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## Circe and the Necessity of the Female Voice

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### Circe and the Necessity of the Female Voice

In this paper, I will argue for the necessity of female perspectives in reception of the Classics through comparing the depiction of Circe in a Classical ancient text, Homer's *The Odyssey*, and a modern reception of it, Madeline Miller's *Circe*. *Circe* serves as a collaboration with Homer's *The Odyssey* through adding the female perspective crucial to Circe's characterization. *The Odyssey*, an epic poem composed from male poets, presents Circe from Odysseus' point of view, casting her as an entrapping seductress driven by her own wickedness. Due to a lack of understanding of the distinctive female experience, Odysseus can only view Circe's actions through the limited male perspective. Contrastingly, *Circe*, written by a female author, explores Circe's story from her own point of view, which provides deeper insight into the central role of Circe's femininity in her motivations. These motivations shed light on Circe as a paragon of the unique dichotomy of women: they feel compelled to express empathy, yet society demands they also protect themselves from consequences of systemic misogyny, such as normalized gender-based violence. The female perspective illuminates this dichotomy, which proves vital to a comprehensive understanding of Circe, and therefore shows the importance of female perspectives in reception of ancient texts. They provide the opportunity for a study of the complexity of women's experiences in the ancient world.

*The Odyssey* serves as perhaps the most notable of the primary ancient sources of Circe. The poem centers around Odysseus' journey home to Ithaca in the aftermath of the Trojan War,

with Books 9-12 presented from Odysseus' perspective. Circe first appears in Book 10, when Odysseus and his men land on Circe's island of Aeaea, an obstacle to their voyage (Homer, 10.149-150). Homer introduces Circe as a demi-goddess, a "daughter of Helios and the Oceanid Perse" (Hunter 2012). Circe's lineage plays a substantial role in her experience as she hails from Titan blood, yet must grapple with the hyper-sexualization of nymphs. From a female perspective, one could view her parents' identities as representative of the gender norms women inherit from each parent. While fathers pass down status, daughters may inherit the sexualization and gender-based violence their mothers experienced. However, from Odysseus' perspective, Circe's inheritance of power and beauty from her parents makes her all the more temptingly treacherous.

Odysseus' introduction of Circe presents her from a distinctly male point of view through focusing on the threat of her autonomy, expressed through her sexuality and power. Odysseus first describes her as "the nymph with lovely braids, an awesome power too / [...] the true sister of murderous-minded Aeetes" (10.149, 151). Odysseus places Circe's great power as secondary to her enticing beauty, emphasizing ancient texts' primary focus on women's appearances. He then compares Circe to her brother Aeetes, known for the cruelty of his sorcery, such as "stealing away their [enslaved peoples'] minds" (Miller, 169). This reference to Aeetes points to the male suspicion of powerful women comfortable in their sexuality as capable of manipulating men at their peril. He expands on the risk Circe poses to the men by saying, she "lift[s] / her spellbinding voice / [...] at her great immortal loom, her enchanting web / a shimmering glory" (10.243-245). The description of Circe's singing as "spellbinding" suggests Circe's song serves to disarm listeners and subject them to her will through witchcraft. Odysseus continues to portray Circe's hobbies as a means to entrap men; he claims her work at the loom crafts her "enchanting

web,” meant to beguile and ensnare unsuspecting visitors. While these hobbies may be for Circe’s own pleasure, Odysseus can only see their purpose as to threaten him and his crew. However, Miller expands on Circe’s motivations for entrapping these intruders on her island through exploring the crucial role of her femininity in her reasoning.

While *The Odyssey* portrays Circe as motivated solely by cruelty, *Circe* emphasizes her motivations stem from critical issues posed to women, namely the risk of sexual violence. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus sympathetically describes his men as entering “all innocence” when they intruded upon Circe’s home (10.254). This seeks to demonize Circe’s response of transforming these trespassers into pigs. Simultaneously, it creates a false portrayal of soldiers, known for enslaving and raping women, as innocent upon entering the home of a woman living alone. The male perspective of *The Odyssey* allows this perpetuation of feigned ignorance of the most likely depraved intentions of these men. However, *Circe*, told from the female perspective, cannot shy away from the likelihood of Odysseus’ men committing sexual violence against her due to her past experiences as a woman. When recounting her rape by a captain and his crew who she offered shelter, Circe says, “With his right hand, he tore my clothes, a practiced gesture. [...] I had said there was no one on the island, but he had learned not to take chances” (188). The description of him tearing her clothes as a “practiced gesture” and him “learn[ing] not to take chances” as to her silence emphasizes sexual assault as a common act committed by men in the ancient world. Furthermore, his distrust of Circe’s word about the presence of other people on the island, even while he exerts power over her through rape, emphasizes the degree of misogynistic suspicion of women. Even as men commit heinous violence against women, the male perspective views women as the deceitful figures. While the male perspective can at times

erase the harm or likelihood of rape from the story, women cannot be afforded this luxury of pretense.

Female perspectives illuminate how women must struggle between an innate leaning towards empathy and the burdening knowledge of the commonality of gender-based sexual violence. *Circe* grants Circe the opportunity to establish her own personal experiences that explain her inability to assume innocence of male visitors due to the need to protect herself. Circe recounts her experience of sexual assault at the hands of male guests she welcomed into her home, who she believed innocent and worthy of her generosity. Upon their inquiring after her name, she recalls, "I almost said it then, the spellword that would send them to sleep. But [...] there was a piece of me that still only spoke what I was bid" (187). Here, the dichotomy of femininity becomes clear. Circe possesses the feminine intuition of anticipating gender-based sexual violence, yet enforced gender norms also compel her to obey the inquiries of these men, to please them. Her longing to believe in the good of people and empathize with these men wins out against her intuitive need to protect herself.

Compounding this issue is the uniquely feminine pressure to not appear as hysterical or irrational, an issue born directly from the disbelief of women. As the men threateningly approach, Circe describes her thought process: "I thought—what? That I was being foolish [...] I did not want to be a fool, to make a fuss for nothing [...] *She always was a hysteric*" (187). Despite the commonality of gender-based violence, women are not afforded the same right of suspicion as men. Rather, women accusing men of sexual violence must first worry about appearing overdramatic or alarmist to the voice of authority: men. The use of "hysteric" not only expresses Circe's concern of others' dismissal of her fear, but also emphasizes this fear as a specifically feminine concern. The word "hysteria" originally meant a disease resulting from a

woman's uterus (now proven false) and stems from the Greek word for womb, hystera (OED Online 2021). Therefore, the reader gathers that Circe's femininity plays a significant role in not only the violence committed against her, but also her decision to betray her intuition. This trauma determines Circe's future receptions of intruders on her island. Yet, Odysseus and his crew cast Circe as a villain driven solely by her own wickedness and in need of moral direction.

The male perspective of *The Odyssey* emphasizes Circe as an example of the necessity to suppress women's autonomy in order for them to accept men as their behavioral exemplars. Odysseus describes Circe's reaction after he robs her of her witchcraft's power, saying, "[she] hugged my knees [...] 'let's go to bed together, / mount my bed and mix in the magic work of love— / we'll breed deep trust between us'" (10.359, 370-373). This description of Circe on her knees emphasizes her position of inferiority to Odysseus and her being subject to his will. Furthermore, her suggestion for her and Odysseus to have sex, after their power dynamic has flipped, further cements her role as a desperate seductress in Odysseus' story. Rather than their sexual relationship being one of equal partnership, Odysseus simultaneously boosts his ego and humbles Circe through depicting himself as the reluctant hero simply giving into a woman's pleas. Following this humbling of Circe, Odysseus acts as a kind of moral guide to her, as she returns the men from pigs to humans at Odysseus' request.

*The Odyssey* portrays Circe's empathy as granted to her by Odysseus, leading her to transform from a seductress to a feminine ideal in Odysseus' eyes. Odysseus describes the effect of the reunion between the crew on Circe, saying, "a terrible sobbing echoed through the house... / The goddess herself was moved / [...] a lustrous goddess now" (10.440-442). Odysseus narrates it so that the men's emotions inspire Circe's empathy rather than her possessing the capability for empathy on her own. From the male perspective, women must

possess men as behavioral guides that lead them to fulfill their duties as women, including their role as sources of emotional support. As a result of seemingly gaining this feminine quality of empathy, Circe becomes a more “lustrous” goddess in the eyes of Odysseus. The audience gathers that women become more shining and attractive in the male eye upon surrendering their autonomy and taking on their proper supportive role. Yet, *Circe* subverts this narrative by arguing that Circe innately possesses this empathy, especially towards mortals.

The foundation afforded to Circe's character in *Circe* establishes empathy as a unique and crucial facet of Circe's character, rather than a quality instilled in her by men. *Circe* examines a formative moment in Circe's childhood that establishes her tendency towards empathy and catalyzes her fascination with mortals. After witnessing her uncle Prometheus brutally whipped for aiding mortals, Circe brings Prometheus nectar, despite imagining “manacles rattling on [her] wrists and the whip striking the air” (20). Circe's strong empathy drives her to help Prometheus regardless of the risk of severe punishment. This also conveys women's deep commitment to expressing empathy to the extent that they may risk their own safety, as shown in the instance earlier with Circe's sexual assault. Circe's status as a uniquely empathetic goddess further sets her empathy apart as not gained by interactions with Odysseus, but an inherent quality belonging to her. The audience witnesses the development of this empathy over time as Circe remarks, “This is something torn that I can mend,” upon entering into her relationship with Odysseus (208). Instead of Circe needing Odysseus' guidance, Circe joins the relationship as an equal capable of providing her partner with understanding. It is her very ability to empathize that allows Circe to repair or aid Odysseus through offering him compassion. While *The Odyssey* attempts to credit Circe's generosity to Odysseus' charm and sway, *Circe* establishes that women do not need men to guide them. Rather, women possess the ability to individually develop their

character. Considering Circe's character beyond the context of a man's story allows for this development of her characterization.

Madeline Miller's *Circe* speaks to the necessity of women's voices in reception of the Classics through supplementing Circe's characterization in ancient classical texts. While ancient texts examine women through an unfailingly misogynistic lens, the inclusion of a female perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of female characters. The female perspective illuminates complex issues that arise specifically from femininity, such as the dichotomy of women as innately empathetic, yet confronted with the consequences of systemic misogyny. The legacies of the Classics continue to permeate through our society in the present, so inclusion of the female voice is crucial to discern how the Classics continue to affect us. Through the narration of ancient stories from female perspectives, audiences can begin to better understand the complex lives of ancient women and reflect on how their experiences continue to resonate through our society today.

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