

Circe's Song: Path to Self-Awareness and Self-Empowerment in Madeline Miller's "Circe"

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Abstract. *Madeline Miller's Circe is a captivating reimagining of the ancient mythological figure who is best known from Homer's Odyssey. Unlike the traditional depictions of Circe as an enchantress who tempts and manipulates men, Miller's novel converts her from a minor sorceress to a powerful symbol of self-awareness and empowerment. In the novel, Circe is illustrated as a multifaceted protagonist on her transforming path of self-awareness and empowerment. The present study looks at how Miller depicts Circe's journey to self-discovery, emphasizing the internal and external struggles that define her character. Miller's use of Circe as a symbol of metamorphosis provides a captivating narrative, making the novel an essential contribution to modern readings of classic heroines. The current paper dives into Circe's journey of self-awareness and discovery, investigating how she goes through a transformation from a marginalized nymph to an autonomous and self-possessed sorceress representing female empowerment and resilience. It contributes to current concerns about feminist mythmaking and the changing role of female characters in literature.*

Keywords: *Circe; Mythological reimagining; Female agency; Self-awareness; Self-empowerment;*

Literature Review

Literature has long explored the nature and complexities of womanhood, and this discussion is getting deeper in post-modern literature as well (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2009). Literature scholars argue that nearly all civilizations share narratives of individuals who overcome destiny, divine forces, or catastrophic events, not necessarily through sheer power, but frequently through unique inner qualities such as bravery and intelligence (Gabriel, 2020). In the contemporary research in the literature, one of the most prevailing topics is self-awareness and self-empowerment, especially of the female characters. Madeline Miller's *Circe* is fundamentally a coming-of-age story that follows the protagonist's path from rejection and isolation to self-actualization.

Miller (2018) presents Circe as a modern reinterpretation of the enchantress from Homer's *Odyssey*, transforming her from minor mythological figures into a well-developed and autonomous character. Rather than depicting Circe as a seductive and menacing sorceress who detains Odysseus, Miller reimagines her as a character with agency and a narrative voice, enabling her to recount her own journey of transformation, self-discovery and self-empowerment (Sarwar & Fatima, 2022). Miller's novel reinterprets conventional depictions of women Greek mythology in order to participate in the current feminist conversation (Qasim & Rahayu, 2021). In the novel power is reinterpreted as self-mastery and the courage to follow one's own path, rather than as dominion over others.

Through a feminist perspective, it can be noted that the novel examines themes of female autonomy, identity, and resilience, establishing Circe as an invaluable contribution to contemporary mythological fiction.

Circe's Classical and Mythological Background

Circe is one of the most mysterious and enigmatic characters in Greek mythology, featured largely in Homer's *Odyssey* but also in other classical literature (e.g. Ovid's *Metamorphosis*; Apollonius of

Rhodes *Argonautica*; Hesiod's *Theogony*). She has been viewed and reimagined differently over time, from a frightening enchantress to a symbol of female empowerment (Yarnall, 1989). Circe's character has been analyzed through various perspectives throughout history. Since her initial appearance in Homer's *Odyssey* later literary traditions and philosophical discussions have expanded on her significance. Scholars have interpreted Circe as a representation of transformation, temptation, divine authority, female autonomy, self-awareness, and empowerment (Yarnall, 1989; Rivers, 2022; Franklin, 2023; Sunny & Narayana, 2024). Her ability to transform humans into animals, within a broader mythological framework, highlights the distinction between humanity and animality, civilization and savagery, as well as nature and culture.

Circe is only mentioned briefly in Hesiod's *Theogony*, but she remains an essential figure in the story. She is introduced as the offspring of Helios, the sun god, and Perse, the sea nymph. She also becomes Telegonus' mother, and Odysseus is his father. While the poem does not explain her magical abilities, her past reveals that she hails from both heavenly and oceanic roots, implying that she has powerful supernatural ties. Rather than focusing on her acts, the poem situates her inside a prominent family, emphasizing how gods and mortals are frequently linked in Greek myths.

As claimed in Zalewska-Jura (2018), Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* shows Circe in a calmer, more religious light than in earlier stories. As Medea's relative, she gets involved when Jason and Medea arrive looking for forgiveness for their murderous crimes. Without fully comprehending their actions, she performs the cleansing process, remaining emotionally detached and focused on spiritual commitment. As posited in the article by Blum-Sorensen (2023), rather than a vengeful enchantress, in *Argonautica*, Circe is portrayed as a defender of holy traditions, emphasizing themes of sin, redemption, and divine limitations. This picture is consistent with the poem's larger consideration of moral struggle and the conflict between feeling and responsibility.

According to Rufo (2016), in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Circe is depicted as a powerful and enigmatic enchantress who is using potions and magic. She is both beautiful and dangerous. She is also an illustration of conflicting qualities of love and revenge. When she falls in love and is rejected by Glaucus, her passion turns to rage, prompting her to mercilessly change her rival, Scylla, into a sea monster. This act presents her possessive and vindictive side, demonstrating how her magic is powered by intense emotions. Circe's character in Ovid's mythological work is highlighting themes of change, power, and the darker side of desire.

Unlike many female figures in Greek mythology, who are often subordinate to male gods or heroes, Circe possesses independent divine power. Her wisdom and knowledge are central to her character, as demonstrated by the crucial guidance she provides to Odysseus on his journey. This wisdom, alongside her magical abilities, represent her as a powerful and respected figure. Circe maintains control over her domain. Her autonomy is particularly evident in her ability to choose her lovers, exemplified by her relationship with Odysseus, which highlights a degree of agency rarely granted to women in ancient narratives (Hartman & Zimmeroff, 2009). Consequently, modern feminist interpretations have reimagined Circe as a symbol of female power, agency, self-empowerment, and self-determination.

In Miller's novel Circe is the daughter of the sea nymph Perse and the Titan Helios. She lives in a transitional state, neither completely mortal nor completely divine, neither completely strong nor completely helpless. She is marginalized from the beginning, being mocked by her siblings for being weak, rejected by her father, and scorned by her mother. However, after discovering her natural talent for witchcraft, Circe starts to define herself. Although this realization has a price: she is exiled to the island of Aiaia, where she must face loneliness, adjust to her new environment, and develop a better sense of who she is.

Exile and its Impact on Circe's Self-awareness and Empowerment

*What fate is mine who, far apart from pains
And fears and turmoils of the cross-grained world,
Dwell, like a lonely god, in a charmed isle
Where I am first and only, and like one who should love poisonous savours more than mead,
Long for a tempest on me and grow sick
Of resting, and divine free carelessness!*

By Augusta Webster (1893)

Exile has been a constant theme throughout human history. In ancient perception, there existed the belief that the world inhabited by humans was not truly their home, and this mythic perspective was

shared across many cultural traditions (Rojas, Nuñez, & Erices, 2015). Among ancient beliefs, being exiled from one's home and left unprotected by laws, family, and friends was considered a fate even more terrible than death in ancient Greece (Patsalidis, 2011). Displacement, or in other words, exile due to compulsion, rather than choice, is a specific form of broader human movement across territorial and government boundaries. According to Pavel (1998), it typically arises from ideological or spiritual persecution, rather than financial motivations.

Exile is commonly used in literature as a transformative moment in which characters confront their identities and reassess their principles. Madeline Miller's Circe is one of such portrayals of an exile as a narrative that allows great personal growth, and is no longer a form of punishment but in some understanding, a blessing. This escape represents a shift toward transformative feminist progress (Rivers, 2022). According to Joseph Campbell (2004), the hero's journey begins with the Call to Adventure, which frequently forces an individual to leave one's comfort zone. The hero may be depicted through exile, which is the forced or voluntary displacement from community, family, or even identity. Campbell sees it as a necessary rapture. According to him, "the familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit" (p.51).

In Madeline Miller's novel, Circe's exile is the outcome of a divine form of punishment. After transforming Scylla out of jealousy and rebellion, the Olympians and her father Helios banish her to Aiaia, a remote and isolated island designed to mute and confine her powers (Plumwood, 1993). However, rather than causing stagnation, exile catalyzes change. Circe comes to understand herself outside the expectations of gods and Titans after being freed from the dynamics of celestial civilization. The psychological space produced by solitude promotes introspection: "When one is alone for long enough, the past becomes a country you can walk across" (Miller, 2018, p.101).

After being expelled, Circe arrives on the island of Aiaia without the company of gods or humans. She soon realizes, however, that the island is already teeming with life – stones, vegetation, and wildlife populate the landscape of Aiaia. Although unable to depart from the island, she gradually discovers meaning, connection, and personal strength through her interactions with the island's living elements. Thus, based on Miller's novel, exile can be seen as a transition from collective identification to personal authenticity, self-discovery and self-actualization.

According to FitzGibbon (2022), it is paradoxical that it is in isolation that Circe begins to experience a genuine sense of place and identity. It can be noted that this personal evolution emerges from a mutual bond she develops with nature, characterized by stability and mutual reliance. Ultimately, Circe gains the strength to open herself to affection, fragility, and the human condition by both channeling and surrendering to the forces of the natural realm. Exile becomes the catalyst for Circe's independence to emerge and strengthen (Thomas, 2021). It is during the exile that she gains invaluable moments of realization, growth, self-awareness, and empowerment that will be further discussed below.

Key moments of realization and growth

One of Circe's most important realizations happens when she discovers her ability to transform. After being humiliated and ignored by the gods, she turns the nymph Scylla into a monster out of jealousy and grief. Although this act results in her exile, it also awakens her to her own hidden power – witchcraft, or *pharmakeia*. Circe feels terrified and excited at the same time. The latter can be seen through her words from the novel: "I had power, and I had used it" (Miller, 2018, p.56). This moment of realization of her power is the first significant break from the divine realm and passivity. Although unlike the other Olympians' effortless, inner abilities, Circe's magic requires tough work, strong and consistent willpower, and regular practice. Her awareness that she can influence the world via witchcraft lays the groundwork for her eventual independence. It also distinguishes her from the other gods and signals her departure from their domain.

Another pivotal moment of her realization and growth is in her years of solitude, within which she builds her magic not as a tool for vengeance, but as a kind of creation and self-sufficiency. This development is crucial since it represents a shift in her perception of power, as a deliberate, acquired skill rather than an emotional reaction (London, Sessa, & Shelley, 2022). Her exile on the island becomes her own universe, shaped by her decisions, hard work, and strong willpower.

Circe's Relationships with Divine and Mortal Character and their Role in her Empowerment

Circe's self-realization and empowerment are heavily influenced by her interaction with characters such as Hermes, Daedalus, Odysseus, and Telegonus. It can also be posited that her emotional growth is greatly shaped by her knowledge of mortality. Her friendship with mortals is profound on her journey of

self-awareness and empowerment. The latter, with their fragility and temporality, stand in contrast to her previous assumption of immortality. Circe's relationships with key characters and their influence on her journey of self-awareness will be discussed below.

Among various divine and mortal characters with whom Circe interacts, Hermes plays a crucial and complex role in developing her early concept of relationships, power, and self-awareness (Thomas, 2021). Hermes is the initial deity to appear during her time of exile. His presence offers a sense of comfort, easing the weight of solitude. Yet, his intentions remain unclear, shifting between playful interest and indifferent humor. He shares tales from beyond the island, news from the realm of gods, and disrespectful remarks about divine affairs. Initially, Circe is driven by a longing for connection and is captivated by Hermes's assertive behaviour. Their physical involvement, instigated by Hermes, lacks emotional intimacy and remains superficial, exemplifying the typical dynamic between deities and those of lower status, even within divine families. Her willingness to engage in such a relationship illustrates her early inability to recognize her intrinsic value and potential influence within the divine and mortal realms.

Hermes represents the classic figure of the cunning archetype – an elusive and intelligent presence who challenges established conventions and compels others to face difficult realities. Beyond his role as a messenger, the figure of Hermes also encompasses associations with trade, theft, and interpretive practices (Alanka, 2015; Lavach, 2020). As an embodiment of mythological consciousness, the Hermes narrative serves as a significant model for understanding cognitive frameworks and functions as a foundational archetype in the exploration of communication and transmission paradigms. In Circe, his presence fulfils the aforementioned function, acting as a reflective surface through which the protagonist begins to examine her status within the established order of the gods. His casual disregard for divine authority and the harshness of his peers subtly fosters in Circe a growing critical awareness and a desire to question the structure she was born into.

As their dialogue develops, Circe gradually uncovers the constructed and performative aspects of divine identity. Although Hermes withholds emotional intimacy and steadfast commitment, he reveals valuable insights: knowledge of nature, updates from the human world, and insights into the strategic maneuvering among deities. These exchanges boost Circe's intellectual growth, enhancing her fascination with earthly matters and sorcery fields through which she eventually discovers her true agency and self-reliance (Volpato, 2022).

In Circe, Miller reimagines Daedalus not just as a legendary inventor but as a deeply human presence whose quiet influence prompts a turning point in Circe's path toward autonomy. Unlike the many divine and mortal figures who have looked for overpowering her, Daedalus treats her with gentleness, thoughtfulness, and shared creative purpose. Their brief encounter offers Circe an alternative model of connection—one built on respect and mutual recognition.

Their meeting in Crete, where she assists with the Minotaur's birth, occurs during a phase when Circe is beginning to reject the exploitative patterns of her past. Daedalus stands apart from others she has known by embodying skill and humility rather than dominance or charm. His dedication to building and making reflects the same persistence that defines her craft with herbs and spells, forging a quiet affinity between them.

Rather than pursuing conquest or eternity, Daedalus chooses meaningful work and grounded wisdom. His view of mortality leaves a lasting imprint on Circe, teaching her that fulfillment lies not in endless life but in intentional living. In this way, he becomes less a romantic figure and more a guide, helping her imagine a future shaped by choice rather than inheritance.

Ultimately, Daedalus contributes to Circe's transformation not by granting her power, but by modeling a form of strength rooted in humanity. Through him, she glimpses a life of integrity and self-determination—one she later chooses for herself.

Odysseus, the man from Ithaca remains on the island, engaging Circe in dialogue and companionship that challenges her understanding of closeness, personal control, and the nature of life's impermanence (Liang, 2017). Though his stay is temporary, his presence becomes a key influence in Circe's process of inner growth and recognition of self-worth. Odysseus approaches Circe as a peer in thoughtful, inquisitive, and emotionally open manner. Their relationship evolves through shared conversation and mutual interest rather than dominance or fantasy. He engages her as a being with thoughts and autonomy, not as a lesser subject to be conquered or controlled.

While classical tradition often depicts him as a master of narrative and illusion, Miller reimagines Circe as the one who gradually gains control over her own story (Wilder, 2021). Although he speaks of battles, destiny, and strategy, she begins to see the act of storytelling as a tool for making sense of her experiences and shaping her identity. Through their exchanges, Circe discovers not just companionship but also a way

to redefine herself—from an isolated figure defined by banishment to someone capable of claiming and naming her own reality.

This evolution in how she frames her life plays a significant role in her becoming. Odysseus does not bestow strength upon her; rather, his presence encourages her to uncover it within. Through their ongoing conversations, she begins to examine the structures of divine control, the illusion of fate, and even the desirability of living forever. He unintentionally becomes a catalyst in her movement toward autonomy.

Crucially, Circe does not attempt to hold onto him when he chooses to leave. She neither regresses into sorrow nor yields to the loneliness that previously defined her exile. Instead, she embarks on a renewed path—one shaped by the insight their relationship offered. His humanity and impermanence teach her to appreciate the fleeting, to embrace emotional vulnerability, and to welcome transformation. In this way, his leaving becomes just as meaningful as his presence.

When she eventually meets their son, Telegonus, the lessons drawn from her time with Odysseus guide her decisions. She steps into the roles of nurturer, healer, and educator—not by divine command, but through deliberate intention.

Through this relationship, Circe experiences for the first time a connection founded on equality and mutual recognition. Odysseus acknowledges her intellect and listens to her stories, offering her a glimpse of the human condition—a perspective absent from her prior encounters with divinity or early mortal affection. Their connection is built not on control or need, but on shared understanding, revealing to Circe a form of love that supports rather than diminishes.

Ultimately, Odysseus functions not as a rescuer but as a reflective surface—an earthly presence that helps Circe see the potential for connection, for embracing change, and for becoming the author of her own life. His companionship sharpens her insight, expands her emotional depth, and contributes significantly to her transformation from a silenced outsider to a self-determined woman who chooses her own destiny. Through knowing him, Circe learns the value of living fully and freely on her own terms.

Odysseus challenges her previous beliefs about power and cunning. Their interactions are more than just an exchange of information. They are the moments of mutual recognition. "He showed me that I had a self beyond what gods had made me" (Miller, 2018, p.215). Odysseus views her not as a deity or a monster but as a person capable of thought, wit, and emotion. Their connection teaches her profound human experiences such as intimacy, vulnerability, and sadness. Thus, mortality serves as a mirror in which she can see herself more clearly.

In *Circe*, Telegonus, Circe's son with Odysseus, serves not just as a symbol of mortality but as a key figure in her growing autonomy. His birth and upbringing mark a profound shift in Circe's identity, transforming her from a passive, exiled figure into a self-determined mother who redefines power, love, and destiny.

Unlike her previous roles, where she was controlled by others, Circe's choice to raise Telegonus alone reflects a conscious decision to embrace a form of power rooted in love and responsibility. Through motherhood, she gains a sense of purpose and authority that is independent of divine hierarchies (Macmillan, 2019).

Telegonus also prompts Circe to confront her past, pushing her to revisit her choices and values. When he decides to seek Odysseus, Circe's resistance stems from a desire to protect him from the painful realities of the divine and mortal worlds. Ultimately, she lets him go, learning that true strength lies in empowering others.

Telegonus' return, marked by grief over Odysseus' death, deepens Circe's commitment to living a life shaped by human connection rather than divine legacy. In embracing Penelope and Telemachus, Circe's maternal role extends beyond biology, reflecting emotional leadership and the realization of her empowered self (Etiz, 2023).

Telegonus thus becomes a transformative figure in Circe's journey, teaching her that power based on care and self-awareness is the most enduring form of strength.

Circe's subsequent relationship with her son, Telegonus, deepens her understanding of love and sacrifice. Motherhood exposes her capacity for strong defense, humility, and acceptance – emotions that are in contrast to the divine world's frigid detachment.

The most important moment of growth and self-empowerment occurs near the end of the novel, when Circe decides to cut ties with the gods permanently. She rejects her father, Helios, overcomes Athena's manipulations, and chooses to give up her immortality (Stucky, 2022). This is a profound choice that represents the death of the old self and a rebirth as humanity.

The Novel's Alignment with Contemporary Discussions on Female Agency and Self-realization

Female are frequently kidnapped, raped, or bartered by their fathers, with little regard for their own desires

or aspirations. In contrast, male heroes such as Hercules, Jason, Odysseus, and Perseus are remembered through history, their legacies vastly different from those of figures like Pandora, Medusa, and Helen of Troy. This disparity arises partly because the stories are seldom told from the perspective of female characters, and their experiences are often overlooked. As a result, female characters are typically reduced to roles defined by their beauty or naivety, serving as lovers, villains, or emotionally shallow plot devices (Vaitiekūnaitė, 2022). While a few female characters do break this mold—being powerful and feared—they are often depicted with masculine traits, as strength and dominance are viewed as incompatible with femininity. Circe emerges as a key feminist literary figure that challenges standard mythological depictions of women (Swartzentruber, 2023).

Circe addresses modern debates about gender, empowerment, and the reinvention of established roles. The narrative reflects the difficulties many women experience today in achieving autonomy and self-identity. Circe can be considered as a compelling investigation of female agency, which feminist theory defines as not only autonomy but also the ability to challenge and modify society institutions that limit one's identity (source). Circe may be viewed as a depiction of the continual fight for women to establish control over their lives and bodies through her magical mastery and control over her fate.

One of the central topics in Madeline Miller's novel is the reimagining of motherhood as a source of strength and self-realization, as opposed to sacrifice and obedience. Circe's bond with her son Telegonus enables her to reinvent motherhood as an empowering decision, mirroring feminist theories that see motherhood as a varied experience that allows for creativity and self-definition (Belenli, 2024). Miller rejects typical representations of motherhood and instead presents a story in which women develop their identities via their parental duties rather than being limited by them.

The novel also criticizes patriarchal structures through Circe's relationships with male characters. As Circe acquires knowledge and autonomy, she begins to question these gendered power systems, mirroring the feminist ideal of destroying patriarchal conventions and establishing spaces for women to define themselves autonomously. Miller's portrayal of Circe's development underscores the significance of fighting external control to develop internal strength and autonomy.

Furthermore, by rejecting heavenly expectations, Circe redefines her connection with masculinity and patriarchy while simultaneously embracing her complex identity as a woman, goddess, and member of the natural world. Her trip emphasizes the necessity of comprehending the numerous elements that shape one's identity and agency.

By the end of the novel she affirms her right to control her own future by making the historic choice to give up her immortality. This choice embodies the novel's central theme, suggesting that genuine empowerment is not defined by external authority but by self-awareness, self-empowerment and the ability to live authentically. Circe serves both a literary rehabilitation of a once-demonized legendary figure and a mediation on universal themes of self-discovery and empowerment through its nuanced depiction of Circe's psychological growth.

Conclusion

Circe's evolution in Madeline Miller's Circe depicts a profound journey toward self-awareness and empowerment. By confronting her fears, challenging her concept of self, and asserting her individuality, she breaks free from the constraints imposed by both gods and society. Her story emphasizes that true strength is found in accepting and comprehending one's actual nature rather than dominating others. In this way, Circe's song represents the metaphor for the transformational power of personal realization and growth.

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კირკეს სიმღერა: თვითცნობიერებისა და თვითგაძლიერების გზა მადელინ მილერის „კირკე“-ში

მერკვილაძე მარიამ

შავი ზღვის საერთაშორისო უნივერსიტეტი, თბილისი

აბსტრაქტი

მადელინ მილერის "კირკე" არის ძველი მითოლოგიური ფიგურის ხელახალი რეინტერპრეტაცია, რომელიც ყველაზე ცნობილია ჰომეროსის „ოდისეადან“. კირკეს ტრადიციული წარმოჩენისგან განსხვავებით, სადაც ის გვევლინება როგორც მომხიბლავი ჯადოქარი, რომელიც აცდუნებს კაცებს და მანიპულირებს მათით, მილერის რომანი მას თვითცნობიერებისა და გაძლიერების მძლავრ სიმბოლოდ აქცევს. რომანში კირკე წარმოდგენილია, როგორც მრავალმხრივი პროტაგონისტი თავისი ტრანსფორმაციული გზით თვითცნობიერების, ქმედითუნარიანობისა და გაძლიერებისკენ. წინამდებარე კვლევა განიხილავს, თუ როგორ ასახავს მილერი კირკეს თვითაღმოჩენის მოგზაურობას, ხაზს უსვამს პროტაგონისტის შინაგან და გარეგან ბრძოლებს, რომლებიც განსაზღვრავს მის ხასიათს. მილერის კირკეს გამოყენება, როგორც მეტამორფოზის სიმბოლოსი, უზრუნველყოფს მომხიბლავ ნარატივს, რაც რომანს ხდის არსებითი წვლილის შემტანად ანტიკური ქალების თანამედროვე ინტერპრეტაციაში. წინამდებარე ნაშრომი იკვლევს კირკეს თვითცნობიერებისა და აღმოჩენის მოგზაურობას, იძიებს, თუ როგორ გადის იგი ტრანსფორმაციას მარგინალიზებული ნიშნიდან ავტონომიურ და ქმედითუნარიან ჯადოქრამდე, რომელიც წარმოადგენს ქალური სიძლიერის და გამძლეობის სიმბოლოს. ეს ხელს უწყობს მითოლოგიის აქტუალურ გამოყენებას ფემინისტურ ჭრილში და ლიტერატურაში ქალი პერსონაჟების ცვლად როლთან დაკავშირებულ აქტუალურ საკითხებს წამოწევს წინ.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: კირკე; ხელახალი მითოლოგიური ინტერპრეტაცია; ქალური ქმედითუნარიანობა; თვითცნობიერება; თვითგაძლიერება;