

The Laugh of Circe: An Ecriture Feminine Journey to the Madeline Miller's Retelling

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Abstract

This essay aims to analyze the underlying reasons behind the infamous reputation of Circe, a mythological goddess, as depicted in Madeline Miller's 2018 novel "Circe," within the context of a fantastical world where male hegemony is strongly felt. It explores Circe's act of writing as a mythological woman through Miller's pen and her regaining of fame in the modern world, drawing on Helene Cixous' feminist theory of "écriture féminine" discussed in her article "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976). The concept of women's writing and the belief that a woman's voice will be heard through her writing, central to Cixous' theory, are also examined by relating them to another mythological female character, Medusa. The essay emphasizes their shared context of infamous reputation and highlights the necessity for mythological female characters to vindicate themselves through writing, respecting the framework of "écriture féminine." It concludes that the essay serves as a tribute to this theory and asserts that even in the realm of mythology, the superimposed notion of the supernatural does not prevail over female characters but rather accurately portrays the reality of gender inequality..

Keywords: Patriarchy, Hegemony, Woman, Writing, Mythology

1. Introduction

Throughout history, the experience of being a woman has been marked by pain, frequent discussions of gender inequality, and uprisings against injustices faced by women in every corner of the world. Being a woman evokes the imagery of embracing femininity and fighting within this reality every day, which can be likened to a fantastical mythological world for creative minds. One of the goddesses from this mythological realm is Circe, whose experience of being a woman will be examined in light of Helene Cixous' 1976 work, "The Laugh of Medusa," through an exploration of Madeline Miller's adaptation of Circe. The education, reading, and writing of women have been extensively addressed by numerous feminist writers throughout history. Cixous, in particular, emphasizes the encouragement of women's writing through her theory of "écriture féminine," asserting that as women write, their voices will be heard and they can access their own voices. This essay focuses on Circe, as

portrayed by Miller, who gradually gains strength as a woman and finds her own voice. It draws parallels between Circe's story and the example of Medusa presented by Cixous, showcasing women in mythology who resist male hegemony, even if in a mythical context. The essay aims to provide a close perspective on the goddess's life and uncover the underlying reasons behind the negative reputation associated with her, similar to the purpose of Cixous' work. The experience of being a woman has been scarred throughout history, with many philosophers and religious figures openly asserting that women are dangerous creatures. According to Miller (2017), Heinrich Kramer's 1487 work, "*Malleus Maleficarum*, described women as being chiefly addicted to Evil Superstitions and blamed their greed, credulous nature, feeble mind and body, slippery tongue, jealous nature, and inherently evil disposition for their tendency to succumb to the Devil's influence."

2. Circe in Mythology

Circe is a goddess from mythology and was reimagined by Madeline Miller in 2018. In mythology, Circe is the daughter of the sun god Helios and the Ocean nymph Perse. She is renowned for her extensive knowledge of plants and her ability to create powerful potions. Indeed, she is strong against her enemies. Additionally, she punishes those who harm her by transforming them into animals with her magical staff. Miller's portrayal of Circe offers a different perspective from other accounts in history, giving Circe the opportunity to participate in shaping her own destiny. In this mythological story, Circe learns to govern herself as a woman. This also brings the reader to a common point that aligns with Cixous' (1976) "The Laugh of Medusa." Throughout all of their stories, mythology sends the same message about women. It approaches women with beautiful attributes, almost enchanting the reader and convincing them of how ugly and wicked women truly are. Cixous (1976) states, "To look at Medusa straight on is enough to see her. And she is not deadly. She is beautiful, and she is laughing." Circe, as a goddess, shares a similar fate with Medusa. The art of potion-making that she developed to protect herself from malicious acts gave her a negative reputation. However, by presenting Circe's perspective, it becomes possible to interpret and understand the pain of being a woman in this mythological world, shedding light on the misunderstandings and offering an understanding of her experiences.

Before delving into Miller's portrayal of Circe as a female goddess, it is necessary to mention earlier works that have featured her throughout history. In mythology, the first and most notable work that comes to mind when Circe is mentioned is likely Homer's *Odyssey*. On his journey back from the Trojan War, Odysseus visits the island of Aeaea, where Circe resides. However, Circe transforms many of his crew members into animals. Odysseus insists that Circe restore his crew to their human forms, and he stays with her for a year. During this time, Circe becomes the mother of their two sons, Latinus and Telegonus. Another significant work where Circe is featured is the adventure of Scylla and Circe, observable in Book 14 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid & Riley, 1995). In this work, Circe's

enchantment of Scylla through her magic is also depicted. Circe, who falls in love with a mortal named Glaucus, cannot bear his love and interest in Scylla, so she turns her into a monster. As a result, dogs emerge from Scylla's waist. In revenge, Scylla kills some of Odysseus' men but cannot destroy the fleet of Aeneas because she has been transformed into a rock. Circe is a witch, and all of her actions stem from jealousy.

Circe, a powerful mythological female character with her abilities, has been portrayed as ruthless, malicious, and devoid of emotions throughout history. Indeed, Circe is so beautiful that she enchants sailors and causes their deaths. This also brings to mind the sirens. In mythology, sirens are known as sea monsters living on an island called Scopuli. They enchant sailors who pass by with their alluring voices and cruelly kill them. From this, it can be understood that some female mythological characters have gained a reputation as wicked but beautiful women. Medusa, once renowned for her beauty, is similar in this regard. Medusa, known for her evil deeds in history, can be seen as a victim due to her being a woman. The depiction of Medusa transforming into a deadly woman and seeking revenge can be seen as a result of male hegemony. Beauvoir (1949) mentioned this by stating, "By the time humankind reaches the stage of writing its mythology and laws, patriarchy is definitely established: it is males who write the codes." Therefore, these women, who have been victims of the patriarchal world and have gained a negative reputation in mythology for centuries, are bearing the punishment for simply being women.

3. Miller's Retelling through "Ecriture Feminine"

Miller's portrayal of Circe's story begins when she is a young girl. The story unfolds with the meeting of Circe's mother and father, initiated by her grandfather offering his daughter to her father. Her grandfather states that if he wants her, Helios can take her. Thus, the fate of Circe's mother, a naiad, is determined. Even in this world, power and the patriarchal structure have been the most crucial factors for a woman's reproduction and transformation into a wife. However, unlike a woman whose destiny is predetermined, Circe's mother courageously asserts that Helios must marry her to be with her. She knows she could easily fall victim to him. Circe tells him that he can easily get what her father wants. Fortunately, Helios sees the marriage as an innovation and refrains from violating her mother. The beginning of the story proves how even mythical order is inherently patriarchal. After Circe is born, despite living for centuries, she remains indifferent to her abilities. This is because she has a role within the patriarchal order and is aware of it. The patriarchal order that dominates the mythological structure also hinders women from reaching their self-awareness, abilities, and ways of thinking. According to Cixous (1976), "Medusa's condemnation of ugliness is a result of a male-dominated world." Medusa, despite her fame for her beauty, is now a victim of rape, an entity deemed ugly and scorned. Rape is an element of male hegemony that seeks to render women unattractive. On the other hand, Circe incorporates criticisms of her image into her own narrative. Circe's father describes her as having hair

streaked like a wildcat and a disturbing jawline. As a result, her mother believes she won't be able to marry a prince. Circe's two beautiful step-sisters also criticize her appearance with good intentions. Additionally, Circe possesses the ridiculed and scorned characteristic of not having a beautiful voice like a goddess. Therefore, even in mythology, a powerful woman is considered beautiful. However, this does not guarantee that she will have a happy life through a good marriage, as she is always at risk of experiencing the same danger of rape as the once beautiful Medusa.

When viewed as a metaphorical element, Miller's negative references to Circe's voice can be interpreted as a woman's struggle to access her own voice and find or express herself. Circe is suppressed by the disparagement in her voice. Being unheard as a goddess associates her with a weak figure among the gods. Her father is a popular and magnificent god, and her "ugly" voice is attributed to her mother. Indeed, since femininity is defined as weak by the patriarchal system, the girl's flaw must have been passed down from her mother. Clearly, the element of voice here also targets the mother. Circe's mother couldn't give her daughter a beautiful voice because she herself was not a beautiful and upper-class goddess. At this point, Cixous (1976) in "The Laugh of the Medusa" expresses that women should stop listening to the sirens, but she makes a good point about sirens actually being men. In the mythological story as it has been passed down through history, sirens are associated with monstrous women, yet Cixous emphasizes that what actually occurs is the suppression of the female voice. With the permission of patriarchal superiority, men have the power to kill and burn using their strong voices. In this case, Miller refers to the oppressed woman in the patriarchal system in which Circe grew up by expressing negative comments and perspectives about her voice. Furthermore, patriarchal hegemony has determining factors in mythology regarding how women should appear. Cixous (1976) speaks about this situation as follows: "We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we have been victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex." Thus, it is expected that Miller's Circe should have a golden-haired and goddess-like voice, but her birth is a disappointment. However, Miller's Circe does not seem to have such concerns; she accepts herself as she is and does not let the things said to her leave deep marks on her character development.

Cixous's (1976) objection to Freud's portrayal of women as negative beings represented by men, which he referred to as the "unexplored abyss," has been a useful reference in understanding Miller's Circe. Events such as Circe helping her punished uncle Prometheus, performing powerful magic out of jealousy, and transforming Scylla into a monster highlight her courage. Circe interprets her belief in being a woman as follows: "It is a common saying that women are delicate creatures—flowers, eggs, anything that may be crushed in a moment's carelessness. If I had ever believed it, I no longer do." (Miller, 2018, p. 437) Cixous (1976) expresses that women should be understood when they write: "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, for you alone; your body is yours; take it." As Miller's

Circe writes her own story, she comes to life and immerses herself in the experience of being a woman, sometimes crushed under male superiority and kingdom, and at other times finding meaning in her existence and gradually finding her voice.

Furthermore, it appears that Miller's Circe's sole desire is to explain herself to herself. She has a longing to question the meaning of her actions, existence, and identity. Circe moves towards a journey of self-awareness, breaking free from the pressures of patriarchal dominance. Eventually, she is exiled and sentenced to rule the island. This becomes Circe's new home and, in a way, a monument to her father's pride. Indeed, her father has played a defining role in Circe's fate. The father is the head of the family, and his decisions are decisive for the destinies of others. Circe continues to seek meaning in her exile through her writings. Literally, Circe is no longer a bird in a cage. "A golden cage is still a cage." (Miller, 2018, p. 198) The cage door is open, and Circe is not foolish enough to fly away. As expressed by Kristeva (1991) in a question, "To be deprived of parents- is that where freedom starts?" For Circe, the answer to this question, just like the question itself, is filled with uncertainties. As a woman, she must now depart from the hegemonic order ruled by her father, exile herself amidst nothingness, and build her own world, sustaining her own hegemony.

Miller's Circe delivers the message to readers that a woman's self-discovery and self-expression become possible through writing. As Circe writes, for generations, she has wandered the world in a sleepy and melancholic manner, freely and comfortably, leaving no trace. Circe, as she writes, discovers and criticizes herself, seemingly relying on an inherent feminine enthusiasm. "Then I learned that I could bend the world to my will, as a bow is bent for an arrow." (Miller, 2018, p. 118) Circe, immediately after her self-discovery as a sorceress, includes her body in this exploration. By choosing to be with Hermes, she satisfies her desire for the male body as well. Cixous (1976), referring to women's sexuality, says, "Women must break free from the trap of silence. They should not be deceived into accepting the role of marginal or harem." Circe's father has many women, and Circe's mother has many children with her sisters. Therefore, the harem mentioned by Cixous is, in a way, the world in which Circe was born. This also offers a perspective on Circe's sexuality. Indeed, Circe is not in love with Hermes, but she is with him because she is an independent woman and can now make her own choices since, after all, she is too ugly to marry a handsome prince.

Circe now begins to listen to the voice of her own passions. Beauvoir (1949) stated, "Capabilities are clearly manifested only when they have been realized." For Circe, this ability is her sorcery, her healing. It is something that requires her to put forth all her efforts and passion; she must cut, shape, mold, and believe. Circe is a testament in the mythological world to how powerful a woman can be when she turns inward and is allowed to freely live her passions. Indeed, her journey of self-discovery begins on the day she steps foot on the island, departing from patriarchal dominance. Circe

grows stronger and begins to reap the fruits of her endeavors. She tends to neglected plants, trees, animals, and many other things in need of care on the island. Then, a group of sailors arrive on the island, and Circe serves them with all her hospitality and goodwill, desiring to be a good host. The questions directed at her revolve around whether her husband will come to the island and when he will arrive. In the absence of men, the island is devoid of irregularities and corruption, whereas when sailors, as men, settle on the island, they will engage in theft for a while, and they could violate Circe. Indeed, after Circe is violated, her father Helios knows about it; he is the god of the sky, powerful and dominant. However, nothing changes, and Circe is left alone. After the violation, she is left alone with her thoughts. This is a lesson she learned from men as a young woman.

While the act of violation targets the body concretely, it also leaves deep marks and traumas on the soul. Cixous (1976) has stated about the body: "If you censor the body, you also censor breath and speech. Write yourself. Your body must be heard." During the violation, Circe's body struggles; she learns that even if she lives alone and rules the island by herself, the inevitable dominance of the male-dominated world exists somewhere. Miller expresses this learning through writing. Precautions need to be taken against them because men govern the world. Men explore the world in this mythological world with their ships and use women not only for their own pleasure but also for what they can possess. Circe, in response, strengthens her sorcery. This emphasis on empowerment represents the self-discovery and development of the mythological goddess as a woman. Circe wants to be ready and alert, just like we all want to be in a male-dominated world. The way Miller's Circe tells her story after the violation can be understood through Kristeva's (1982) words: "Could it be written in another way, in a definite catharsis, if we hadn't been nauseated?" On the other hand, the term "nausea" describes a situation of being excluded from societal and moral norms and rules. In post-structuralism, this term provokes the traditional concepts of identity and culture. The person who is excluded from the moral scale's norms and rules is actually Circe. As a woman, while writing about the tragic moment of violation, Circe may have felt a sense of nausea, and perhaps through writing, she could have been lightly cleansed while sharing this unfortunate event accompanied by nausea. Overwhelmed by disgust and drowning in emotions, as she writes, she leaves behind that malevolent label. Ultimately, she learns lessons from the violation, and from then on, her treatment of every sailor who visits her island will be merciless. Her notoriety will spread after her actions following the violation. Circe now expresses who she has become as follows: "I did not send my animals away anymore when men came. I let them loll where they liked—around the garden, under my tables. It pleased me to see the men walk among them, trembling at their teeth and unnatural tameness. I did not pretend to be a mortal. I showed my lambent, yellow eyes at every turn. None of it made a difference. I was alone and a woman; that was all that mattered." (Miller, 2018, p. 269)

Indeed, Circe becomes a powerful goddess figure. She transforms sailors into various animals, so things change for her. She may not be able to control the male-dominated world beyond her island, but she has her boundaries. The empowerment of a woman—her ability to control her own power and confidence—ensures that she will not be hurt again. Cixous (1976) expresses this situation as follows: "Men have committed the greatest crime against women; they have directed them to hate themselves, to become their own enemies." The truth is that Circe's entire life evolved towards self-discovery after being exiled from the world she lived in. When the surrounding noises silence her, her hidden talent turns within her. Circe has been a goddess for centuries, but she has never had the opportunity to tap into her latent power and train herself. Therefore, a woman's journey of insight and self-discovery becomes what makes life worth living. In other words, the purpose of her existence is revealed. As Circe shares that magic is not an easy feat, she actually speaks to the value of patience and effort in the journey of self-discovery. In reality, Circe has separated herself from the kingdom of patriarchal dominance and discovered herself as an independent woman. Her encounter with Odysseus occurs during these times of personal growth. There is a romantic relationship between Miller's Circe and Odysseus. Did Circe truly fall in love with Odysseus, or did she cling to him out of emotional hunger and loneliness? Circe, as a goddess, is superior to the human Odysseus. Therefore, she does not want to plead with him; she does not want him to realize that she needs him. After he leaves, she must be a mature woman who has learned to cope with all that she has experienced throughout this time, knowing that she will face a new struggle, a new pain, and a new sense of loneliness. In this case, it is understood that Circe is independent and powerful in Miller's portrayal.

Odysseus, as a human, reminds Circe of her unrequited love for Glaucus and Glaucus' relationship with Scylla. Odysseus has a wife, and he needs to return to her. The experience of being a mother is added to the story with Circe giving birth to a son with Odysseus. With Circe becoming a mother, Cixous's term "writing with maternal milk" adds a nice nuance to this narrative. Through Circe's feminine language, the foundation of "écriture féminine" separates from male-centered, word-focused writing and presents the reader with the experiences of motherhood from a female writer's perspective: "Thank the gods, I did not have to sleep. Every minute I must wash, boil, clean, scrub, and put to soak. Yet how could I do that when every minute he also needed something—food, change, and sleep?" (Miller, 2018, p. 334) In this case, concerns and anxieties naturally arise from the close attention a mother gives to her child. Towards the end of the work, it explores how a mother instinctively approaches her son and is willing to do anything for him. As a woman, Circe writes her own story and reveals the reasons and consequences of her actions. Undoubtedly, when the male-centered language is abandoned, it becomes possible to eliminate biases against the female character.

Furthermore, throughout Circe's narrative, Perse's motherhood emerges in a more suppressed manner. Here, Circe's motherhood and her own mother Perse's motherhood can be compared, and the

influence of two different environments on motherhood can be observed. As a mother, Circe is a woman who has control over her son and can make decisions on her own, but details such as her mother telling her that her physical attributes are not good enough and that they should have a better child for her husband indicate that she is a victim of patriarchy. While Circe's role as a mother has made her more anxious, responsible, and controlling, her mother's lack of these qualities can be evaluated from a feminist perspective. Circe's mother is a more passive female character who does not require control and does not raise her voice as a woman. Undoubtedly, the underlying reason for this is Perse's presence in a palace dominated by male hegemony and her unnecessary need to stand out as a woman. On the other hand, Circe, especially as a mother, is a character who has to write her own story; she has to think for her beloved son and is responsible for protecting the island she lives on and her son Telegonus. She must provide the best protection that Telegonus earns by taking Trigon's tail. Additionally, she must protect her son with the help of Athena, the great goddess and daughter of Zeus. After Telegonus kills his own father, Odysseus, he brings Odysseus's wife, Penelope, and their son to the island. After some time, Odysseus's wife, Penelope, manages to befriend Circe on the island. Penelope is also a woman who leaves behind her patriarchal world and finds a new life on the island. Both Circe and Penelope survive and stay safe on the island with their sons by their sides, taking on their responsibilities. While everyone moves forward with their choices, Circe gains complete freedom with her rebellion by being exiled to a single island, threatening her father, a powerful male god figure. Miller's writing about Circe is a response to her infamous reputation. In fact, Circe is a character who is exiled from the patriarchal order where she spent her entire life. The theory of "écriture féminine" by Cixous, frequently mentioned in this writing, is presented to the reader through the basis of the mythological world, showcasing the consequences of gender-based inequality in being a woman. With Miller's Circe, a woman who expresses herself and writes, she can make her voice heard and find a place in society.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Miller's Circe confronts and processes every trauma and adversity she experiences by writing about them. Cixous (1976) draws attention to this by stating, "The only book that is worth writing is the one we don't have the courage or strength to write. The book that hurts us, that makes us tremble, redden, bleed." The reader witnesses a woman's personal development, actualization, and existence. Circe's journey begins when she breaks free from patriarchal hegemony in a way. She faces the consequences of a mistake driven by jealousy, inflicts harm on another woman, and forever changes her own fate. She causes the loss of hundreds of lives and experiences sexual assault on the island she rules as a woman. Through writing, she confronts herself, realizing that she possesses a gender that is perceived as weak and powerless. Thus, she learns to defend herself through the metaphor of magic until she finds strength within. This essay aims to shed light on Circe's story by

closely examining Miller's Circe, drawing on Cixous' feminist theory of "écriture féminine," and giving meaning to her narrative. Circe's story, which gains meaning as she writes and embarks on a journey of self-actualization, shares striking similarities with the concept of "écriture féminine." Evaluating the portrayal of women's writing through the mythological character of Circe allows for a metaphorical self-expression that can transcend biases and infamous reputations imposed on women throughout centuries. By giving Circe a voice and increasing the significance placed on her voice, Miller has revitalized her with meaningful fame. Remembering Circe and her voice in this work serves as a reference to women oppressed under male hegemony. Examining this work through the lens of Cixous' (1976) "The Laugh of the Medusa" suggests that the positioning of women's role even in the realm of fantasy is predetermined and that the inheritance of infamous women is a consequence of male superiority. The reexamination of Medusa's infamous reputation brought forth by Cixous is made possible for Circe through her opportunity to vindicate herself through writing. This fantastical narrative serves as a reminder of women's power. Every attribute accepted as part of being a woman is necessary for her existence. Circe's power, unthinkable for many other powerful goddesses, finds its place in the book. Women will exist as long as they continue to write and make their voices heard. A woman's voice is in need of being heard, and regardless of the world she occupies, she must continue to write.

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