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(ADAD5004) Lecturer: Delyth Lloyd Williams

(Word count:

Three Keywords: Queer, Mythology, and Symbolism.

Queer Art in Mythology and Representation.

Introduction:

For my proposal essay I'll be looking at the overall theme of what I intend to create for the third-year project, using my three key words: queer, mythology and symbolism, looking at artists that inspire me and how they use the theme of mythology in their work and the link of queer representation. For the third-year project I will create a series of paintings using the knowledge and research of this proposal. The representation of queer identity in art has been subject of conversation among historians and artists for decades, the representation from cultures around the world show depictions of erotic homosexual art like found on Greek pottery or murals and symbolism in early paintings depicting mythical storytelling's through the medium of traditional painting. These are some of the earliest forms of representation found in different cultures around the world and their storytelling's of queer relationships are still of use in more modern art and media.

Queer Art and History:



Achilles and Patroclus, Attic red-figure kylix, ca. 500 BC.

Representation of homosexual relationships in art can sometimes be vague in its depiction or sometimes erotic and visible. Achilles and Patroclus are one of the most celebrated male warrior pairs in Greek literature and the art of these two shows the “closeness” of the pair, although Homer, the poet writes the pair as two friends with a tender relationship but has been up for debate as to the sexual relations. There are many other depictions of homosexuality in Greek art that in their own way show how a culture might have viewed the relationship and relations of same gender. On the topic of ‘queer’ identity in art, it has importance to show the history of the identity of

queer relationships as of how different cultures might have viewed it and how it exists in their society. There are different stories of queerness in different cultures that show us the wider range of representation, but it can be difficult to differentiate a homoerotic relationship from friendships, as historians often debate about, and medieval Christian writers deliberately suppress the homoerotic nuances of ancient literature and art.

In Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles describes Patroclus as '*the man I loved beyond all other comrades, loved as my own life*'. Although Homer doesn't explicitly cast them as lovers, their intimate relationship is crucial to the plot of the *Iliad*, and in other works of ancient literature the relationship between the two men is more explicitly referenced as a love affair. In ancient Greece it was common for men to have sexual relationships with both men and women. There were no words in ancient Greek for 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' and in classical Athens's relationships between older, often married, men and younger men were a normal part of social life.

(Who was Achilles, The British Museum, 2019)

There are some depictions of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus as being lovers and in more modern reinterpretations of the story, like Madeline Miller's '*The Song of Achilles*', which looks at the perspective of Patroclus and takes notes from the *Iliad*, by Homer. And focuses on the love relationship between them, this story has also been subject to artistic creations of the characters, adding to the countless depictions. Art and historical artifacts like this confirm and validates the identity of queer people in our existence and helps us point to a time where human sexuality and gender has always been apart of culture and it diversity is wide in range.



Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene (1864, by Simeon Solomon)

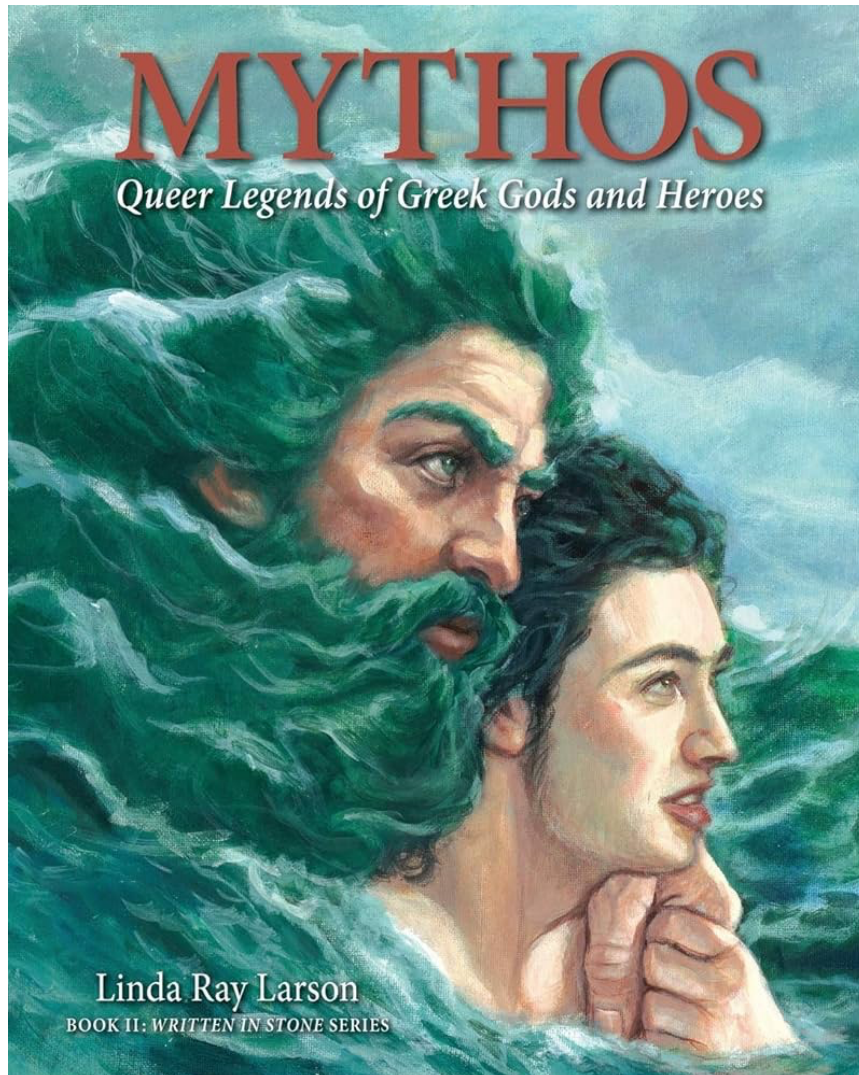
Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene is a touching image of female love. The piece is inspired by fragmented poems written by a woman named Sappho in the 4th century BC, in which she pleads that Aphrodite help her in her same-sex relationship. The term 'lesbian' derives directly from this poet, as her homeland was the Greek Island of Lesbos. Sappho's story points to a longer history of same-sex desire. It's perhaps for this reason that Simeon Solomon a man who was attracted to men in defiance of the law, painted her. While a depiction of two men kissing

would have been completely taboo, this is a passionate depiction of same-sex desire.

Solomon's own sexual preferences eventually lead to his incarceration. When he was released from prison, he was rejected by many of his acquaintances, struggled to find work and soon became homeless, a painful reminder of our repressive past. (Five Stories of Queer Artists, Tate)

This painting is incredibly inspiring, the story behind it is quite expressive in how it shows the difficulties queer relationships face in society and how the painter Solomon himself used the story of Sappho as reflection of himself as a homosexual man in a time where it was not greatly accepted in society at that time, but it's interesting how art like this which suggests a same gender relationship in an open and artistic way was there existing despite the repressive past and even now in modern times. Queer art has existed longer than most might believe and been a part of cultures around the world before different and more oppressive beliefs came to be, as cultures had their own world view and traditions of how they perceived things and tolerated. Simeon Solomon's artwork is inspirational to me because of the style of art, Pre-Raphaelite and Orientalism periods. Also, his same-sex desire and how it influenced his works in a way, and how he painted figures in a dreamy kind of way. It's hard to find older queer artists that are well known in this period and the kind of style that he uses; I want to take elements of this style into my own work and how I can learn from the masters of that time that influenced many.

Mythology, Queer Art:



Mythos, Queer Legends of Greek Gods and Heroes (2020, by Linda Ray Larson)

Linda Ray Larson's book of her painted illustrations showcased with descriptions and insights to 'queer' gods in Greek myths explores tales of gods and heroes with homoerotic themes. It has helped bring these stories mainstream with information to

contextualise the history of same-sex relationships in myths that are widely known but not looked at through the lens of 'queer' stories and the stories that some have heard of in mainstream media, like Achilles' story.

The "Gay" Gods

Although many ancient civilizations were tolerant of same-sex love among men, the Classical ages of Greece and Rome are known especially for their openness. Comparable to the Greeks and Romans who worshiped them, many of the Olympian gods were what we in modern times would think of as gay or bisexual. The ancient Greeks, however, didn't think of sex in terms such as bisexual, heterosexual, and homosexual. These words were invented in the late 19th century to describe various practices in studies on human sexual behaviour.

(Larson, 2020, p. 4)

Her paintings show great adoration for the Greek myths and help to understand these stories in a different prospective that often gets overlooked. The style of the paintings is inspirational and captivating, they convey the message of the storytelling and over all theme of the myths. It's important to see these myths come to life through the medium of traditional painting, it also helps keep these cultural stories alive and shows the importance of representation of queer identity in the world. It is interesting to have many interpretations of these stories from artists and illustrators and how someone else could take these myths and visually create the theme of the story and culture. I also look at the composition of the illustrations and how the artists used the symbolism of the culture and the relations of the mythical characters to tell a story. I am mainly interested how I can create my own interpretations of these stories and

having an artist or illustrator to take inspiration from it is helpful in giving me a better understanding in how I can create a piece of work that properly conveys a message and story of queer myths. It is also useful in giving observational skills in how I can take the way they paint as technique into my own work. I like her way of painting that I want to try and archive this kind of style like many others as well, it can be hard to find a good reference for figures and the idea for a composition that fits a narrative like a mythical story, so I find it valuable to find artists like Linda that have this style.

Symbolism in Queer Art:



"Dionysus and his Followers" (2019, by Ryan Driscoll)

Reverberating with references to the romance and theatricality of Pre-Raphaelite and Mannerist painting, Ryan Driscoll's affinity for art history materializes formally as well as through his approach to experimenting with painting techniques. Like the chemically thin layers of glazing Driscoll applies to his emotive compositions, his vast and associative reference points add their own depth to his at times morose and unexpected iconography. Each retablo-like image operates as an incantation; eerie

litanies to conjure hidden knowledge. The results are generative. Mining the depths of a private emotional world, Driscoll proposes a mythos of his own.

(ANAT EBGI, Ryan Driscoll)

Ryan is a queer painter working pronominally in oils and watercolour, using classical mythology, biblical mythology and literature to visually translate queer symbolism through traditional painting techniques. His work gives a lot of ambiguity in how he conveys gender and the theme of the paintings reflecting the queer history that was often lost, as he reflects on in his work. The bodies in his paintings are also often androgynous and queer displaying of intimacy and explores gender fluidity. I like how his work has a lot of symbolism in it, more open and visible than older paintings that were during a time that being open was suppressed, although queer art has always existed in our history and cultures. This just gives a different prospective in how more modern art can shape the current and future in how we express the themes of human identity.

People bring gender into being through gender acts. Such acts are not necessarily deliberate or consciously chosen but are the repetitive practices that perpetually reproduce gender – for example, wearing make-up, trousers or skirts, or calling people ‘he’ or ‘she’. Butler suggests that gender does not come from a rooted identity somewhere inside us, but that it only exists through our actions, and the actions of others in society towards us. ‘Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed’ (Butler, 1988: 527)

Driscoll’s way of creating the figures in his paintings show something that’s not always shown in paintings like the feminine men or gender ambiguity in his work sort of

clashes with the traditional view of gender in paintings. Queer theory plays a part in his work and the symbolism of his work. I'm not sure how this would look for my own painting's exploration, but I think that showing gender ambiguity in my work would help give more visibility and something to reflect on as someone who has not always fitted into a gender binary role. But there sometimes is a theme of power dynamics in a lot of homoerotic focused art especially Greek art, that maybe needs to be challenged but I also want to be open about creating the stories in a faithful way.

Conclusion:

In this proposal I wanted to look at different artists/illustrators and the history aspect of the overall theme I'm going for in my third-year project. Queer art has always been a part of history despite the ways of which historians, governments and the like have been in denial about the very existence, and influence queer identity has had on our culture and how it has been a part of oral storytelling, in myths and religions around the world. It has been viewed in many ways and I think the fact it has existed is enough and helps people understand the importance of the mythology and history of these identities. I'm mainly interested in mythology and looking at some stories especially Greek ones I was interested in the queer side as a theme and something to illustrate in my own interpretation with regard to the artist I have looked at in this proposal and many others that are there that focus on different mythologies around the world that show queerness in those parts of the world, this is something I have also considered to look at as a possible outcome instead of just focusing on Greek myths, as there are homosexual relationships in different mythologies as well. I think it's greatly important for these stories to be kept alive and for them to be visually created using art as a

medium to bring them to life but also to show the reality of our world and the different types of identities living in the world that can be found in early literature and arts. Gender is another thing to maybe explore in my art as well looking at how it can be viewed in more or less of a binary way, which traditional art often focuses on a binary or power dynamic and I think a lot of mythical stories can combat this as well. I want to focus on how queer mythological stories can be reviewed in a way that's visible and not trying to hide behind a story that suggests a queer relationship but is one instead. This has helped me to contextualise the ideas that I might have for a third-year project and how I might go about creating an illustration on the theme and what I want my own work to be influenced by.

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