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Unpredictable Mythology in *Salvage the Bones*

Jesmyn Ward uses Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* as a frame to set up an ever-evolving comparison of the protagonist Esch in *Salvage the Bones* to the Greek mythology character Medea in "the Quest for the Golden Fleece" (7). This juxtaposition lends the story both a character-illuminating and plot-driving foreshadowing: where the mythology fails, Esch's growing independence and emerging fierceness of character is revealed; when the mythology holds true, the story is given a sense of inescapable fate common to Greek myths.

Esch "follows" the mythology with her intense attraction to Manny, which is immediately compared to how Medea felt "before she walked out to meet Jason for the first time" (7). The parallel to the myth in the text lets the reader know that Manny, if truly similar to his mythic counterpart Jason, will not be loyal to Esch and likely has another lover. This is later proven to be true, but Esch does not hurt, kill, or even approach Manny's girlfriend Shaliyah, unlike Medea, who murders Jason's Corinthian princess bride (56). This highlights a major difference between Esch and the women of mythology she idolizes – she is a woman to be reckoned with without being monstrous. Likewise, she is a woman independent of both her idols and Manny.

The mythology "fails" or does not continue when Esch seemingly falls out of love with Manny in a moment, shifting from "I love you!" to "I loved you!" in the space of one sentence (204). It is arguable that Medea never stopped loving Jason in her madness, or at least was never

truly free of him despite her attempts. Had she not loved him, she might have sought out another before seeking revenge that would cause her infamy, not uncommon in Greek mythology. One example is in the tale of Ariadne, also abandoned for another woman (by Theseus) after she helped her lover.

Another moment in which the mythology fails is when Esch decides to be a mother rather than attempt to end her pregnancy. The book ends with Esch's desire for China, her motherly role model, to "know [Esch] is a mother" (258). This differs from the mythology in that Medea killed her children and Jason's new bride in an effort to be free of him. Esch does not need to abort her pregnancy to be free of Manny; she is freed in a moment (in the bathroom stall) by her own actions, which shows the strength of her character.

The most tragic instance in which Esch's story continues in line with Medea's story is when she unintentionally betrays her brother. When Esch is pushed into the water by her father, the puppies Skeetah has worked so hard to keep alive fall out of the bucket she carries them in. Skeetah is torn between saving them, China, and his sister; he chooses the latter. It is a difficult decision for him, manifested in how he is "looking from [China] to [Esch] screaming" (235). Esch's action, though unintentional, changes Skeetah's prospects for the future. China, (established in the story as much more than mere dog) jumps into the water for one of three reasons: to "save" Esch, to "save" her puppies, or because she is terrified of the storm and feels unsafe in Skeetah's arms. The latter is the least likely because China is known to be fearless and trusts Skeetah implicitly. Instead, she jumps into the water to save the puppies, making China's loss an indirect fault of Esch. China "is [Skeetah's]" and he will never be the same without his long-term counterpart (3).

Esch observes that “in every one of the Greek’s mythology tales” there is “a man chasing a woman or a woman chasing a man. There is never a meeting in the middle. There is only a body in a ditch and one person walking toward or away from it,” after witnessing a car accident (32). This observation explains why Ward makes the mythology fail in some parts and makes it consistent in others: in both Esch’s life and mythology, women do not escape love; there is a fate of women, a “price of being female” (96). Her mother is dead, the woman in the accident is dead, and China is likely dead; Jason’s wife is dead, any daughters he had with Medea are dead, and even though Medea might have lived past the affair, the life Medea wanted with Jason is dead. This fateful “women cannot escape love” theme reoccurs in Greek mythology as well, making the appearance of select myths in *Salvage the Bones* a masterful comparison. If Esch did not become strong enough to “throw off” the expectations set up by Ward through mythology, she would be a victim of fate. By denouncing Manny and choosing to keep her unborn child, she ensures her survival (seemingly against all odds – the reader is almost disappointed) despite the heavy feeling of fate weighing down on her.