera also means “an illusion or fabrication of the mind, especially: an unrealizable dream,”⁹⁶ which precisely fits what Robin really seems to be in the novel. In her core she is a heterogeneous being, consisting of different ambiguous identities (whether it be gender, sexuality, humanity, animality). This way she resists any attempts at classification and presents herself as an enigma to all the characters (human or nonhuman), including the reader. Furthermore, as she has a chameleon-like character she can fit whatever image someone has of her, thus making her an eternal illusion, a chimera in the metaphoric sense. Felix realizes this by saying: “I find that I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time. I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing” (100). That is because to the other people who try to interpret her Robin is everything and nothing at the same time, and for that reason, she cannot be pinned down to one single form – she is in a state of constant

⁹¹ Schiesari, *Polymorphous Domesticities*, 33.

⁹² Oulanne, “Affective Bodies,” 14.

⁹³ Thumiger, “Metamorphosis,” 407.

⁹⁴ Homer. *The Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray, Ph.D., (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1924) 6.180-185.

⁹⁵ Amy Hinterberger “Marked ‘h’ for human: Chimeric life and the politics of the human,” *BioSocieties*, no. 13 (June 2018): 455, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41292-017-0079-7>.

⁹⁶ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “chimera,” accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chimera>.

change. Barnes thus presents us with a compelling set of insistent questions that unwaveringly interrogate the issue of identity on all levels, rendering any sense of a binary paradigm obsolete and useless.

Using the mythological method in reading *Nightwood* clearly shows the extent of Barnes's artistic abilities and the symbolic layers that comprise the work. She hints at various aspects of ancient myths to showcase the topics and issues that are current in the society of the early 20th century, where the mythical substrate becomes an integral part of the narrative. In our reading, the myths are there as threads that help weave a cobweb of labyrinthine personalities and plots together into a more comprehensible union. Moreover, the myths highlight that the marginalized communities of different genders and sexualities indeed do have a foundation in ancient stories and that these archetypes are still present. Though the mythological method is frequently used by the modernists, it can be argued that the extent to which Barnes uses mythology is unparalleled and can perhaps be compared in its allusive variety and stylistic and linguistic play to Joyce's *Ulysses* in the careful creation of mythical subnarratives, even though their respective approach to myth is divergent in other respects.

Conclusion

What is evident from any reading is that Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* is a work of art that lends itself to a wide scope of possible interpretations, ranging from psychoanalysis, through occultism and even mythology. However, reading *Nightwood* through the prism of Greek mythology specifically, has not inspired critical interest, which is what this thesis is trying to rectify, at least partially. A full-fledged mythological reading of Barnes's book would amount to hundreds of pages, which is why a selection of the most relevant was crucial for the purposes of this thesis, though it also meant omitting other aspects that would have been worth exploring.

The mythological method of reading this experimental modernist text through a series of comparisons with the selected deities and creatures of Greek mythology served a number of different purposes. Barnes elevates the symbolic allusions to various myths with a careful addition of key changes that make it more relevant to the reality of the early 20th century, which shows the interpretative flexibility and applicability of myths but also the need of modernity to mix and match these existing traditions in order to make sense of its emergent contemporaneity and, inversely, to keep these traditions relevant. Furthermore, due to the enigmatic characteristics of *Nightwood*, tracing its wide range of possible mythological echoes and resonances presents itself as a useful interpretive tool that helps to clarify or at the very least amplify certain aspects and behaviours of the world of *Nightwood* wherefrom we may glean meaning.

As sexuality and gender are key features of *Nightwood* that relate to the archetypes of Greek gods, a comparative juxtaposition helped demonstrate their interspersed, complex nature and the many diverse ways in which the questions of identity, and sexuality and gender politics in particular, abide within the expanse of the Western tradition... In the first chapter the main concerns were the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the personalities of Tiresias, Agdistis, and a brief mention of Aphroditos and Artemis. The myth of Demeter and Persephone was contrasted to the relationships of Robin. Robin, being a constantly moving entity, kept getting abducted into binding relationships that triggered her instinctive response to move away into the night and seek liberty in the hands of other non-committal lovers. When Nora was with Robin it was precisely this nature of essential instability and fluidity that tormented Nora, who suffered, developing a growing anxiety concerning Robin. This archetypal portrayal also demonstrated that the relationship dynamic of the two strongly resembled a mother-daughter relationship that many critics state is frequent in lesbian relationships. *Nightwood* introduces

characters with different gender expressions than would be expected in the mainstream reality of Barnes's contemporary world, but which manifestly do exist in its liminal spaces – represented in the text by the circus, the artists' salons. Her main characters are a man who wants to become a woman and a woman who resists typical feminine roles and who dresses as a male. Doctor Matthew O'Connor, a gynaecologist by day and crossdresser by night was read through the role of *Nightwood's* Tiresias, with his abilities of a seer and the fact that he offered council to the love rigmaroles of other characters. Those are also the characteristics that compare him to the Bearded Aphrodite, or in other words, Aphroditos. Robin Vote, read through the characteristics of Agdistis and Artemis, is showed as an essentially androgynous character which, along with Matthew, blurs the lines of stereotypical gender expressions.

The last chapter focused on metamorphoses, as it is a frequent occurrence in Greek mythology but also because the characters of *Nightwood* itself as a whole and its central character, Robin, all seem to be undergoing a certain metamorphosis of their own and it goes as far as borderline cyanthropy, which leaves yet more questions in the wake of the novel's strange finale. Various metamorphic changes are frequent throughout the text and mostly concerning the characters' increasingly unstable mental states, and that is why metamorphoses function as a powerful symbolic element that helps to shine more light into the demeanour of the characters, as well as maintaining the connection to the symbolic substrate of myth in the novel.

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The title of this BA thesis uses a line from Sappho's 'Anactoria' (Barnard, Mary. *Sappho: A New Translation*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958).

