Divine Immortality as a Curse in Madeline Miller's *Circe*

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Madeline Miller's novel Circe *(2018) raises the question of whether the witch of Aiaia is simply the Homeric version of a cunning and tempting sorceress, or rather a well-rounded female figure with a rich backstory and doubts about her own immortality. Published at the height of the #MeToo movement, Miller's novel engages with two issues that the following paper will discuss. Firstly, it contributes to the rich and commonly negatively connotated mythology around the witch Circe by offering an engaging background narrative in which Circe's actions and reactions become traceable and understandable for the readers. Secondly, Miller lets her protagonist defy various conceptions about the gods. By portraying Circe's immortality as a curse rather than a blessing, Miller challenges the media-driven narrative that women have to remain young and age, if at all, gracefully.*

Madeline Millers Roman Circe *(2018) wirft die Frage auf, ob die Hexe von Aiaia lediglich die homerische Version einer listigen und verführerischen Zauberin oder eher eine vielseitige Frauenfigur mit einer ergiebigen Hintergrundgeschichte ist. Millers Roman, der auf dem Höhepunkt der #MeToo-Bewegung veröffentlicht wurde, beschäftigt sich mit zwei Themen, die im folgenden Artikel erörtert werden. Erstens trägt sie zur reichhaltigen und häufig negativ konnotierten Mythologie rund um die Hexe Circe bei, indem sie eine spannende Hintergrunderzählung bietet, in der Circes Handlungen und Reaktionen für die Leser nachvollziehbar und verständlich werden. Zweitens lässt Miller ihre Protagonistin verschiedene Vorstellungen über die Götter in Frage stellen. Indem Miller die Unsterblichkeit von Circe als Fluch und nicht als Segen auslegt, stellt sie das mediale Narrativ in Frage, dass Frauen jung bleiben und, wenn überhaupt, in Würde altern müssen.*

Introduction

Homer's *Odyssey* is one of the best-known texts from antiquity: The titular wandering hero, fallen out of the gods' graces, is unable to return to Ithaca at the end of the war on Troy. It is a story that has been handed down through generations and cultures. Long and arduous journeys are still referred to as odysseys; the intelligence of Odysseus and the beauty and wisdom of his wife Penelope are known far and wide. Another character that is ever-present is the witch Circe. Daughter of the sun-God Helios and the nymph Perse, the goddess is a mistress of witchcraft, especially transformation and herbology. Even in Homer's patriarchal society and epic poem, Circe is a strong woman who transforms her visitors into tame animals and protects her island from all dangers. She is a beautiful temptress, whose charm the soldiers cannot resist - or at least that is the description we usually get.

Since Circe has a widely accessible background and is a thoroughly established character, the question arises whether a feminist retelling of her story is really necessary. After all, Circe is already a strong and brave woman who leads a self-determined life in Homer's version of the myth. However, Madeline Miller's novel shows that Homer's narrative is only one side of the coin and that a sorceress on a remote island must certainly have a backstory that is worth telling. In her 2018 novel *Circe*, Miller offers a rich re-interpretation of the myth that not only gives Circe more agency than she has in Homer's version, but that also discusses contemporary questions: Is immortality really a desirable state or should a graceful life and death be more preferable? And what is the inherent worth of divine immortality? To answer these questions, the following paper offers a brief close reading of the mythological source material before mapping out the character development of Miller's Circe. Furthermore, it presents a short analysis of the symbolism of water in similes and metaphors concerning immortality. Lastly, this paper discusses the idea of divine immortality as experienced by Circe and the other divinities, demonstrating why immortality is seen as a curse in Madeline Miller's novel.

Homer's Circe

Before outlining Circe's character development in the novel, one should examine Homer's Circe. Readers first encounter her in Book X of *The Odyssey*, when the grief-stricken crew lands on the island Aiaia, "the home of the beautiful Circe, a formidable goddess, with a mortal woman's voice" (X.136–37). Odysseus divides his crew and sends about half to the house in the woods. There they encounter tame mountain wolves and lions that "rose on their hind legs to fawn on them, with much wagging of their long tails" (X.212–13) and hear the beautiful voice of a woman, singing at her loom. They call to the woman, who then prepares a feast for them, but mixes one of her draughts into the wine. The men are turned into pigs and driven into sties with blows of a stick. Book X portrays a rather aggressive Circe, who uses not only magic to subjugate the men, but also physical violence. Whether one considers these actions to be justified or not, they are certainly the actions of a self-sufficient woman who knows how to defend herself against surprise visitors. However, this image of a strong sorceress does not last, for when Odysseus confronts her and presents his sword, Circe "with a shriek […] slipped below [his] blade, clasped [his] knees and burst into tears" (X.323). Only after restoring Odysseus's position of power is Homer's Circe allowed to seduce the hero, and from that point onwards, Circe's "black magic" is only used to benefit the heroes. About a year later, when Odysseus and his men long to leave Aiaia, Odysseus himself "clasped the goddess's knees in supplication" (X.479–80). As Judith Yarnall argues, "[t]he gesture of surrender thus becomes balanced, mutual" (15).

As a consequence of both the position of Circe's narrative as having a book of her own in the poem and the textual evidence offered, it can be said that Homer's depiction of Circe is a rather balanced one. Circe appears to fulfil many stereotypical ideals of antique womanhood: she feeds and takes care of the men, is aptly afraid of brave Odysseus, and can be kept under control through Hermes's knowledge of herbology, for example when he offers herbs to Odysseus that severely limit Circe's magical influence on him. One can also refer to Circe's own words on this account: "It is

a common saying that women are delicate creatures, flowers, eggs, anything that may be crushed in a moment's carelessness" (Miller 330). She is also a powerful sorceress who lives on her island without any male relatives or watchdogs and is more than able to defend herself. One question that Homer neither asks nor implicitly answers is why Circe's powers and position in the realm of divinities is such an impactful one "[w]ith unbound power. Who need not answer to none but herself" (179). Madeline Miller states that

> [t]he assumption has often been that it's because she's just naturally cruel and capricious. But that's not the character Homer gives us. After she and Odysseus become lovers she's incredibly helpful to him, offering him vital advice about navigating the monsters and obstacles on the path ahead. She clearly cares for him, but she never tries to keep him against his will. I wanted to dig into that complexity, her menace and her benevolence both. (Women's Prize for Fiction n.p.)

So while the cultural perception of Circe through Homer's poetry seems to paint the image of a self-centred, ferocious island-witch, Miller's novel attempts to focus on the multi-faceted nature of this almost marginal character. However, "[t]o interpret Homer is to embark upon an enterprise fraught with risks, chief among them the possibility of distorting with one's own cultural and personal biases a myth that is complete and compelling as presented" (Yarnall 17). As a female reader in the twenty-first century, I am no exception to what Yarnall calls risky enterprises and carry my own bias, namely the wish for an independent female character from a literary and social period when women did not have powerful positions within society. This bias seems to be carried into Madeline Miller's adaptation of the mythological narrative of Circe.

Miller's Circe

Having studied Latin and Ancient Greece, Miller is a trained classicist. In her dramaturgical work, she focuses on adapting classical tales for contemporary audiences. As a teacher and a reader, both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* are among the most influential works she

cites throughout interviews, for example in *The Guardian*'s Saturday interview (Cochrane). Her first novel, *The Song of Achilles*, which was published in 2011, tells the story of the close bond between Patroclus and Achilles. This retelling of the *Iliad* from Patroclus's perspective focuses on the intimate relationship between the two heroes, which is not an entirely new idea as both antique and more contemporary scholarship debates: "From the fifth century B.C., the nature of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus as presented by Homer was a matter for discussion among writers and scholars in antiquity[.] […] [B]ut the view that they were lovers prevailed" (Morales and Mariscal 292). Nevertheless, this queer perspective still appears to be quite uncommon in mainstream popular culture, which is often coloured by director Wolfgang Petersen's (2004) or even archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann's ideas of Troy. In her first novel we can thus already see a drive to adapt mythological narratives to fit contemporary concerns around questions of gender and sexuality.

In April 2018, Miller's second novel *Circe* was published to much popular and critical acclaim. Ron Charles at *The Washington Post* firmly roots Miller's second novel within the #MeToo movement: "The archaeological evidence is sketchy, but the first pussy hat was probably knitted by Circe. Among nasty women, the witch of Aeaea has held a place of prominence since Homer first sang of her wiles" (n.p.). In *The Guardian*, Aida Edemariam summarises *Circe* as such:

> And that is where Miller anchors her story – in the emotional life of a woman. She is not the first to see the potential in Circe, who over the centuries has been interpreted as everything from a parable against drunkenness to an embodiment of emasculation. [...] Miller's is a feminist version in which everything is at stake. (n.p.)

In both novels, the plot is hardly a mystery meant to be solved. Most readers will have an idea of Circe's encounters with the Minotaur, her niece Ariadne, and above all Odysseus. What is noteworthy, however, is the language with which Miller accentuates characters and themes, allowing her readers to retrace what she perceives to be at the heart of Homer's epic poems.

One of the central concerns in *Circe* is the protagonist's backstory. Homer does not give much information about how Circe came to be on her island in solitude and what kind of character she is, apart from one begging at Odysseus' knees. The way Miller phrases Circe's judgement of Homer's epic poem can be read as a hint to how Miller herself perceives the representation in the poem, which is rather unkind:

> Later, years later, I would hear a song made of our meeting. The boy who sang it was unskilled, missing notes more often than he hit[.] […] I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep. (Miller 213)

But who is Miller's Circe, other than a woman refusing to humble herself? Miller's genealogy is the same as Homer's: Her father is the sun god Helios, a powerful deity who "was bound to no will but his own" (12). Her mother Perse cast her aside immediately after birth to "make a better one" (6) and her siblings spend most of their days teasing her. For a majority of her early life, it even remains unclear what exactly she is – nymph or lesser water-goddess are the terms usually given to her, but neither appear to be fitting. There is no love between her close family, even her beloved brother Aeëtes eventually leaves her, as he prefers to rule his own kingdom, rather than remain with his doting sister. So Circe is left alone by everyone in her father's vast halls: "Such were my years then. I would like to say that all the while I waited to break out, but the truth is, I'm afraid I might have floated on, believing those dull miseries were all there was, until the end of days" (13). This idea of eternity floating and swimming by is vividly expressed through Miller's figurative use of language. Seeing that Circe's familial origins are those of a lesser water-goddess, the idea of time stretching on like a slow and unending river is neither a new connotation, nor a surprising metaphor. Circe as narrator is prone to use similes connected to water and this clear lexical alignment with water is dominant in the first part of the novel, before Circe fully realises her abilities of controlling flora and fauna as well as using them for her magic. The

house she grew up in was "always faintly damp from the presence of so many water-gods" (74). Expressions "darted like schools of fish in the water" (70) across her brother's face and "all those years [she] had spent with them were like a stone tossed in a pool. Already, the ripples were gone" (80). The reason for Circe's exile on Aiaia and her full transformation from nymph-like goddess to powerful witch is her usage of witchcraft against her own god-like family by turning the nymph Scylla into a sea monster. Furthermore, Circe is used by her father as a bargaining chip against Zeus in the endless struggle between the titan divinities and the Olympian gods. Once Circe is left alone on the island and can discover herself, the similes switch to more mortal, heaven- and earth-bound ones: "I will not be like a bird bred in a cage, I thought, too dull to fly even when the door stands open. I stepped into those woods and my life began" (84). Pamela Mittlefehldt argues that especially for women writers, water can be read as a metaphor for creativity as well as for time:

> Water is illusion: steam, fog, mist. Water is force: storm, torrent, tsunami. Water is light: refractions of a million suns, glittering sparks of distant fire. Water is depth beyond comprehension, cold beyond flame. […] We ourselves are contradictory, elusive, mutable beings. (139)

So, water in Miller's metaphorical usage serves two concrete narrative purposes. It expresses Circe's centuries of subdued existence among the immortals, where time was flowing ceaselessly, and whether Circe existed outside or inside of her family's halls did not make a difference. But it also serves as a reminder of the force behind the witch once she realises her potential. Like water, Circe's sorcery is a powerful tool that one needs to explore and learn to harness: "Then I learned that I could bend the world to my will, as a bow is bent for an arrow. I would have done that toil a thousand times to keep such power in my hands" (86). Circe already used her powers when she was living as a nymph, when they came naturally to her and involved no conscious effort. However, once she accepts and harnesses the power that the world of the mortals – away from naiads, nymphs, and water gods and goddesses – can offer,

she grows more powerful, and her abilities grow with both her efforts and her distance to the water-based power.

Against Divine Immortality

Circe's struggle into a fully formed, rounded character as well as her witchcraft both set her apart from the rest of her divine family. While divine graces and enjoyment of immortality come easy to her siblings, Circe grapples with this aspect of her life the most. When Circe was born, "the name for what [she] was did not exist. They called [her] nymph, assuming [she] would be like [her] mother and aunts and thousand cousins" (3). She accepted her role as the "[l]east of the lesser goddesses, [their] powers were so modest they could scarcely ensure [their] eternities" (3). Immortality and the worship by mortals is reserved for the great divinities, not nymph-like beings as Circe; especially not when these nymphs are "named *Hawk,* Circe, for [their] yellow eyes, and the strange, thin sound of [their] crying" (6, my emphasis). Having never felt at home among the immortal gods and goddesses, it is easy for Circe to decry her own "relentless divinity" (66). Considering further that her only relationships based on kindness and true connection were with mortals such as Daedalus, Odysseus, and Glaucos (before he was turned into a god), Circe's loyalty is clearly aligned with the mortals: "there are rare moments when another soul dips near yours, as stars once a year brush the earth. Such a constellation was [Daedalus] to me" (157). In a podcast about *Circe*, Miller stressed this longing for *nostos*, the ancient Greek word for homecoming:

> I wanted her to be looking for her family, her real family, her found family and the sort of home but she doesn't know where it is. It isn't like Ithaca, it doesn't exist geographically it's something she has to decide and create. And so in that sense I think she has all these qualities but she doesn't have a community. In order to have those qualities she has to live entirely alone. And so the one thing she still lacks is connection. (Recall this Book)

This lack of connection is obvious when Circe lives in her father's halls, but it becomes even more striking when her life with her family is put in contrast with her punishment. When Circe arrives on Aiaia, she is completely alone for the first time in her life. Before feeling the freedom this offers, she reflects on why her father considers the exile a punishment: "To be utterly alone. What worse punishment could there be, my family thought, than to be deprived of their divine presence? […] That was my new home: a monument to my father's pride" (Miller 81–82). The biggest issue Circe takes with her punishment here is neither the exile nor having been used for the trade with Zeus that preceded it, but the complete lack of understanding her divine family shows. As the novel progresses, this indifference is not only shown by her family, but Circe extends this to be a condition of immortality: Mortals "could not imagine the scope of gods, the mercilessness that comes of seeing generations rise and fall around you" (282). "There was no mercy among the gods, I had known it all my life" (293). The older Circe gets, the more disillusioned she becomes:

> The gods and their incomprehensible rules. Always there was a reason you must kneel. […] How many times would I have to learn? Every moment of my peace was a lie, for it came only at the gods' pleasure. No matter what I did, how long I lived, at a whim they would be able to reach down and do with me what they wished. (238)

No divine being has ever treated Circe with understanding, compassion, or kindness. She has been discarded and replaced, traded off for another/one more century of unstable peace between Helios and Zeus. The impression of divinity and immortality that is imprinted on Circe is a question of usefulness and a never-ending quest for power and novelty. Gods such as Helios or Hermes, and even Circe's siblings, only acknowledge her when she becomes useful, for example during the birth of the Minotaur, as only an immortal witch can help birth the monster. As the quote shows, Circe feels that gaining the upper-hand or at least leading a self-sufficient life is impossible as long as she continues to feel as a member of the family and abides by the rules dictated by her father Helios and

her siblings. While Circe herself does not fully realise this in the beginning, her sister Pasiphaë is well aware:

> They take what they want, and in return they give you only your own shackles. […] [E]very time, I thought, that is it, she is done, […] she will leave us and good riddance. Yet always you came back the next day. […] You loathed [our family] as I did. I think it is where our power [as witches] comes from. (151)

The only thing that could make a god afraid is a "power greater than their own" (46). This realisation that there will never be true companionship between immortals, but always a disconnect based on power relations, completely disheartens Circe.

Desirable Mortality

Circe's experiences with and views of mortals, on the contrary, are substantially different. Of course, there are "the practicalities. By the time we learn their names, they are dead. They must be meteors indeed to catch our attention. The merely good: you are dust to us" (Miller 104). Some of Miller's most memorable characters certainly are such meteors for Circe. Her relationships with Daedalus and Odysseus are marked by tenderness, affection, and a focus on the scars that grace mortal skin. In her encounters with Greek heroes throughout the novel, Circe links these scars with learning experiences and honing one's skills: Daedalus's hands are "deft-looking and thickened with muscle" (105) because he had become a master of his craft; Odysseus' chest was "hatched with scars" (220) because he is a heroic warrior who had his fair share of misery. The smooth and rapidly healing skin of immortals, however, has never felt true failure and, as a consequence, they have no need for growth or development. Mortals, with their limited lifetime, have to make use of their skills and abilities, they feel compassion for other's failures and in the end, this "fragility of mortals bred kindness and good grace" (191).

As empathetic as Circe is towards mortals, the continuous passing of time takes a toll on her understanding of mortal problems. When her niece Medea comes to the island to be cleansed from her fratricide, the encounter with this demigoddess and her mortal husband Jason is an opportunity for reflection: "But she had stripped me to my skin, and now I saw myself in her eyes: a bitter, abandoned crone, a spider, scheming to suck out her life" (Miller 179). It can be argued that Circe's impression of the emotional coldness of divinities is at least partially based on her own experiences. Certainly, her treatment by her family does not foster positive connotations with immortals. But the fact that Miller so openly depicts Circe's own fall into bitterness and indifference shows that the lack of empathy is not a family trait, but a trait shared, if not created, by immortality: "This is the grief that makes our kind choose to be stones and trees rather than flesh" (56). This can also be seen in the countless stories of scheming and mingling by Athena and Zeus, for example the planned attack on and murder of Telegonus by Athena.

Circe actively tries to position herself against this indifference bred by immortality, partially to avoid becoming too similar to the family she hates, but she too is bound by the circumstances of her own unending life. During her son's childhood, she is happy to protect him with her divinity, but when she again falls in love with a mortal, Odysseus' son Telemachus, Circe has to decide: Will she succumb to indifference and see another one of her lovers die or will she take her fate into her own hands by trying to become mortal herself? Considering that Odysseus once said about her "[t]hat he had never met a god who enjoyed their divinity less" (Miller 399), it is a rather easy decision for Circe to let go of her immortality. Using her witchcraft, she takes her own divinity and immortality away to grow old with Telemachus. This active decision marks the final step in Circe's character development:

> I thought once that gods are the opposite of death, but I see now they are more dead than anything, for they are unchanging, and can hold nothing in their hands. All my life I have been moving forward, and now I am here. I have a mortal's voice, let me have the rest. (405)

While most mortals depicted in the novel strive for immortality, either for glory, being close to the gods, or because they want to leave a lasting impression, Circe's dream is to grow old in a quiet and peaceful way. Glaucos summarises his new-found position as such: "I will not think on those days [of mortality]. Every hour some new bruise upon me, some new ache, always weary, always burdened and weak. I sit at councils with your father [Helios] now." (56) The precariousness of family relations and romantic relationships is something that Circe, unlike her divine family, has experienced for half an eternity. Her relationships with divine beings, either with her family or Olympian gods such as Hermes, have been dismissive at best and painful or treacherous at worst. In Circe's eyes, immortality lends former mortals and gods the time to breed their worst qualities: Even humble mortal Glaucos turns against her once he finds himself immortal, though unknowingly through Circe's sorcery (50). While the relationships with mortals such as Odysseus or Daedalus are inherently painful as well, as they ultimately have to leave her, the experiences during their time together are full of contentment in the worst case and love in the best. Even if a mortal life must end eventually, she feels "stupid with luck, crammed with it, stumbling drunk" (404) when she herself becomes mortal. In the end, life's general precariousness is what Circe longs for – what makes her feel and experience the world vividly instead of suffering through it in eventual boredom – because "[t]his is what it means to swim in the tide, to walk the earth and feel it touch your feet. This is what it means to be alive" (405).

Miller has set out to write a feminist adaptation of an ancient myth, so let us briefly consider more contemporary implications of her text. The *#MeToo* movement has raised important questions about the treatment of women, especially in the media industry, and there are constant discussions about how women age and when they are ageing out of the workforce. While this is not an explicit theme in Miller's novel, we are confronted with the very rare narrative of a woman wanting to age: "But I do not wish myself back. Of course my flesh reaches for the earth. That is where it belongs" (404). Circe has confronted almost all prejudices that are levelled against modern women: She is forced to both find solace in her

solitude and create a family and home for herself; she gets to experience the joys and pains of motherhood, in a world that does not accept her motherhood; she feels rejection and heartache and has to watch her lovers leave her; she ages, not always gracefully, but with loose skin and grey hair. Miller's depiction of a woman happily ageing is rare, not only because pop culture often relies on the male gaze, which strives for eternal beauty and positions it as the main goal to attain. Miller skilfully reverses this journey at the very end of the novel, by showing death not as an unstoppable outcome to be avoided, but as the holy grail of her journey through life: "All my life I have been moving forward, and now I am here. I have a mortal's voice, let me have the rest" (405).

Conclusion

For Circe, it is mortality that makes life worth living. Immortality might appear to be a desirable state for many mortals within and outside of the novel; nevertheless Miller's novel suggests that with countless chances to restart or change the narrative, there is hardly any challenge in life. Miller's idea of humanity is thereby completely dependent on the notion that mortals want to strive for meaningful relationships and a world that is both worth living in and worth leaving from. At the core of Circe's beliefs lies the conviction that immortality robs us of empathy, understanding, and the acceptance of imperfections, which are the factors that make life interesting for her in Miller's novel. In societies with a strong set of beliefs in an underworld, such as the Greco-Roman conception of Hades, with its blessed isles, Madeline Miller's novel suggests conclusions that are not limited to the antiquity it is set in, but are impactful for her 21st century readers. Miller's narrative follows a woman who is ultimately neither divine nor mortal enough and constantly strives for something else, without being able to name it for a majority of the novel. Once she discovers that it is mortality she longs for, she can finally find peace and happiness. While the novel, contrary to Miller's intentions, may not fundamentally change popular gender-biases around ageing, or will stop alchemists from looking for the

fountain of youth, it can be argued that Miller wants to support her readers who have enough of not being enough in finding pleasure in a life that can be shaped and created by their own mortal hands.

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