

Refusing Restraint: The Feminist Function of Shape-shifting
in the Thetis Myth and Faulkner's *Sanctuary*

Faulkner's use of Greek myth in his novels is well-known and well-studied; he once described southern light in August as light which is "from back in the old classic times. It might have fauns and satyrs and the Gods and—from Greece, from Olympus in it somewhere" and even tried his hand at that classically originating poetic form, the pastoral, when he was young (Bleikasten, 1986, p. 133). Yet, when scholars such as Gladstein (1986) and Adams (1968) incorporate Greek myth into their understanding of the women in Faulkner's mythological Yoknapatawpha county, they tend to apply the same classical trope—that of Persephone and Demeter—indiscriminately, therein creating a misleadingly homogeneous mythic prototype for Faulkner's women, who in fact maintain rich relations to a far greater range of Grecian deities that such a reductionist understanding suggests.

This "Persephone" pigeonholing is particularly problematic when we attempt to understand a woman who is, arguably, Faulkner's most puzzling and problematic female of all—Temple Drake, the kidnapped debutante and protagonist of *Sanctuary* (1931). Temple has no mother, no qualms about severing family connections, and although she is kidnapped and taken to a 1930s "underworld" of prostitution, by the novel's end she permanently escapes. In short, the "Persephone" prototype simply doesn't fit. Moreover, there is no evidence that Faulkner consciously preferred Persephone over other mythological women; as such, I propose that Temple Drake's story will be better understood if we view her tale as a modern-day iteration of the myth of Thetis and Peleus, by focusing upon the women's shared status as bodily "shape-shifters" in their respective stories. By virtue of her very name, Temple demands we pay attention to her physical form; her name invokes the cliché "the body is the temple of the Lord,"

and therein invites readers to understand her story by focusing upon *what* her body is doing, (the crux of the myth of Thetis and Peleus's first encounter) rather than *where* it is going, or who is taking it there (a central focus of the Persephone myth.)

This paper will compare the myth of Thetis and Peleus to the story of Temple Drake and her captor Popeye, and will compare Thetis's representations in *The Iliad* and other classical literature to Temple's depiction in *Sanctuary* in order to demonstrate how Temple operates as a "Thetis" figure in her story. I will begin by eliciting the provocative parallels between the stories which give fertile grounds for comparison, placing particular emphasis upon each woman's actions as a shape-shifter. I will illustrate that Temple's psychological transfiguring from girl, to old woman, to old man, to young boy while unhappily gripped in the arms of her captor can be understood in terms of Thetis, who likewise frantically transforms herself while unwillingly held in the arms of a man. In doing so, I will propose that these women's violent physical struggles metaphorically represent the generalized female's ideological struggle with the patriarchal restraints existing in the classical and modern periods. Shape-shifting is a means by which the women maintain their autonomy, despite their external bindings. My ultimate argument is that when we view Temple's bodily transformations through a Thetis-attuned lens, we are able to understand Temple's story not as one of futile fighting, but rather as a tale of successful feminist struggle which has its predecessors in classical antiquity—a struggle that, while not resulting in matrimonial liberty, nevertheless results in freedom for the female mind. Both women are, within the scope of their respective traditions, minor mythological figures; nonetheless, making sense of their shape-shifting using comparative analysis provides major insights into how women dealt—and continue to deal—with gender restraints in classical antiquity and today.

Works to be Cited

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