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Revisionary Mythmaking: How Madeline Miller's *Circe* Creates a Feminine World

Circe is a powerful goddess and skilled witch in Greek mythology, famous for turning innocent men into pigs, seducing Odysseus, and disrupting his journey home. Throughout history and myth, this negative and one-dimensional portrayal of Circe has perpetuated a warning to men of the villainous power of femininity as well as the notion that femininity and female characters are not worthy of focus in myth and epic. Like many young women reading the *Odyssey*, Madeline Miller was shocked that no one asked *why* Circe was turning men into pigs. Thus began Miller's quest to allow Circe to take "her rightful place at the center of the story" (Miller, "Interview with Madeline Miller"). Fittingly, Miller's novel is simply yet powerfully entitled *Circe*, giving the goddess the focus and proper epic scope she always deserved. The novel follows Circe over the several millennia of her immortal life, telling intimate tales of her childhood, exile, love, and motherhood. Miller's novel has been highly successful, adored by casual readers and academics alike. Naturally, the scholarly conversation surrounding *Circe* is quite rich. Scholars engage with *Circe* through the lenses of gender studies, feminism, literature, and many more, analyzing the novel and its impacts. What struck me most about *Circe* was how understood I felt; I felt like Miller had written a love letter to women, so I chose to complement the existing scholarly discussion by exploring the methods she used to do so. I will argue that the style and form of the narrative–Circe's subversion of binaries in Greek mythology, her

environment, and her experience of passing time–create a story that not only dismantles patriarchal structures embedded in myth, but also writes an epic that is distinctly feminine in nature. Miller's novel is an important work of feminist revisionary mythmaking because she reclaims the character of Circe and represents women accurately, portraying Circe as a flawed, powerful, and relatable female protagonist, and thus creating a feminist narrative written about women for women.

Traditional Greek Myths and Their Effects

To understand how *Circe*'s representation of female characters subverts traditional portrayals, we must examine the portrayals of female characters in Greek mythology. Alzena Bangasin examines "popular" female characters in Greek mythology, concluding that they can be largely sorted into two categories. The majority of these characters are victims of "fridging," which refers to "women [who] have been…killed, abused, and or depowered to serve the character of a male protagonist thereby reducing their characters as a plot device leaving no room for character development" (Bangasin 8). The select few characters that do not fall under this pattern are portrayed quite negatively, "written in such a way that the readers and or audiences would see them as antagonists in their own stories" (16). Circe manages to tragically fall victim to both of these tropes. When the *Odyssey* shifts the focus to her, she is characterized simultaneously as an evil witch who attacks men without provocation and a beguiling seductress who leads men to their doom–a pretty fitting example of a villain. Soon after she turns Odysseus's crew into pigs, Circe easily falls for one of Odysseus's tricks and almost immediately becomes his lover, caretaker, and counselor, reduced to a plot device in his story. Miller's *Circe* has Circe at the center of the story, portraying her as a flawed and lovable protagonist rather than a villain to be hated. Circe's actions were central to other heroes' stories, but her thoughts, intentions, and

motivations were always ignored. Miller creates space for Circe's character to be fully fleshed-out and explored, an opportunity rarely given to women in myth.

Greek mythology has had a profound impact on modern life, ingraining problematic attitudes and values towards women into society as well. This is why Miller's revision of Circe's story, which promotes inclusivity and equal representation for women, is productive. The English language, culture, and the types of stories we enjoy have all been impacted by myth. Cui Xiaoxi's analysis of Greek myth mentions examples of idioms in the English language that are based in myth, notably "Pandora's box" and "Apple of Discord," both of which are taken from stories where female characters are seen as villains. The negative attitudes towards women in myth have caused people in modern times to associate negative experiences and ideas with femininity. This example asserts that fiction and reality are not completely separate entities. They transform each other over time. This is why engaging with myth and addressing problems of representation in impactful texts matters; authors must conceive alternatives to transform a genre that has negatively impacted women for centuries.

Miller engages with feminist revisionism, specifically feminist revisionary mythmaking, in her novel to reclaim the character of Circe. Feminist revisionary mythmaking aims to reclaim cultural signs, symbols, and myths that have promoted patriarchal ideas about women and reclaim them. These retellings are effective because they highlight problems with the past while making a clear call for societal change, which has positive effects on the future. Feminist revisionary myths "require constant activity in order to truly affect contemporary classical receptions and the symbolism that myth carry" (Grzybowska 2). *Circe* contributes to this important activity not only through its existence as a novel, but also through characterization and form.

Circe's Subversion of Binary Structures

Circe breaks tradition by subverting oppressive binaries that are inherent to Greek myths, specifically by allowing Circe to exist outside of these structures. Grzybowska points out that two organizing binaries within *Circe* are "male and female, gods and humans" (Grzybowska 12). Notably, both binaries are hierarchical; males rank higher than females, and gods rank higher than humans. Even when these hierarchies merge, immortal women are undervalued. Circe explains that "nymph," the term for her kind, "paced out the length and breadth of our futures. In our language, it means not just goddess, but bride" (Miller, *Circe* 3). By definition, Circe and other female nymphs are valued only for their ability to serve a man and bear children. Goddesses, although undervalued, have the protection of their divine abilities and familial ties to male deities. Human women are entirely on their own–the absolute bottom of both hierarchies discussed. Clearly, these organizing principles are oppressive and consider women unimportant, which has facilitated their abuse and erasure throughout myth. Miller's depiction of Circe breaks free from these two binaries, allowing Circe to create and take up a category that is uniquely her own. Circe herself indicates that she has never fit within this structure, opening the novel with the line, "When I was born, the name for what I was did not exist" (Miller, *Circe* 1).

Miller subverts the traditional gender binary in Greek mythology by giving Circe the characteristics of the ideal Greek man and woman, allowing her to embody both sides of the binary and thus deconstructing it and its power. Greek masculinity was "intimately tied to the virtue of courage. The very word that we translate as courage, *andreia*, comes from the Greek word for a male adult, *anêr/andros* and can be translated as 'manliness'" (Rubarth 24). This sense of courage was especially important in times of physical danger, such as combat in war or training for such combat. If courage and masculinity are interchangeable by nature, then Circe is

clearly masculine. Circe can protect her son Telegonus within the bounds of Aiaia, but has no sway outside the island. To ensure her son's safety, Circe travels to the sea's lowest floor to challenge Trygon, a great monster of the deep whose poison tail is the most potent in the universe. "A single touch would kill a mortal instantly, condemn a great god to an eternity of torment." (Miller, *Circe* 277). No god or mortal had braved the pain required to win Trygon's tail, but Circe chose to for the sake of her son. While she works up the courage to touch the tail, she narrates, "My body, with its simple good sense, balked at self-destruction. My legs tensed to flee, to scramble back to the safety of the dry world…Around me was murk and dark currents. I set Telegonus' bright face before me. I reached." (281). Circe's description clearly indicates her intense fear of the danger she is about to face. She is acutely aware of her body, but courageously fights against her natural instincts for Telegonus's safety. Circe is a prime example of Greek manliness, but her masculine action has feminine motivation. Circe acts out of maternal love for her son, embodying the ideal trait of a woman and mother. Therefore, Circe subverts the gender binary by exhibiting the ideal traits from both sides and thus not fitting into either.

After Circe is exiled to Aiaia, she takes over the feminine role of domestic duties as well as the masculine role of the head of the household; however, she fulfills her masculine role in a feminine way, once again dismantling the male/female binary by existing on both sides. In ancient Greece, "the Athenian head of a household was the *kurios* (master, lord). The *kurios* had absolute control over his household; the state had little to say regarding how he treated his wife and children, managed his slaves, or spent his free time" (Rubarth 27). Greek women were meant to bear children, raise heirs, and preside over the domestic duties of the household (Gabriel 8-9). While on Aiaia, Circe takes both of these positions. She fulfills the role of a woman by managing domestic tasks on the island and caring for her son. She fulfills the role of a man by taking

charge of all other affairs on Aiaia, including presiding over the nymphs on the island. When she receives visitors, she assures them that "If you would thank your host, thank me. This house is mine alone." (Miller, *Circe* 186). Although there is no "state" in question here, no other power controls what happens on Aiaia. Even when her brother visits, angry that Circe hosted his daughter and allowed her to leave peacefully, Circe confidently stands up to his threats, asserting that "In Colchis you may work your will. But this is Aiaia." (175). Circe alone is in charge of her domain, meaning she has "absolute control" over her space as a *kurios* would. Notably, even though Circe has power over the nymphs, she does not uphold patriarchal values on her island. When Odysseus's men dine in her hall, Circe narrates, "The table grew stained as if with slaughter, and they looked to my nymphs to clear it up. When I told them they would do it themselves, they eyed each other, and if I had been anyone else, they would have defied me. But they still remembered their snouts" (219). Circe does the job of a man, but without toxic patriarchal expectations. Circe's "female" duties and her simultaneous feminization of the role of *kurios* subvert the gender roles of ancient Greek culture, thus deconstructing the male/female binary.

Another organizing binary within Greek myths that Circe subverts is the one of god/human; she does so through her human-like nature and transition to mortality at the end of the novel. From birth, Circe did not fit in with her family. They teased her for her frail voice, even naming her after a hawk because they said she sounded like a gull crying. Later, Hermes reveals to her that she has the voice of a mortal. Circe is of pure immortal blood, but was born with a human's voice, so her very existence creates tension in the god/human binary because she does not fit the expectations of the side she is on. As Circe develops her skills as a witch, she explains that sorcery "is not divine power, which comes with a thought and a blink…By rights, I should have

never come to witchcraft. Gods hate all toil, it is their nature." (Miller, *Circe* 83). Rather than having divine abilities, Circe is drawn to sorcery, which should contradict with her nature because it requires practice and dedication. Additionally, throughout the novel, Circe is deeply sympathetic towards humans, revealing that she favors the opposite side of the binary rather than her own. She laments that "No matter how vivid [humans] were in life, no matter how brilliant, no matter the wonders they made, they came to dust and smoke. Meanwhile every petty and useless god would go on sucking down the bright air until the stars went dark." (159). Circe characterizes humans as bright, but their fate as "dust and smoke." Contrastingly, she calls gods useless, but their fate is characterized as bright. The characterization and fates of the gods and humans is mismatched here. Circe asserts her distaste for the divine and preference for humans through the literal meaning of her words as well as the structure of her sentences. The figures who are truly meaningful to Circe, such as Daedalus, Odysseus, Telegonus, and Telemachus, are all humans. Although she was born into a divine household, she does not find kinship or connection with a single divine being, rejecting her assigned side of the god/human binary. Circe's ultimate subversion of this structure is at the end of the novel, when she chooses to sacrifice her divinity and become her true self, a human. She concludes her story by saying, "I have a mortal's voice, let me have the rest. I lift the brimming bowl to my lips and drink" (385). Circe is born in-between the sides of the binary, rejects her assigned side, and finally transitions across it. She takes agency over her life, transforming her mode of being, and thus dismantling another organizing binary that perpetuates the oppression and silencing of women.

The subversion of all these binaries culminates in Circe's identity as a witch; her characterization helps her dismantle these organizing structures by existing in both sides of each binary, but her sorcery allows her to exist completely outside of any binary. Circe's witchcraft is

based on practiced skill and the power of Circe's will. She describes that sorcery "must be made and worked, planned and searched out…Even after all that, it can fail, as gods do not." (Miller, *Circe* 83). Circe's witchcraft is not exclusive to gods or humans and is not dependent on gender. It allows Circe to develop agency and cultivate her own identity. She finds comfort in sharpening her skills, and she describes herself as "A witch…With unbound power. Who need answer to none but herself" (172). Circe arrives on Aiaia completely against her own will, but when she leaves, it is of her own accord. Her witchcraft helps her protect herself and her son, negotiate her freedom, and transition to humanity. As a witch, Circe is not bound by the rules of any binary, and she secures complete liberation. Therefore, she breaks free of the stereotypes and expectations that binaries have used to systematically oppress women in literature. By allowing Circe to exist in between and outside of simple binary oppositions, Miller asserts her novel as a work of feminist revisionism through the disruption and collapse of inherently patriarchal structures.

A Feminine Morphology of Narrative

Circe participates in feminist revisionism not only through the characterization of Circe, but also through the way she experiences her environment in a distinctly feminine manner. Traditional masculine narratives of adventure, such as the Greek epic, "integrate a male-initiated adventure and quest with the longing for paradisal bliss" while "women questers are noticeably absent…Instead, the feminine is identified as the paradisal landscape itself" (Daemmrich 214). The protagonist usually completes the masculine action of conquering the feminine land and making it his own. Traditionally, the questers follow one of three narrative patterns. They either "exchange their masculine traits" for feminine ones in order to protect their paradise, "retain their masculine aggressiveness as they penetrate paradise, ravish and destroy the fragile space,"

or “are annihilated” and their “masculine traits of aggression and competition dissolve” (215). Circe takes a drastically different approach to her environment when she arrives in Aiaia. She embraces the paradise of the forest. She does not look to conquer or defeat it, only to understand and coexist with it as best she can. As Circe familiarizes herself with the forest, she narrates, “I stroked the glossy brown scorpions who braved me with their tails. Their poison was barely a pinch” (Miller, *Circe* 82). Circe experiences the forest holistically, even appreciating creatures that act hostile towards her. Through her description of how the scorpions “braved” her, Circe demonstrates deep understanding and compassion in her acknowledgement that they act out of fear. She allows them to harm her and even treats them with tenderness afterwards, embracing the nature of the forest and its creatures as they are. Circe’s love for the forest runs deep enough that it provides her company in times of solitude; she says, “when I did get lonely, when I found myself yearning for my brother, or Glaucos as he had been, then there was always the forest” (82). Circe does not see the forest as something feminine and passive to be conquered, and she feels no masculine desire to claim it as her own. Instead, she breaks masculine narrative tradition and becomes fully immersed in paradise, adapting her habits to optimize her experience, but not at the expense of the flora and fauna.

Circe becomes connected to Aiaia over time, but she also shares the cyclical nature of the island, which structures time and space within the novel using characteristics that are traditionally associated with femininity. Time passes differently for Circe because she is immortal and because of the repetitive nature of her exile. The way the novel indicates the passing of time is usually through how Circe opens a chapter and remarks that “It was spring and I was down on the eastern slope, picking early strawberries,” (Miller *Circe* 161) or “The winter storms came early that year” (285). Both Circe and her environment seem to have merged into

one being. As she learns more about the forest, she remarks, “Little by little I began to listen better: to the sap moving in the plants, to the blood in my veins” (85). Circe’s comparison of the sap to her own blood reveals that her understanding of her environment and her understanding of herself are one and the same. Circe perceives passing time only with the help of Aiaia’s cyclical shifts, so in a sense, the island functions as her internal clock. The notion of cyclicality is inherently feminine due to its association with biological rhythms associated with the female body. Feminist scholars link repetition, cycles, and interconnectedness with femininity because they more accurately represent how women understand and experience the world. Contrastingly, the traditional linear nature of time within stories is considered masculine because it is focused on conquest and linear achievement. Thus, Circe’s experience of time and space on Aiaia is inherently feminine, revising the myth by subverting the traditional masculine morphology of the genre.

Circe’s Portrayal of Womanhood

Circe also subverts the traditions of myth with an inspirational and relatable female protagonist, evoking hope that the audience can, too, break free of oppressive structures in their lives. Although Circe is a goddess for the majority of the novel, she experiences the same struggles that a human may go through, like arguing with a sibling. This humanizes Circe and allows readers to see themselves in her place. After an upsetting argument with her sister, Circe rages back at Aiaia, angrily thinking, “I had walked the earth for a hundred generations, yet I was still a child to myself” (Miller, *Circe* 156). Circe’s frustration with herself is quite relatable. She notably adds that she is a child to *herself*; even though she knows she is a goddess and a famously powerful witch, Circe still feels ashamed, insecure, and unsure of her abilities. Readers

know that Circe is a force to be reckoned with, but seeing her doubt herself in such a human way allows readers to relate to her instead of seeing her as an untouchable goddess.

The events that shape Circe's life are also deeply intertwined with the experiences of human women in particular. The novel is self-aware, and helps female readers feel acknowledged and seen. When a group of sailors stop at Aiaia to rest and realize that Circe has no man to protect her, they violently rape her. Circe thinks her father will rush to her aid or avenge her, but soon realizes that she is unimportant, understanding that she is "only a nymph, after all, for nothing is more common among us than this" (Miller, *Circe* 164). Unfortunately, sexual violence is a part of the lives of many women. Circe defeatedly admits that *nothing* is more shared among women than the fact that they are victims of men. Her use of the words "common" and "us" evokes the notion that she speaks not only of nymphs or goddesses, but of all women, readers included. In this sense, the novel is self-aware; Miller indicates to the female audience that she knows they are there. Usually in stories, the rape of a woman is used to spur a man into action, but no man comes to Circe's aid. She alone exacts her revenge on her attackers, turning them into pigs. Circe's trauma is not ignored or used as a plot device to drive a man's story; instead, she gets closure and works through her trauma herself, eventually healing. Even if this event is not personally relatable for the reader, women are acutely aware of the realities of sexual violence, and thus will connect with Circe's revenge and recovery. Miller writes about real women and for real women, which is quite rare in literature and even rarer in myth.

Another important and potentially relatable aspect of Circe's story is her motherhood. Her postpartum experience is raw, emotional, and realistic, allowing the novel to portray a feminine experience without expectations that come from a male point of view. Circe describes her feelings for her son, narrating, "I would look at him and feel a love so sharp it seemed my flesh

lay open. I made a list of all the things I would do for him. Scald off my skin. Tear out my eyes. Walk my feet to bones, if only he would be happy and well" (Miller, *Circe* 243). Patriarchal perspectives associate the nature of motherhood with gentleness and nurturing, but the intensity of Circe's love for her son is instead revealed through her use of violent imagery. She knows she would destroy herself to secure Telegonus's well-being, and does, in fact, prepare herself to do this when she later challenges Trygon. This fierce motherly love is more realistic and, thus, more relatable for readers who are mothers. While it is clear that Circe loves her child, she also describes how difficult the shift to motherhood is for her. She says, "I did not go easy to motherhood. I faced it as soldiers face their enemies, girded and braced, sword up against the coming blows" (242). She talks of the struggles of raising her newborn, lamenting that "He was not happy…He hated sun. He hated wind. He hated baths. He hated to be clothed, to be naked, to lie on his belly, and his back. He hated this great world and everything in it, and me, so it seemed, most of all" (243). Once again, Circe compares motherhood to violence, indicating how difficult the mental toll of it has been. The repetition of "he hated" further reveals her frustration. She sounds exhausted, unsure of how to help her child while maintaining an anxious and defeated tone, indicating that she feels she is not doing a good job. After a particularly difficult day, she holds Telegonus in her arms and narrates, "Guilt and shame sawed at me. He should hate me, I thought. He should flee…'Why can you not be more peaceful?' I whispered. 'Why must it be so hard?'" (258). Again, the weight of motherhood is described violently with the word "sawed," and again, Circe brings up the idea of hate. Circe's postpartum experience is filled with self-doubt, anxiety, and incredible struggle. According to harmful stereotypes perpetuated by patriarchal society, motherhood is supposed to come naturally to women. However, Circe operates within feminine structures, and her experience is more authentic to the

actual female experience. Many women do not take to motherhood immediately. They struggle, adapt, and find their way, but that does not mean that they do not love their child. Miller's depiction of motherhood is realistic and relatable, making readers who relate to motherhood feel seen and accurately portrayed in an epic story.

Effects of *Circe*

Miller's novel has transformed the Greek epic, a genre traditionally rooted in oppressive binaries and structured in masculine, linear conquest, into a completely feminine version of the genre. Circe, a female hero, understands the world in a feminine way; her experience of time and space is cyclical and repetitive, focused on her development rather than linear achievement. Circe is also a relatable character who portrays the female experience in a realistic and emotionally raw way, facing similar struggles as human women and giving women the opportunity to see themselves represented accurately in epic literature. Furthermore, seeing a relatable figure in a powerful goddess who develops complete autonomy serves as inspiration for what human women can accomplish as well. Thus, *Circe* is a phenomenal work of feminist revisionism because it reclaims the character and myth of Circe. She is not an obstacle in a man's story; she is the hero of her own. Miller's work is important because it demonstrates how revisionism can extend to the structures of narrative as well as representation, dismantling both harmful structures *and* the misrepresentation of women in literature. Future authors can use these strategies from *Circe* to create more effective retellings.

The financial success of Circe proves that a feminine epic is not only interesting and popular, but also extremely necessary. As previously mentioned, feminist revisionary myths require constant activity. Authors must create a substantial number of retellings to amend a literary canon that has existed and impacted society for centuries. Miller has effectively contributed to

the project of revisionary mythmaking by writing a novel that profoundly revises myth. From my personal experience visiting bookstores, Miller's novel has also inspired many more feminist retellings of myths; I have recently started to see small sections and displays for books of the genre. *Circe* is not the first of its kind, and it definitely will not be the last. As stated before, worldbuilding in literature is not confined to the boundaries of the story. Over time, *Circe* and other works of feminist revisionism can bleed into society, asserting the understanding that people experience the world in different ways and that representation of each perspective is important. Miller saw injustice in literature and in the real world, so she built a literary world that corrected it, a world where a woman was given space to exist, grow, and experience true freedom. She urges her audience to take on her goal of correcting injustice, speaking in Circe's mind through the voice of Trygon, the most ancient, wise, and powerful being in the novel. In a moment of hopelessness, Circe narrates, "I thought: I cannot bear this world a moment longer. *Then child, make another*." (Miller, *Circe* 283).

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