Interpretation of Myth in Jennifer Saint's Novel Ariadne

Nana Mukeria, PhD Candidate
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

Doi: 10.19044/llc.v12no1a5 http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v12no1a5

Submitted: 06 May 2025
Accepted: 09 June 2025
Published: 12 June 2025

Abstract

The current academic research project examines the reception of ancient myths in Jennifer Saint's 2021 debut novel, Ariadne, a contemporary English author. This study identifies the general patterns and principles of antiquity's reception within the novel, focusing on the main storyline - Ariadne's journey. The narrative is developed from the perspective of the main female characters - Ariadne and Phaedra. The study employs hermeneutic interpretation and comparative literary analysis to examine Saint's feminist reimagining of classical myth, analyzing how the novel reshapes traditional narratives through the lens of modern female experience. By comparing Saint's version with ancient and world literary adaptations of the myth, the research reveals the author's thematic emphasis on female agency, voice, and resistance. The analysis finds that Saint uses myth adaptation as a tool to critique patriarchal power structures and to center the emotional and psychological experiences of female characters. Her portrayal transforms classical figures like Theseus and Dionysus into symbols of masculine domination, while recasting Ariadne, Phaedra, and Pasiphaë with depth, sympathy, and modern resonance. This work represents the first academic study of Jennifer Saint's novel, which has not yet been translated into Georgian.

Keywords: Myth reception, Jennifer Saint, Ariadne, female perspective, contemporary literature

Introduction

The current academic research project aims to study the reception of ancient myths in Jennifer Saint's 2021 debut novel, Ariadne, a contemporary English author's work, to identify the general patterns and principles of antiquity's reception within it. Given the format of the work, I will primarily focus on the main storyline of the novel - Ariadne's journey - which I will refer to by the conventional term "the myth of Ariadne."

The narrative is developed from the perspective of the main female

characters - Ariadne and Phaedra. It is especially worth noting that Jennifer Saint's work has not yet been studied by literary critics or academic researchers - except for media reviews and a few interviews in which the author herself discusses the central themes of her novels. So far, none of her novels have been translated into Georgian, which is why all excerpts from the original text are translated by me, word-for-word. Naturally, these translations do not claim to be artistic or literary renditions.

This research primarily employs two methods: to reveal the central message of the novel and the author's interpretation of myth, I rely on the hermeneutic method; and through the comparative method, I compare the plot of Saint's novel with narratives of the myths presented in world literature. In the conclusion, I use an analytical research approach to explain the principles and motivations behind the author's reception of the myth of Ariadne. These methods are particularly well-suited to the study of myth reception, as they allow for both close textual interpretation and broader contextualization across time and literary traditions. The hermeneutic approach provides interpretive depth, uncovering layers of meaning in Saint's retelling, while the comparative method reveals how her narrative choices align with or diverge from classical and modern representations of the myth.

The main research question this study seeks to answer is: *How does Jennifer Saint reinterpret the myth of Ariadne in her novel, and to what extent does her retelling modernize the traditional narrative through contemporary literary and thematic frameworks?*

Based on this, the hypothesis is that: Saint's reinterpretation of the myth of Ariadne is shaped by a distinctly feminist perspective that emphasizes female voice, agency, and resistance, in contrast to the traditional patriarchal framing of classical sources.

The Myth of Ariadne and Classical Literature

It is widely known that the most popular version of the myth tells how Ariadne, having fallen in love with the Athenian prince Theseus, helped him defeat the Minotaur. She fled Crete with him, but Theseus, following the command of Dionysus, abandoned the sleeping maiden on the island of Naxos. Ariadne was later taken as a wife by the god Dionysus.

However, this relatively familiar and seemingly traditional version of the story actually emerged later in classical literature, as will be discussed below. It is important to recognize that the myth of Ariadne has survived in multiple variations, many of which differ significantly from one another.

Ariadne is already mentioned by Homer in the Iliad. In Book 18, it is noted that on the shield of Achilles, Hephaestus depicts a dance performed in a circular space, which resembles the dance taught by Daedalus to Athenian

youths and dedicated to Ariadne (Homer, Iliad, 18.590–592).

It is also worth noting that, according to Webster (1966), a fragment by Callimachus - where the Greek poet refers to the dance of a delicate maiden from Naxos, called Cydippe, described as "the dance of Ariadne" - likely alludes to the same circular dance mentioned by Homer. Based on this connection, Webster argues that the dance was ritualistic, symbolizing the awakening of the dormant forces of nature and vegetation.

In his Theogony, Hesiod presents the story of Ariadne's marriage to Dionysus. He writes that "golden-haired Dionysus made Minos's daughter, Ariadne of the lovely tresses and radiant beauty, his wife; and the son of Kronos, by his son's desire, granted her immortality and agelessness" (Theogony, 947–949).

Hesiod does not mention that this marriage took place on the island of Naxos, nor that Ariadne had been abandoned by Theseus, leaving open the possibility that the marriage may have occurred on Crete. For this reason, some scholars speculate that both Homer and Hesiod followed an earlier version of the myth, in which Ariadne and Dionysus were already lovers in Crete before Ariadne ever encountered Theseus. According to this version, Ariadne was punished with sudden death for her betrayal of Dionysus (Hernández de la Fuente, 2017).

Interestingly, in Hesiod's version, there is another explanation for Ariadne's abandonment by Theseus. According to this account, Theseus left Ariadne because he had fallen in love with Aegle, the daughter of Panopeus - an alternative Plutarch mentions in Theseus (Plut. Thes. 20.3–5). Plutarch notes that this version, in which the Athenian hero betrays his savior, was later removed from the epic - allegedly at the order of Pisistratus - to preserve the hero's reputation, possibly for political reasons. Instead, the abandonment of Ariadne was reinterpreted as being due to the divine will of Dionysus, who desired her as his bride (Webster, 1966).

This same version is also echoed in the Cypria, a poem from the Epic Cycle. There, Nestor recounts to Menelaus the stories of ill-fated wives and recalls the myth of Dionysus and the unfaithful Ariadne (Cypria, 4, as cited in West, 2003).

Based on this, scholars have established the view that there existed a so-called ancient "pre-Homeric" version of the myth, which is attested in the works of Homer, Hesiod, and the cyclic poets (Eisner, 1977).

In Apollonius of Rhodes's Argonautica (3.997 and following), Ariadne's betrayal of her family is mentioned - clearly intended as a parallel to Medea's betrayal, drawing a comparison between Theseus and Jason. It is also noted that Ariadne became favored by the gods.

For Diodorus Siculus (Library of History, 4.61.5), the fact that Dionysus took Ariadne from Theseus on Naxos is attributed directly to her

beauty. Elsewhere (5.51.4), the same author recounts that Theseus was warned in a dream to surrender Ariadne to Dionysus or the god would take her by force. Fearing this threat, Theseus chose to abandon her. Dionysus then found Ariadne and took her to Mount Drios, where the two disappeared forever and ascended together to dwell in the celestial realm.

Important information about the myth of Ariadne can also be found in Catullus's poem The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis, which primarily recounts the episode on Naxos involving Theseus and Ariadne. In the poem, the newly awakened Ariadne sees Theseus's ship sailing away across the sea and cries out in despair. She pleads with Jupiter to punish Theseus. Jupiter clouds Theseus's mind, causing him to forget his promise to Aegeus - to replace the black sails with white ones if he returns victorious. As a result, Aegeus throws himself to his death (Catullus, Carmen 64.100–105, trans. Banks).

Interestingly, the poem does not mention that Ariadne gave Theseus the sword and thread. It only states that she abandoned her homeland and followed him. As we can see, in Catullus's version, the marriage of Ariadne and Dionysus takes place not on Crete, but on the island of Naxos. The poem also does not explain the reason for Ariadne's abandonment by Theseus.

It is noteworthy that Catullus's poem became something of a canonical version for Roman authors and had a significant influence on both his contemporaries and later generations of poets.

In Ovid's Heroides, the myth of Ariadne is mentioned three times. Later, Ovid returns to the myth again in The Art of Love, where he describes the encounter between Ariadne and Dionysus on the island of Naxos. In one passage from Book I of the work, he depicts Ariadne weeping and lamenting after being abandoned by Theseus.

A compilation, summary, and commentary on the various versions of the myth is found in the chapter Theseus from Plutarch's Lives, where the author attempts to bring the stories about Theseus closer to historical reality. Plutarch begins his account of Theseus's Cretan adventures by explaining why the Athenian prince set out to fight the Minotaur. He recounts the story of the murder of Minos's son, Androgeus, in Attica - a crime that led Minos to declare war on Athens and bring much suffering upon its people. The gods, too, punished Attica: famine, drought, and plague ravaged the land.

Through oracles, the Athenians learned that divine wrath could only be appeased by reaching an agreement with King Minos. Athenian envoys then pleaded for peace, and Minos agreed under the condition that every nine years Athens would send seven young men and seven maidens to Crete. This is confirmed by all major sources. According to some historians, as Plutarch reports, the Minotaur devoured the youths; others believed they were lost in the labyrinth and perished there.

Plutarch also presents the view of a certain Philochorus, who claimed that the Cretans explained the events differently. According to them, the labyrinth was a prison from which no one could escape. Minos gave the captured youths as prizes to the winners of athletic games held in honor of his deceased son. The victor of the first contest was a general named Taurus, infamous for his cruelty. Plutarch notes that the Athenian youths were not killed but used as slaves.

This latter version, as conveyed by Plutarch, has since been thoroughly examined and confirmed by modern scholarship (Powell, 1998).

According to Plutarch, when Theseus arrived in Athens and King Aegeus recognized him as his heir, it was the third time the tribute to Minos was due, and the Athenians were required to send their children to be chosen by lot. This tribute was to be paid until the death of the Minotaur. The people of Athens were furious with Aegeus, cursing him for the loss of their children, and they also resented the fact that an illegitimate son would inherit the Athenian throne.

In response, Theseus decided to sail to Crete without drawing lots, choosing instead to share the fate of his fellow Athenians.

According to Plutarch, the historian Hellanicus claimed that it was not the city of Athens that selected the youths by lot, but rather that Minos himself made the selection - and it was Minos who chose Theseus. Traditionally, as a sign of mourning, the Athenians would equip the tribute ship with black sails. Theseus promised his father that he would defeat the Minotaur, and in return, Aegeus gave him a white sail, instructing him to raise it on the return journey as a signal of victory. According to Plutarch, the poet Simonides believed that the sail should not have been white but red.

Before departing, Theseus offered a sacrifice to Apollo at Delphi, where the god advised him to choose Aphrodite as his guide. Upon arriving in Crete, Theseus fell in love with Ariadne, who gave him a thread to help him escape the labyrinth. With it, the Athenian prince was able to kill the Minotaur and escape with Ariadne and the other rescued youths, setting sail for Athens.

According to another version of the myth, Theseus participated in a competition organized by Minos in honor of his deceased son. There, he defeated the brutal general Taurus, who was rumored to have had an affair with Pasiphaë. Minos was so pleased by the defeat of the hated Taurus that he freed the Athenian youths and released Athens from its tribute.

Regarding the escape of Theseus and Ariadne from Crete, Plutarch notes that there are several contradictory accounts. According to one version, Ariadne hanged herself after being abandoned by Theseus. In another version, she was left behind by sailors on the island of Naxos, where she later married Dionysus's priest, Oenarus. As mentioned earlier, the reason

for her abandonment was Theseus's infatuation with another woman - specifically, Aegle, the daughter of Panopeus.

The myth of Ariadne remained popular even in Late Antiquity, as evidenced by its appearance in Nonnus's epic Dionysiaca. In Book 47 (Dionysiaca 47.265–471), it is told that Dionysus arrives on the island of Naxos and sees Ariadne asleep. Enchanted by her beauty, he instructs his companions to be cautious not to wake her. When Ariadne awakens, she searches for Theseus, but his ship is already far out to sea. It is revealed that Minos's daughter had dreamed of marrying Theseus, but reality turned out quite differently - her lover had cruelly abandoned her while she was still a virgin.

It is noteworthy that Dionysiaca presents a different version of Ariadne's death, which occurs as the result of a tragic accident. Persuaded by Hera, Perseus confronts Dionysus in battle. During the fight, Perseus unintentionally turns Ariadne to stone using Medusa's head. Dionysus is ready to kill Perseus and destroy the city of Argos, but Hermes calms him, explaining that, by the will of the gods, Ariadne has been taken up to the heavens and transformed into a constellation (Nonnos, 1940, p. 423).

Thus, even in antiquity, multiple and often conflicting versions of the myth of Ariadne and Theseus existed - versions that presented the narrative, characters, and their roles in the story's development in very different ways.

The Myth of Ariadne in Post-Antique Literature

In post-antique literature, one of the first figures from the Ariadne myth to reappear is Minos, King of Crete, who features in two passages of Dante's Divine Comedy, specifically in Inferno (V, 4–24; XXVII, 124–127). The reason is clear: Dante Alighieri draws heavily on Virgil's Aeneid. In Inferno, unlike in the Aeneid, Minos is portrayed as a demonic figure with a serpent's tail who judges the damned. The number of times he wraps his tail around himself corresponds to the circle of Hell into which each soul is cast. He is depicted as "fearsome and enraged," listening to the confessions of the sinners.

Dante does not specify whether the Minotaur has a human head and a bull's body or the reverse, but he emphasizes the beast's savage and animalistic rage. According to Dante's retelling, the myth unfolds as follows: Pasiphaë, the wife of King Minos of Crete, fell in love with a beautiful white bull and asked Daedalus to construct a "false cow" (XII.12–13) in which she could conceal herself to mate with the bull. Daedalus complied, and from this union, the Minotaur was born. Minos then ordered Daedalus to build a labyrinth to imprison the monster.

To punish the Athenians for killing his son, Minos demanded that seven Athenian boys and seven Athenian girls be sacrificed to the Minotaur

each year. When Ariadne fell in love with Theseus (XII.16–18), they devised a plan to kill the creature. Theseus entered the labyrinth with a sword and a ball of thread, killed the Minotaur, and found his way out.

Between the 14th and 17th centuries, the figure of Ariadne gradually gained greater significance. In Geoffrey Chaucer's The Legend of Good Women, written around 1380, Ariadne appears as the sixth woman in the sequence. Although her story and the reasons for her virtue are not recounted in detail, elsewhere in the poem Chaucer notes that "Bacchus greatly honored Ariadne, because he loved her dearly" (Percival, 1998).

In The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne (1490), a poem by Lorenzo de' Medici, which centers on the Naxos episode of the myth, Ariadne is depicted as a noble young woman who truly deserves happiness and ultimately marries an Olympian god.

Scholars have observed that just prior to the flourishing of painting and literature in the Quattrocento, a new era begins - one that focuses on the Naxian episode of the myth. This period is often referred to as the Age of Ariadne (Hernández de la Fuente, 2017 p. 259).

Indeed, during the Renaissance, the Naxos episode became the most popular part of Ariadne's narrative. The theme of romantic betrayal is central to the poem Theseus and Ariadne by the late 16th-century Spanish poet Juan de Arguijo. A lover of Horace and a poet deeply inspired by classical mythology, Arguijo dedicated many sonnets to various mythological figures. He follows the Roman version of the myth, in which Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus on the island, suffers deeply and pleads with the gods to avenge her betrayal (Arguijo, 1841).

Another notable example is Lope de Vega's 1621 dramatic work The Cretan Labyrinth, where the myth's characters undergo a kind of "Hispanicization." In the play, Ariadne and Phaedra disguise themselves as men and arm themselves with swords. In this version, the lovers - Phaedra and Theseus - abandon the sleeping Ariadne on the island of Naxos.

Following the Renaissance, interest in the myth of Ariadne intensified significantly at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The main catalyst for this renewed fascination was the discovery of Knossos in 1900 through the excavations of Arthur Evans, as well as the myth's philosophical and psychological reinterpretation in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Jung, and Sigmund Freud. Due to the scope of this research project, we will not dwell in detail on the early 20th-century philosophical perspectives.

Both Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud viewed the Minotaur as a manifestation of chaos, although they proposed very different approaches to dealing with it. Freud believed that the individual must fight and conquer this inner beast, whereas Nietzsche argued that one must accept this primal force and learn to coexist with it. In the second part of Beyond Good and

Evil ("The Free Spirit"), Nietzsche writes that a person enters the labyrinth of life - a space filled with trials - becomes increasingly estranged, and if they are unable to coexist with this hardship, they will ultimately be torn apart by the Minotaur of their conscience (Nietzsche, 2020).

Russian literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries also offers noteworthy interpretations of the myth of Ariadne. Anton Chekhov is the first Russian author in whose work the myth appears in a particularly interesting form of reception. Although the story is titled Ariadne, its plot diverges significantly from the traditional narrative of the myth. The action takes place in contemporary Russia of Chekhov's time.

Ariadne is portrayed as an outwardly attractive young woman who is admired by two men. One of them, Lubkov, represents Dionysus in the story - he captivates her with masculine boldness, cynicism, and pragmatism. These are qualities that the idealistic Shamokhin - Theseus's counterpart - lacks. Shamokhin falls in love with Ariadne and worships her like a goddess. However, once he comes to understand her true nature, he is left disillusioned (Chekhov, 1974–1983).

Scholars have noted that in Chekhov's story, Ariadne's thread becomes a symbolic guide that leads the idealistic Shamokhin through a labyrinth of vulgarity, sin, and moral degradation - from which he ultimately escapes, becoming a misogynist (Odesskaya, 2010). Particularly noteworthy is Marina Tsvetaeva's five-act tragedy Ariadne, written in Prague in 1924. While the content of the play closely follows the so-called "Roman" version of the myth, scholars have observed that the poet approaches the myth of the Minotaur and the symbol of the labyrinth from a unique perspective (Knyaz, 2013). Tsvetaeva assigns a liberating power to Ariadne - she acts in the interest of the Minotaur, as the labyrinth is portrayed not simply as a structure, but as a symbol of darkness, death, and imprisonment for the lonely monster. Ariadne aids Theseus not only for his sake but also because she believes that by helping him, she is also helping the Minotaur, for whom death represents freedom - the only true escape from the labyrinth (Trifonova, 2019).

We believe that Tsvetaeva's verse drama, a retelling of the Greek myth from a woman's perspective, is especially relevant to our project, since, as noted in the introduction, Jennifer Saint also presents the story in her novel Ariadne through the lens of female experience.

It is interesting to note that the idea of the Minotaur as a marginalized figure - a kind of societal outcast and sacrificial victim - appears in other works of world literature as well. Among these, we consider two to be especially significant: Jorge Luis Borges's short story The House of Asterion (1946) and Julio Cortázar's dramatic poem The Kings.

In Borges's The House of Asterion, the myth is retold from the

perspective of Asterion - the Minotaur himself. He is condemned to eternal solitude. A dying man once prophesied to him that a liberator would come one day, and Asterion waits for this moment with growing anticipation, wondering whether his savior will be a bull or a man. At the end of the story, the narration shifts from the first to the third person, as Theseus speaks to Ariadne: "Do you believe it, Ariadne?" said Theseus. "The Minotaur scarcely defended himself" (Borges,1946, p 140)

Scholars have repeatedly pointed out that by retelling the myth from the Minotaur's point of view, Borges seeks to humanize the creature (Bennett, 1999). Particularly compelling is the symbolic role of the labyrinth, one of Borges's favorite motifs: "The numerous labyrinths Borges constructs throughout his richly layered works are absolute intellectual structures, created by humans to mirror their disordered and chaotic existence" (Dauster, 1962, p 75).

In Julio Cortázar's version, the encounter between Theseus and the Minotaur in the labyrinth is interpreted in a particularly thought-provoking way. The Minotaur is not portrayed as a violent beast but rather as a naïve and innocent youth who attempts to engage Theseus in conversation. Theseus refuses, fearing that speaking with him would prevent him from carrying out the killing. He explains that his goal is not to kill the Minotaur as an individual but to destroy what the Minotaur represents.

Theseus tells the Minotaur that after the killing, he will find his way back to the sea using the thread Ariadne gave him. Here, the sea symbolizes freedom - both Theseus and the Minotaur compare Ariadne to this vast, liberating force. Cortázar presents their confrontation as a struggle for Ariadne's love. In the end, the Minotaur willingly sacrifices himself to Theseus in the hope that, through death, he might be reunited with the woman he loves:

"When the final bone breaks away from my flesh and my image fades into oblivion, I will truly be born in my endless kingdom... Ariadne, from the depths of your virgin soul I will rise again, like a brilliant blue dolphin. Like the free breath of wind, you longed for in vain. I am your hope! You will return to me"(Cortázar, n.d., para. 5).

Cortázar does not break from the traditional narrative of the myth - Theseus still emerges victorious in the battle. However, in the final act, it is revealed that within the labyrinth live all the people who were once sacrificed to the Minotaur by King Minos. These individuals now dwell peacefully in the Minotaur's kingdom and mourn his death deeply. One of them, a singer, speaks to the dying Minotaur: "How could we not mourn you? You filled us with grace in these secluded gardens. You helped us overcome the restless youth we carried with us when we entered this labyrinth... Who could understand our love for him? We will be forced to forget him... We

will have to lie, always lie, to repay this survival. Only in secret, in that hour when souls take their own path... What strange words you left us, master of all games!" (Cortázar).

This passage powerfully reimagines the Minotaur not as a monster, but as a wise and redemptive figure - one who offers refuge, transformation, and ultimately, sacrifice. In Cortázar's work, although Theseus triumphs physically over the Minotaur, he suffers a moral defeat (Frazier-Yoder, 2012).

Numerous stories and novels in the 20th century were dedicated to the myth of Ariadne. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze all of them, we believe it is worthwhile to conclude the discussion of 20th-century literature with a single example from Georgian literature. Archil Sulakauri's poem Minotaur, according to Ketevan Gardapkhadze, is "the only work in contemporary Georgian poetry that gives poetic embodiment to this particular myth" (Gardapkhadze, 2004, p. 91).

Sulakauri's Minotaur offers a compelling reinterpretation of the myth and can be considered a highly original take within modern literature (Gardapkhadze, 2004). Like Borges, Sulakauri tells the story in the first person, from the Minotaur's perspective. In the poem, the Minotaur, much like in Borges's work, suffers from deep loneliness as a result of being ostracized by society - viewed as different and alien to humankind.

Finally, we present a brief excursus into 21st-century literature. In Nino Haratischwili's 2014 play Phaedra on Fire, the myth of Ariadne appears right at the beginning, during Phaedra's opening monologue. Phaedra, who for twenty years has repressed her desires and identity while living in the shadow of her husband's heroic reputation, feels deeply unfulfilled. She delivers a harsh critique of Theseus's egotistical and womanizing nature. At this moment, she recalls her childhood and the happy moments spent with her younger sister, Ariadne, and begins to dream of starting her life anew.

In Haratischwili's version, the myth appears as it is told in Plutarch's retelling of the Hes iodic tradition: Ariadne helps Theseus, but he ultimately abandons her for Aegle. Theseus is depicted as a deceitful and power-hungry scoundrel, who tramples on the dignity and well-being of others to build and preserve his heroic image.

In Madeline Miller's 2018 novel Circe, several passages reference episodes related to the myth of Ariadne, drawing on Homeric tradition. The novel offers a reimagined portrayal of Pasiphaë, who is shown caring for the survival of her son, the Minotaur - viewing him as a means to gain recognition and power.

Thus, unlike the literature of classical antiquity, post-antique literature is characterized by the emergence of numerous new versions of the

Ariadne myth, featuring entirely fresh interpretations of both plot and character. Notably, by the end of the 20th century, female characters increasingly take center stage, moving from the roles of deuteragonists or even tritagonists into the position of protagonists.

Thus, to summarize the evolution of the myth in literature, we can draw the following conclusions: writers show a particular fascination with the figure of the Minotaur, who is transformed from a man-eating monster into a beautiful, harmonious being - an outcast, lonely, and philosophically reflective character portrayed as a sympathetic hero. Homer's "wise among kings" Minos gradually becomes a negative figure - a ruthless, power-obsessed despot driven by greed and tyranny.

The de-heroization of Theseus began as early as antiquity, especially in Roman literature, where his abandonment of Ariadne came to be equated with betrayal. Against this backdrop, the Minotaur's nobility (as seen in Borges, Cortázar, and Sulakauri) and Ariadne's helplessness and moral purity are thrown into sharper relief. Dionysus, for the most part, retains his ancient role as a savior figure. However, Chekhov's story stands apart in this regard, presenting a version of Dionysus stripped of intellectual depth, reimagined as an unequivocally negative character.

As for Ariadne, it is noteworthy that in the post-antique period - particularly in the works of several 20th-century authors - her pre-Homeric role as a traitor to her homeland, family, and lover (Dionysus) re-emerges in a transformed manner. In these retellings, Ariadne is no longer a betrayer of Dionysus, but rather of Theseus. In Kazantzakis's version, Ariadne is even portrayed as a spy for Minos, whose true aim is to stop Theseus. In Chekhov's interpretation, she appears as a mercenary and sensual woman who rejects the intellectual Theseus-Shamokhin in favor of the vulgar and corrupt Dionysus-Lubkov.

It should also be noted that in 21st-century literature, the narrative perspective of the Ariadne myth shifts - now being told from the viewpoint of female characters (e.g., in the works of Haratischwili and Miller). This narrative strategy contributes to a more sympathetic and nuanced portrayal of Ariadne, reinforcing her agency and moral complexity.

Analysis of the Ariadne Myth in Jennifer Saint's Novel

On the cover of the 2022 American edition of Jennifer Saint's Ariadne, we find a quote from Glamour magazine that reads: "If you loved Madeline Miller's Circe and The Song of Achilles, you'll devour Ariadne."

The novel opens with an epigraph taken from Ovid's Heroides - a poignant excerpt from Ariadne's letter to Theseus, in which she writes:

"And you sail toward your native Cecropia,
To gaze upon your people with pride,

To tell of your victory over the man and the bull,
On the carved paths of the palace.
Speak of me too - how you left me alone on the island.
Don't forget that heroic deed as well." (Nasoni, 2008, p. 88)

In our view, by including this epigraph, Saint signals her alignment with the version of the myth in which Ariadne is betrayed and abandoned by Theseus, and she builds the narrative around this very episode. The entire text of Ariadne is told in the first person, with two narrators - Ariadne and Phaedra. Due to the focus of our research project, we will concentrate primarily on the reception of Ariadne's myth, though we will also consider Phaedra's narrative in part.

In the first chapter of Ariadne, we find numerous references to classical sources that repeat well-known and relatively traditional elements of the myth, as well as rarer versions and some entirely new interpretations.

Examples of the traditional material include stories about the death of Minos's son, Pasiphaë's love for the sacred bull, and the figure of Daedalus. The narrative also integrates additional myths, such as those of Artemis and Orion, and Poseidon's tragic love for Medusa (Saint, 2022).

Jennifer Saint demonstrates a strong familiarity with the classical sources that reference the plague in Athens, caused by Minos's wrath - an episode attested in Catullus. In describing the details of the sacrifices (the annual offering of seven maidens and seven youths), the author appears to favor the versions found in Virgil and Dante. This choice likely serves to underscore the cruelty and severity of Minos.

It is also notable that several elements in the novel are based not only on literary sources but on archaeological evidence as well. For example, the pendant depicting bees - described in the first chapter as a gift from Daedalus to Ariadne (Saint, 2022) - is inspired by a real gold pendant dated to 1800–1650 BCE, discovered in Malia, Crete (Nelson, Mavrofridis, & Anagnostopoulos, 2020).

It is particularly noteworthy that Jennifer Saint is also familiar with scholarly literature related to the myth, which she skillfully weaves into the fabric of her narrative. For example, when Daedalus explains to Ariadne why he chose to depict bees on the pendant, his response subtly addresses a question explored in academic research: the role of bees in the religious and cultic practices, as well as the economic life, of Minoan Crete - an idea well-established in archaeological and historical studies (Marinatos, 1993).

In the second chapter of Jennifer Saint's novel, the description of the Minotaur's birth appears to be strongly inspired by a passage in Madeline Miller's Circe, where Pasiphaë's labor is described in vivid and detailed terms (Miller, 2020). A completely new element introduced by Saint is

Pasiphaë's magical abilities, which, in our view, are likely derived from her familial ties to Circe and Aeëtes. Greek mythology itself does not preserve any references to Pasiphaë possessing magical powers.

As the daughter of a despotic father and a half-mad mother who lives in the world of spells, Ariadne is portrayed as utterly alone, seemingly lacking any emotional attachment to her family or homeland. Her only source of joy is her sister, Phaedra, whom the author thoughtfully integrates into Ariadne's narrative. The inclusion of Phaedra in the context of Ariadne's myth is not unique to Saint; as noted earlier, we also see this narrative pairing in the works of Lope de Vega, André Gide, and Nino Haratischwili.

According to Saint's vision, Ariadne stands apart from the other Cretan women of her time - she is portrayed as a strong, independent character who is willing to question not only her parents' authority but also the actions of the gods themselves. She shows compassion toward Athens, the enemy of Crete, and views the monstrous Minotaur as a victim of circumstance and a tragic symbol of divine cruelty and cynicism.

Particularly striking is the parallel characterization of Ariadne and Phaedra. Ariadne is depicted as more reserved, innocent, and cautious, whereas the young Phaedra demonstrates greater boldness and bravery.

Daedalus in Ariadne assumes a role that partially overlaps with Ariadne's traditional function in the myth - it is he who offers her a solution and provides the red thread that enables Theseus to escape the labyrinth of his own design. In Madeline Miller's Circe, Daedalus also plays a significant role - not only as a master craftsman who captivates Circe with his artistic genius but also as a kind and loving man. In Saint's novel, the bond between Daedalus and Ariadne reflects a relationship she never experienced with her parents. In this sense, Daedalus may be seen as a narrative antithesis to Minos.

Jennifer Saint also provides one of the most distinctive descriptions of Medea's appearance. She is portrayed as a woman of astonishing beauty, yet also as a deeply unsettling and dangerous figure - something reflected in her serpent-like movements and speech. Her bronze-colored eyes, shared by Medea, Ariadne, and all descendants of Helios, appear to be inspired by Madeline Miller's depiction of Circe, whose eyes are also described in similar, striking terms.

In Chapter Eight of Ariadne, Theseus tells Ariadne that Androgeus was killed by the Pallantids, who sought to seize the throne of Athens, and that he avenged the murder. However, this does not align with the historical tradition. According to Diodorus Siculus, the Pallantids were friends of Androgeus, and it was Aegeus who, fearing that the Pallantids would ally with Minos, had Androgeus assassinated (Diodorus Siculus, 1939, 4.60).

Thus, Theseus is deliberately lying to Ariadne to gain her trust and secure her help.

In Chapter Fifteen, Theseus lies again - this time to Phaedra - claiming that Ariadne was killed by Artemis. This version of Ariadne's death, which Theseus attributes to Artemis's wrath, is based on a passage from Homer's Odyssey (Book 11), where it is said that Dionysus punished Ariadne for betrayal and had her put to death by Artemis. Jennifer Saint does not reference the element of betrayal in her retelling and selectively adopts only one part of Homer's account.

Significantly, Saint attributes Ariadne's death at Artemis's hands not to infidelity toward Dionysus, but to her betrayal of her homeland and father - an explanation that better suits the context of the novel. Theseus's later confession that he abandoned Ariadne because she had betrayed her family and homeland, comparing her to the traitorous Medea, finds a parallel in Apollonius of Rhodes's Argonautica (3.997 and following), where Ariadne is also described as having betrayed her kin.

In Chapter Sixteen, the story of the sailors being transformed into dolphins is based on the myth of Dionysus and the Tyrrhenian pirates. This myth has been interpreted in various ways across ancient literature, including in the Homeric Hymns, Euripides' Cyclops, Ovid's Metamorphoses, Seneca's Oedipus, Nonnus's Dionysiaca, and others (Kobakhidze, 2008). It is evident from Dionysus's narration that Jennifer Saint chooses Ovid's version, in which Dionysus is abducted by pirates.

In Chapter Seventeen, the tales Dionysus recounts - full of adventure, humor, and liveliness - stand in sharp contrast to Theseus's arrogant and self-aggrandizing monologues about his supposed heroics. One might argue that Saint deliberately presents Dionysus, with his sincerity and emotional openness, as a foil to the proud, deceitful, and superficial character of Theseus.

In Chapter Twenty-One, Dionysus's encounter with his deceased mother evokes a clear allusion to The Odyssey, Book 11, where Odysseus meets the shade of his mother, Anticleia, in the underworld. Just like Odysseus, who attempts in vain to embrace his mother's spirit, Dionysus tries to hold his mother, but she slips through his grasp. Homer writes: "Thrice I rushed forward, longing to embrace her, and thrice she slipped through my hands like a shadow or a dream" (Homer); while in Saint's version, Dionysus says: "And when I reached out to touch her arm, my fingers met only smoke" (Saint, 2022, p. 177).

An especially compelling moment in the novel is Dionysus's journey to the underworld - a scene that depicts his courageous self-sacrifice to save his mother, contrasted with the utter failure of Theseus. This episode serves as a turning point for Ariadne, marking the complete de-heroization of

Theseus in her eyes - a moment of disillusionment with the Athenian prince.

The events described in Chapters Twenty-Two through Twenty-Six, which focus on Phaedra's tragic love, are noteworthy in that Ariadne takes part in them - something absent from the traditional versions of the myth. It appears that Jennifer Saint intentionally weaves the stories of the two sisters into a single narrative thread, adding emotional depth and dramatic intensity to the plot.

Also significant is the confrontation between Dionysus and Perseus, which strips Dionysus of the divine qualities Ariadne once believed in and loved. His conflict with the women of Argos intensifies Ariadne's growing sense of despair. In Saint's version, this conflict is presented with heightened tragedy, as Ariadne reproaches Dionysus and realizes that she, once again, has been the victim of illusion.

Ariadne's death scene is also tragic. Jennifer Saint's version is based on Nonnus's Dionysiaca (47.658–688), where Perseus turns Ariadne to stone using Medusa's head.

Thus, in her retelling and interpretation of the myth, Jennifer Saint draws primarily from classical authors such as Homer, Hesiod, Euripides, Apollonius of Rhodes, Hyginus, Plutarch, Catullus, Virgil, Ovid, and Nonnus.

From post-antique literature, based on my observations, Saint seems to incorporate elements of reception from Dante, Lope de Vega, André Gide, Madeline Miller, and likely also from Marina Tsvetaeva and Nino Haratischwili.

At the same time, she adds new layers to her characters - most notably to Dionysus, who, for the first time in the context of this myth, is portrayed in a distinctly negative light. Pasiphaë also deserves attention, depicted here as a tragic mother who loves her monstrous son, the Minotaur. Ariadne's character is especially striking: by the end of the novel, she emerges from the illusion in which she has viewed her life and finally sees Dionysus for who he truly is.

Regarding the plot, it is worth emphasizing that Saint never follows literary sources to the letter. Instead, she selectively reshapes and reinterprets the stories and character dynamics - always with respect for the core structure and essence of the myth, but with the freedom to expand its emotional and psychological dimensions.

In addition to the well-known episodes of the myth, Jennifer Saint introduces numerous previously untold stories in Ariadne. These include the Minotaur's childhood, Pasiphaë mourning the loss of her son, Phaedra's life in Athens before her encounter with Hippolytus, the childhood of Ariadne and Phaedra, Minos as both father and husband, and - most significantly - the life Ariadne and Dionysus share after their marriage on the island of Naxos,

which is explored in several extended passages throughout the novel.

Conclusion

Jennifer Saint demonstrates a deep familiarity with ancient mythology and its post-antique receptions, yet she does not treat them as a rigid or dogmatic paradigm. She freely alters episodes of the myth, adds new details, expands the plot, and enriches the narrative through original interpretations. The author places particular emphasis on female characters and the world as seen through their perspective - a world that, in my observation, is divided into two often opposing realms: that of men and that of women. In the novel, women are cast in the role of victims; their freedom and agency are suppressed by the ambitions and vanity of tyrannical fathers, husbands, and brothers.

Notably, the distinction between mortals and gods dissolves in this regard, as demonstrated by the characters of Theseus and Dionysus. At first, Dionysus seems superior to Theseus in every way, but he ultimately becomes a mirror image of the Athenian hero - a kind of divine alter ego. Likewise, although Theseus opposes the tyranny and cruelty of Minos, he replicates similar behavior in his treatment of Ariadne and Phaedra.

Accordingly, Saint selects versions of the myth that align with her conceptual framework and uses additional details to further highlight her characters' defining traits. Thus, the Minotaur becomes a merciless monster who is bloodthirsty from birth; Minos, a tyrant hiding behind the mask of justice; Theseus, a self-serving, egotistical traitor obsessed with personal glory; and Dionysus, a god who craves honor and power but lacks compassion.

In contrast, the female figures are portrayed with greater depth and sympathy: Pasiphaë is a tragic mother, a victim of divine cynicism and her husband's failures; Ariadne is a naïve and trusting idealist, betrayed and emotionally shattered by an ungrateful Theseus and a proud Dionysus; and Phaedra is forced into marriage with Theseus by her brother Deucalion and kept in spiritual captivity.

Despite maintaining the original myth's setting, timeframe, characters, and core plotline, Saint's novel is both original and distinctly modern, as it resonates with pressing contemporary issues - such as violence, femicide, and the systemic disempowerment of women. By infusing her narrative with a feminist spirit, Saint uses one of antiquity's most well-known myths - the myth of Ariadne - to draw powerful parallels between gendered injustice in ancient times and in today's society. In my view, the author achieves this aim with great success, as evidenced by the novel's wide readership and popularity.

Declarations

Funding statement: The author did not obtain any funding for this research.

Data availability: All the data are included in the content of the paper.

Competing interest statement: The author reported no conflict of interest.

Additional information: No additional information is available for this paper.

References:

1. Arguijo, J. de. (1841). *Poesías*. Sociedad de Bibliófilos Españoles.
2. Bennett, M. J. (1999). Borges's *The House of Asterion*. *The Explicator, 50*(3), 166–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.1992.9937945
3. Borges, J. L. (1946). *The House of Asterion* (B. Arabuli, Trans.). https://litagora.ge/2017/08/16/borges/
4. Chekhov, A. (1974–1983). *Ariadne*. In *Collected works* (Vol. 9). Nauka.
5. Cortázar, J. (n.d.). *The Kings (Los Reyes)* (C. Svich, Trans.). *InTranslation, Brooklyn Rail.* https://intranslation.brooklynrail.org/spanish/the-kings-los-reyes/ (Accessed August 19, 2024)
6. Dauster, F. (1962). Notes on Borges' *Labyrinths*. *Hispanic Review, 30*(2), 142–148. https://doi.org/10.2307/472089
7. Diodorus Siculus. (1939). *Library of history* (Vol. 4). Loeb Classical Library.
8. Eisner, R. (1977). Ariadne in Naxos. *The Classical Journal, 72*(3), 175–177.
9. Frazier-Yoder, A. (2012). The "incessant return" of the Minotaur: Jorge Luis Borges's *La Casa de Asterión* and Julio Cortázar's *Los Reyes*. *Variaciones Borges, 34*, 85–102.
10. Gardapkhadze, K. (2004). Archil Sulakauri's *Minotaur* and Borges's *The House of Asterion*. *Logos, 2*, 88–95.
11. Hernández de la Fuente, D. (2017). Dionysus and Ariadne in the classical tradition. In V. Zajko & H. Hoyle (Eds.), *A handbook to the reception of classical mythology* (pp. 117–131). Wiley-Blackwell.
12. Homer. (1996). *The Odyssey* (R. Fagles, Trans.; B. Knox, Intro.). Penguin Books. https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/290045/the-odyssey-by-homer-translated-by-robert-fagles-introduction-by-bernard-knox/
13. Knyaz, L. (2013). The symbolic function of the labyrinth in

Tsvetaeva's *Ariadne*. *Russian Literature, 74*(1–2), 82–85.
14. Kobakhidze, I. (2008). The reception of the myth of Dionysus and the Tyrrhenian pirates. *Philologia, 8*, 73–78.
15. Marinatos, N. (1993). *Minoan religion: Ritual, image, and symbol*. University of South Carolina Press.
16. Miller, M. (2020). *Circe*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
17. Nasoni, P. O. (2008). *Heroides* (I. Gagua, Trans.). Logos.
18. Nelson, M., Mavrofridis, G., & Anagnostopoulos, A. (2020). The bee pendant from Malia: New perspectives. *Cretan Studies, 20*, 67–78. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003581520000475
19. Nietzsche, F. (2020). *Beyond good and evil*. Penguin Classics.
20. Nonnos. (1940). *Dionysiaca* (W. H. D. Rouse, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
21. Odesskaya, M. (2010). The reception of myth in Chekhov's *Ariadne*. *Chekhov Studies, 28*(2), 113–129.
22. Percival, F. (1998). *Chaucer's legendary good women*. Cambridge University Press.
23. Powell, B. B. (1998). *Myth and the polis*. Cornell University Press.
24. Saint, J. (2022). *Ariadne*. Flatiron Books.
25. Trifonova, I. (2019). *Marina Tsvetaeva's reimagining of classical mythology* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford).
26. Webster, T. B. L. (1966). *From Mycenae to Homer*. Methuen.
27. West, M. L. (2003). *Greek epic fragments*. Harvard University Press.