Who: Lilly Hinckley, a lowly undergraduate student, and **Madeline Miller**, American novelist and author of *Song of Achilles* and *Circe*. Her impressive list of achievements also includes being awarded the Orange Prize for Fiction (one of the United Kingdom’s most prestigious literary prizes) in 2012, and receiving an Alex Award (which recognizes adult books with special appeal for adolescents) in 2019. Location: a room on the second floor of the Efroymson Creative Writing Center. When: a sunny afternoon in September.

*So, to begin: I know you talked about this last night [at the Visiting Writers Series presentation], but could you tell me another brief summary of how you came to be a writer?*

I have loved writing since I was a child, and I read every book by writers on writing that I could get my hands on. You know, all the classics—Stephen King’s *On Writing* and Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* and *The Forest For the Trees* [by Betsy Lerner], and Ursula K. Le Guin *Steering the Craft*. This was pre-internet, to date myself, and so I would just go to the bookstore and buy whatever they had, or go to the library and take out whatever they had about writing. Mostly, I just read and read and read. That’s something Zadie Smith says that I really like. Someone asked her, how do you become a writer? She said something like, “Go back in time and read everything you can.” I read very widely as a child. I read everything from non-fiction to memoir to pulp to high literary fiction—and I just kept writing, mostly contemporary stuff, and mostly bad. But I kept at it. Then at the same time I was studying classics, and eventually I figured out that I wanted to put my writing and my love of classics together.

*And that was with the production of the play, right?*

Yes. I directed *Troilus and Cressida*, which is Shakespeare’s version of the *Iliad*—a terrific play—and it was a revelation to be a part of telling these stories that I loved. I had been teaching Greek mythology at a local
independent school, and I had begun editorializing, shaping the story, choosing between versions... but directing the play made me realize that I wanted to go further and write an adaptation myself—the story of Achilles and Patroclus. I had been so frustrated by the fact that the interpretation of them as lovers had been basically erased and closeted. I realized in that moment that the things I wanted to say about them I could better express in a novel than a master’s thesis.

Nice, that’s awesome! So, question number two: since this is a college magazine, I feel obliged to ask: how did your undergraduate and graduate studies influence your career as a writer? Did they help you?

So much, yes. I had some really outstanding classics mentors—Michael Putnam, Joseph Pucci—people who supported me from beginning to end and really invested in me as a student. I also took many eye-opening classes, particularly in classical literature and poetry. I feel like everything I know about close-reading I learned from reading Virgil with Michael Putnam. So aside from the subject matter, the classes taught me how to be a good reader, and being a good reader is instrumental to being a good writer, because you have to be able to notice what good writers are doing in order to be able to learn how to do it yourself. And the classics department was also small, and it was lovely to be part of such a passionate and tight-knit community of learners.

Hmm-hmm, that’s a lot like how it is here at Butler, too.

Yes.

That’s actually one of my other questions. It seems to me that classics as a field is shrinking every year. Do you have anything to say on the importance or relevance of classics in the world today?

I think it’s totally relevant. Culture has changed and technology has changed but people have not changed. Read any ancient text and you will see humanity in all its pride and folly and virtue. People will sometimes ask me, “How do you make these myths feel relevant?” But I feel that I don’t have to change anything, just allow what’s already there to bloom. Or maybe it’s more like pulling off the veil — the veil of time. Women have struggled with being belittled and undermined and abused for
millennia. *Circe* in the *Odyssey* is presented as a figure of anxiety about female power. She has the power to strip men of their selfhood. We still fear women’s power. We still like to “tame” them as Odysseus tames Circe in the *Odyssey*. One of the really exciting things about being a classics teacher is having students come on the first day, thinking “this is going to be boring,” and realizing that these stories are anything but boring—they are vital and resonant. One of the most startling experiences of my life was reading the *Philoctetes* and then going to visit my grandmother who had broken her hip and couldn’t get around. She was so frustrated by the limitations of her body and by the fact that she couldn’t do what she wanted to do, and she felt abandoned by some of her friends. That’s what *Philoctetes* is about. It’s all there.

*It’s still there. Yeah. Awesome. This next question goes along with that. In many of your interviews and in your presentation last night, you mentioned how Greek myths have a sort of timeless universality in what they tell us about humanity — and that’s something we would very much like to believe — but, clearly, there are flaws and missing perspectives in Homer, in Ovid. So, how do you grapple with that? And in your perspective, does that lessen the value of those works at all?*

I think it’s important to be really honest about it. I definitely don’t want to sugar-coat the fact that Briseis is being kept as a sex slave. There have been so many adaptations that take a romantic view, where Briseis falls in love with Achilles. But that’s a very disturbing interpretation. So I think we have to be willing to confront the things that are disturbing in the literature. It’s important to keep engaging with it honestly. And it’s extra important because these works are the foundation for so many later works of literature, from James Joyce to the *Penelopiad* to Shakespeare. It’s okay to be ambivalent about them, to love them and still be frustrated with them.

*Oh yeah, definitely. This is a more technical question, I suppose, but to what extent are your adaptations or re-tellings true to the original? How do you choose what to cut out and what to include? We already have the Iliad and the Odyssey, so why do we need books like *Circe* and *Song of Achilles* to tell us the story?*

The key thing is that there is no “original” for any of these stories.
You can talk about the earliest version, Homer’s version, but Homer is coming out of oral tradition anyway, so these were stories that had been told and re-told and re-told already, before they were crystalized into what we now know as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. And then immediately you have other authors riffing off of them, retelling them, from the tragedians to Ovid and Vergil, to the Christian authors after that. In other words, “adaptation” is baked into classics. It’s been there from the beginning. I think it shows the richness of the original material, that it can hold so many different perspectives. And it’s particularly important to think about the stories that are implied but not told—the silenced voices. There was a poll by the BBC which asked “What’s the greatest tale ever told?” and the winner was the *Odyssey*. Everyone loves Odysseus because he’s smart and he’s an underdog and he’s got a great wife. But he also has a violent temper. He’s very erratic. He is an aristocrat who thinks nothing of murdering slaves. He’s clearly struggling with multiple layers of trauma. In my opinion, it makes the work richer to include all of that. I am a firm believer in novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ideas about the danger of a single story. If we just tell one story, then that becomes objective truth, and it’s really important to hear from different voices and different perspectives.

*Hmm-hmm. I love that TED Talk. We see that in a lot of classes.*

Yes, it’s terrific.

*Now, going along with that... would you say you see yourself as part of a dialogue that’s been going on for thousands and thousands —*

Oh! I forgot to answer your question about how faithful I was being. Let me take a shot at answering that, and then I’ll answer this next one. I don’t think an adaptation has to be faithful to be successful. But I like to write close to Homer because I like to be in conversation with him, pushing back at moments, elaborating in others. I follow his basic structure, but I also change things. For example, my Circe does not kneel to Odysseus as she does in the *Odyssey*. I decided that that was Odysseus’s spin on the story (since he narrates the Circe section), and I didn’t have to consider it objective truth. Odysseus it the great liar of the ancient world, after all! It’s a constant balance—adhering to Homer, while giving myself freedom to follow what serves the story best. I am a
lot more relaxed about this than I used to be. With *The Song of Achilles*, my first novel, there were things I changed that I was very anxious about changing. My Briseis is a farmer’s daughter, rather than the princess that Homer makes her. And that was because I wanted to make room for the collateral damage of the Trojan War, the suffering of the non-aristocrats. How are the Greeks camped out there for ten years? It’s because they’re destroying all the Trojan farms in the area. So it was important to give voice to that experience. If I’m going to make a major change to Homer, it has to be something that is deeply felt.

*For a good reason.*

Exactly.

*Recently, Emily Wilson came out with a new translation of the Odyssey. Do you see any similarities between your work and hers? And, as a follow-up question: do you see yourself as a feminist and did you intend for Circe to be a piece of feminine literature?*

I think that she and I are both looking at these works and trying to find the silenced voices, and other perspectives. I love that she names the Cyclops chapter, “The Shepherd and the Pirate” — meaning Odysseus the pirate and the Cyclops the shepherd. She’s also looking at how we “otherize” people. Odysseus feels entitled to come in and loot the Cyclops’ land, and because he’s telling the story we go along with that view of the cyclops as villainous. But Odysseus is the one invading his land.

Emily Wilson and I are also both interested in the women that Odysseus orders to be killed at the end. For generations, they’ve been translated as “the maids.” The word in Greek “slave,” and using that word, “slave,” as Emily Wilson does, reminds us that this is a slave society—that Odysseus is a slave holder. And as much sympathy as we have for Penelope, she has it a lot better off than the slave women, who have no power at all. I think Emily Wilson is brilliantly attuned to all those things.

And yes, I call myself a feminist, and yes, definitely, I think *Circe* is a feminist work. To me that means that Circe is the center and subject of her own story, as opposed to being an object in Odysseus’ story. One
of the ways Odysseus describes her is having this beautiful, ornate hair. And he presents it as if she’s all dressed up in her fanciest outfit with her fanciest hair, just waiting for him to show up. That’s clearly a straight male fantasy of how women spend their time. In restoring subjecthood to her, I asked myself: why would “Circe of the beautiful braids” have braided her hair? Well, she spends all her time in the woods, she’s digging up herbs, she’s hanging out with her lions — you’d definitely put up your hair.

That’s what I mean when I say I like to write close to Homer. I like to take that detail and flip it so she’s the subject and she looks at him as the object and she assesses how attractive he is. I don’t know why, but there’s a lot of fear around people calling themselves “feminists.” I think that there’s all this anxiety that it means that you hate men, which is also what Circe has been accused of over the years.

I’m one of these people who believe that feminism helps everyone. As a teacher, I see young men being pushed into roles that don’t fit them all the time. When we loosen up those strictures, everyone benefits.

*I think you said last night that if 50% of a society is oppressed, it’s never just 50%.*

That’s right. It’s never just 50%, it’s everybody. Men are being constricted, as are women, and wouldn’t it be nice if everyone could chose what they wanted to do.

*You also mentioned last night that, in some of your classes in college, you were the only female student. And obviously there are more women in the study of classics today than there have ever been before. How do you think that is changing or possibly improving the field?*

I think it’s terrific. I’m thrilled. In the last twenty years there has been a flood of women into the field of classics. Then it feeds on itself, because the more women who are visible in the field, the more women will be encouraged to pursue classics. My two mentors in college were both male, and I had a wonderful experience with them and they were incredibly supportive of me — but I know that that has not been the experience of every female classics student. So I am thrilled that there is
a lot more support. But I still think there is a ton of work to do. I don’t know if you have heard of the work of Donna Zuckerberg? She has an online classics journal called *Eidolon*, and she’s written about how the alt-right community has embraced classics as their own. There are a lot of things to say about that. But the point is the work is ongoing, and the more diverse perspectives we get in the field the better our understanding of the past will be.

*Yeah, for sure. So, more about you specifically: what do you think the “you” of ten years ago would be most surprised about what you’re doing now?*

I feel incredibly privileged that I am able to make art, and to talk about the things I’m passionate about. The fact that I am able to pull that off would definitely have shocked me ten years ago! Everyone has passions and everyone has a job, but those things don’t often get to be the same. I think I would feel a lot of gratitude that for me they have been.

*Most definitely. Now, what does the writing process look like for you?*

A lot of revising, especially early-on. Just trying things and throwing them away, and trying things and throwing them away. I like to write in a dim room, because I like to be able to picture the scene in front of me. I have a theater background, and so sometimes it feels like I’m directing the scene in front of me, and I need to see it. It’s a bit like getting into character, and being part of the scene myself. I cannot write in cafés at all because I can’t have distractions or music. I find that it’s very important for me to write a little bit every day. Even if I can’t put in a full writing day, just checking in with the story feels really important. I also love to write at night when everyone’s asleep.

*I know a lot of authors who love to wake up first thing in the morning, at like 4am —*

Yeah, no, I can’t do that. I do it on the other end.

*Yeah, that’s understandable! What do you think is the most important message in your books? When people finish reading, what do you want them to come away with?*
Unlike Horace, I am not a didactic poet, so there isn’t one message that I want to teach. But I want people to feel that they have lived in a fully three-dimensional world, that they have experienced this person’s perspective and their life. I want them to feel that they have been immersed in a rich and complex psychology. Both of my novels — and really all of my work — is about empathy, which I think is the great work of literature: to experience someone else’s life. That’s what we do when we read. We’re putting ourselves into someone else’s perspective and we’re imagining our way into their story. I think empathy is the great saving virtue of the human race.

*Beautiful point. This leads me to my final question: do you have any advice for aspiring writers who may be reading this one day?*

Don’t give up. One of the hardest things when you are starting out as a writer is that it’s really easy to feel that the bad draft is forever. But it’s just another part of the process. That bad draft will lead you to a better one, and a better one, and every time you sit down, you are advancing your understanding of the story, even if it’s by figuring out what you don’t want to do. All writers have bad days. All writers struggle. And I think the difference between people who go on to actually be writers and those who don’t is that, after a bad draft you go back the next day and try again. And that is really the main difference. You have to be willing to sit with that discomfort. And it is uncomfortable. So just know that all the writers that you admire are doing the same thing.