Helen Oliver, "Entry on: Circe by Madeline Miller", peer-reviewed by Babette Puetz, Elizabeth Hale and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2023). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1569. Entry version as of September 14, 2026.

Madeline Miller

Circe

United States (2018)

TAGS: Achilles Aeëtes Circe Crete Cyclops / Cyclopes Daedalus Greek Gods Helios Iliad Immortality Minotaur Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Ovid Pasiphae Penelope Prometheus Scylla Telemachus Trojan War

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Circe
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2018
First Edition Details	Madeline Miller, *Circe.* Philadelphia: Little, Brown and Company, 2018, 393 pp.
ISBN	9780316556347
Official Website	Circe at the Madeline Miller Official Website (accessed: September 9, 2022)
Awards	2018 – Athenaeum Literary Award; 2018 – Goodreads Choice Award (Fantasy); 2018 – The Kitschies (Red Tentacle) Award; 2018 – Finalist for Mythopoeic Fantasy Award; 2018 – Shortlisted for Women's Prize for Fiction; 2019 – Alex Awards.
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Myths, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults ((themes not appropriate for young children))

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Creators

Madeline Miller , b. 1978
(Author)

Madeline Miller was born July 24th, 1978, and grew up in New York City and Philadelphia. She gained a Bachelor of Arts in 2000, and a Master of Arts in Classical Studies in 2001 from Brown University. She then went on to become a high school teacher, teaching Greek, Latin, and Shakespeare for over fifteen years. In 2009 she studied in the Dramaturgy department of Yale School of Drama, focusing on the adaption of classical texts into modern forms. *The Song of Achilles* was her debut novel in 2011, being awarded the Orange Prize for fiction in 2012, as well as being a New York Times Bestseller. She was also shortlisted for the 2012 Stonewall Writer of the Year. Miller's second novel, *Circe*, was a 2018 number 1 New York Times Bestseller, won the Indies Choice Best Adult Fiction of the Year Award, and the Indies Choice Best Audiobook of the Year Award, also being shortlisted for the 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction. It also won an American Library Association Alex Award, the The Kitschies Red Tentacle Award, and the 2018 Elle Big Book Award. Her other publications consist of two short stories, *Heracles' Bow* in 2012, a companion to *The Song of Achilles* which tells the story of how Philoctetes suffered a snake bite and was abandoned by his companions, and *Galatea* in 2013, a retelling of the Greek myth of Pygmalion from the perspective of his sculpture.

Sources:

Wikipedia (accessed: September 9, 2022).

Official Website (accessed: September 9, 2022).

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Additional information

Adaptations	Audiobook with Audible, released April 10th, 2018. *Circe* is currently, being adapted as an eight-episode drama series for HBO Max.
Translation	Over thirty-two languages, including: Bulgarian: *Цирцея* [Tsirtseya], trans. Krasimira Adadzhieva, Anish'r, 2018. Persian: □□□□□, trans. 2018 ,,□□□□□ □□□□□□, □□□□□□. Polish: *Kirke*, trans. Paweł Korombel, Albatros, 2018. Croatian: *Kirka*, trans. Patricija Horvat, Profil Knjiga, 2019. Czech: *Kirke*, trans. Eva Maršíková, Slovart, 2019. Danish: *Kirke*, trans. Agnete Friis, Grønningen 1, 2019. Dutch: *Circe*, Uitgeverij Orlando, 2019. French: *Circé*, trans. Christine Auché, Pocket, 2019. German: *Ich bin Circe*, trans. Frauke Brodd, Eisele Verlag, 2019. Greek: *Κίρκη* [Kírkī], trans. Kleri Patamichali, Dioptra, 2019. Hungarian: *Kirké*, trans. Judit Frei-Kovács, General Press, 2019. Indonesian: *Circe*, trans. Lulu Wijaya, Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2019. Italian: *Circe*, trans. Marinella Magrì, Sonzogno, 2019. Lithuanian: *Kirkė*, trans. Eglė Raudonikienė, Baltos lankos, 2019. Portuguese: *Circe,* Planeta Minotauro, 2019. Slovak: *Kirké*, trans. Jana Pernišová, Tatran, 2019. Spanish: *Circe*, trans. Celia Recarey Rendo, Alianza Editorial, 2019.

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Swedish: *Kirke*, Wahlström & Widstrand, 2019.

Turkish: *Ben, Kirke*, trans. Seda Çıngay Mellor, İthaki Yayınları, 2019.

Georgian: *კირკე*, trans. სალომე ჩიტაძე, პალიტრა L, 2020.

Korean: □□□, trans. □□□, □□, 2020.

Romanian: *Circe*, trans. Ioana Filat, Grupul Editorial ART (Editura Paladin), 2020.

Russian: Цирцея [Tsirtseiâ], trans. Liubov Tronina, AST, 2020.

Serbian: *Kirka*, trans. Nevena Andrić, Laguna, 2020.

Ukrainian: *Цирцея* [t͡sɨrt͡seja], trans. Ostap Gladkyĭ, Vivat Publishing, 2020.

Arabic: □□□□, trans. ,□□□□□, □□□□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□ ,□□□□ □□□□ 2021.

Chinese: □□□, trans. □□□, □□□□□□, 2021.

Estonian: *Kirke*, Postimees Kirjastus, 2021.

Finnish: *Kirke*, trans. Irmeli Ruuska, WSOY, 2021.

Slovenian: *Kirka*, trans. Polona Glavan, Sanje, 2021.

Source:

Goodreads.com (accessed: September 24, 2022).

Summary

The narrative follows Circe from a young child who is bullied and shunned by her family and peers until she meets the mortal Glaucos. Circe falls in love with the mortal and searches for a way to turn him into a god, discovering the power of *pharmakeia* and feeding him sap from flowers sprung from the blood of gods while he sleeps, turning him into a sea-god himself. Circe believes this will finally allow them to be together, but Glaucos' eye is caught by the nymph Scylla, who drives Circe away. In jealousy, and a misplaced belief that with Scylla

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gone Glaucos will turn to her, Circe again uses *pharmakeia*, to turn Scylla into a monster.

Circe is exiled to the island of Aiaia, where, alone, she hones her skills as a *pharmakis*, or witch, growing more confident in her own power as the days pass. One day, Hermes comes, seeking a place to hide Apollo's stolen lyre, leading to them becoming lovers.

Circe is briefly released from her exile and called to attend her sister Pasiphaë and the birth of the Minotaur. While in Crete she meets Ariadne, and becomes lovers with Daedalus for a brief time, also meeting the toddler Icarus, until she returns to Aiaia, where Hermes brings her the news of the Minotaur's, Daedalus and Icarus', and Ariadne's deaths. Ships full of men looking for an easy target begin to come to her island, and Circe is raped, afterward turning all men who come into pigs, until eventually Odysseus arrives. The episode where Circe turns Odysseus' men into swine is integral to this section of the novel, as this is the most well-known moment of Circe's power in mythology. Resolution is achieved much as it is in the Odyssey. For a time, they are lovers, and they exchange stories. Much of this section is given over to describing the Trojan War, and many events from Homer's *Odyssey* that Odysseus suffered in his travels.

Once Odysseus leaves Aiaia, Circe suffers through the hard birth of their son, Telegonus. As he grows, Circe realises that Athena has been trying to kill him indirectly through sending scorpions, stinging insects, and making pottery fall, as the Fates say she cannot do it herself. On his sixteenth birthday Telegonus asks if he can leave Aiaia and find his father on Ithaca. At first, Circe does not allow him to go as she fears what Athena will do once he leaves her protective magic behind, but eventually she agrees. For protection she gives him Trygon's tail-spine, which contains poison that brings instant death to mortals and eternal pain to immortals. To Telegonus and Circe's horror, an accident causes Odysseus to be killed by a spear with the tail strapped to it.

After Odysseus' death, Telemachus and Penelope are no longer welcome on Ithaca, so Telegonus takes them to Aiaia where Circe greets them cautiously, soon realising they do not mean her or her son harm. They live in harmony for a year until Athena comes and tells Telemachus he must go found a city in the West, as she would have Greeks to balance the city Aeneas is founding. He refuses, but Telegonus accepts in his place.

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Circe seeks release from her exile from her father, blackmailing him into granting it. She then goes with Telemachus to make an end of Scylla so that her constant murder of mortals can finally stop haunting Circe. In the meantime, Penelope takes up witchcraft on Aiaia, finding new happiness there. Circe and Telemachus fall in love and Circe turns herself into a mortal so that she can travel the world and grow old with Telemachus, finally finding happiness and contentment herself.

Analysis

Madeline Miller's *Circe* is a mythological, day-to-day, feminist, witchcraft, fantasy novel for older young adults. It retells the life of the sorceress Circe, best known from Homer's *Odyssey*, from a young child to the moment where she chooses whether to stay immortal or become mortal. As well as being a direct retelling of the myth surrounding Circe, it also incorporates and references numerous myths from antiquity, many well-known, and even a few lesser known, as well as having various mentions of common tropes from ancient Greek myth. Circe's story spans centuries, so the inclusion of several generations of classical myths is one that makes sense for the narrative, and allows Circe, the eponymous character, to reflect on herself and her own life, as well as all the issues of gods and mortals. As Hovind describes, it is much like the *Odyssey* in that it "is based on the titular character describing past and present events," however while the *Odyssey* spans two decades, Circe spans much more.* It often becomes philosophical, as Circe tries to reconcile the changing nature of the world with her own experiences and traumas as she struggles to make a place for herself amid the spiteful and unkind lesser gods that are her peers.

Early on in the novel, Circe encounters the titan, Prometheus, while his punishment for bringing fire to mortals is being decided. A version of this Greek myth is briefly written in Book 1.7 of Apollodorus' *Library*, and Miller's version is true to form. Circe narrates: "I heard the news from a naiad cousin: he had been taken to great jagged peak in the Caucasus and chained to a rock. An eagle was commanded to come every noon to tear out his liver and eat it steaming from his flesh", whereas Apollodorus writes: "So Prometheus was nailed [to Mount Caucasos] and held fast there…each day, an eagle swooped down to feed on the lobes of his liver, which grew again by night" (Miller, 21. Apol. 1.7.1). The only real difference is that he was either

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nailed or chained. The inclusion of this myth in the novel provides Circe with a frame of reference for someone who is not cruel like the rest of the gods she is surrounded by in her early life. Before he is punished, Circe speaks to Prometheus, and he tells her that "not every god need be the same" (18). This is a pivotal piece of advice that Circe comes back to throughout the novel time and again to remind herself that she does not need to be petty and spiteful like the other gods. As Preston writes, for Circe "this kindles a deep sympathetic interest in humans".** Thus, the inclusion of this myth begins to set up a frame of self-awareness and morality in Circe, which she seeks to understand and develop throughout her life. As Hovind details, it is empathy that sets Circe apart from other gods, both as they are portrayed in Greek myth, and as they are portrayed in the novel, as well as generating new layers of depth to her character not seen in the *Odyssey*.***

There are also many other myths that are incorporated into the earlier sections of the novel that can be found in Apollodorus' *Library*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, such as the transformation of the mortal Glaucos into a sea-god and the subsequent transformation of the nymph Scylla into the six-headed, tentacled monster; Pasiphaë and the sacred bull; Daedalus' labyrinth; Theseus and the Minotaur; Theseus and Ariadne; a mention of Aeëtes having the golden fleece on Colchis; and Medea and Jason's request of Circe for a ritual cleansing of their sins.

A large portion of the novel is given over to Odysseus' stay on Aiaia on his journey home from the Trojan War, and several other episodes from Homer's Odyssey are alluded to. The section in Circe begins – although from Circe's perspective – much as it does in the Odyssey, with Circe turning Odysseus' men into swine. In Book 10. 250–270, Circe "opened her gleaming doors at once and stepped forth, inviting them all in…then she mixed them a potion…suddenly she struck with her wand, drove them into her pigsties, all of them bristling into swine—with grunts, snouts—even their bodies…". There is an interesting change to this that Miller makes in order to fit better with her recreation of Circe. There is not a specifically magical "wand", but rather Circe simply raises a "staff", mentioned very briefly, and only during this one transformation (all previous sailors were turned into pigs only through herbs, and what is described as "a word of power"). Circe narrates: "I raised my staff of ash wood and they ran…their piggy eyes still wet with the last of their human tears" (171). It is simple and brief, the pain of the sailors and the gruesomeness of the bodily transformation already previously detailed. Even with the

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brevity, it still maps quite accurately to the Odyssey. The addition of a "word of power" into Miller's narrative brings forward the idea that 'spells' are being cast, rather than just herbal metamorphoses. Including this episode is also integral to the narrative of *Circe*, as this is perhaps the best-known myth about Circe, and Miller uses it to her advantage to continue building a three-dimensional characterisation of Circe that is not seen in ancient texts, as well as later doing the same for Odysseus.

Odysseus tells Circe stories of the Trojan War that can be found in the *Iliad* and in Apollodorus, as well as in numerous other places such as the tragedies by playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides that tell the Trojan cycle. Circe has not heard of Achilles, as isolated as she has been on Aiaia, so Odysseus tells her: "Achilles, prince of Phthia, swiftest of all the Greeks, best of the Achaian warriors at Troy. Beautiful, brilliant, born from the dread nereid Thetis, graceful and deadly as the sea itself. The Trojans had fallen before him like grass before a scythe, and the mighty Prince Hector himself perished at his ash-spear's end" (184–185). This is very similar to how Achilles is described in the *Iliad*, although it is not all in one sentence such as Miller puts it, but rather lore picked out from throughout. Odysseus also tells Circe of Palamedes, Philoctetes, Astyanax, the Trojan Horse, and more, all stories of horror and deceit. Miller is stripping back the trope of the hero persona from Odysseus, exposing the rawness of the horrors of his experiences and showing the burdens he carries with him instead of continuing the one-sided wiliness of the Homeric hero. Circe also warns Odysseus of some of the trials he still has to face on his path from Aiaia to Ithaca, such as a *katabasis* to speak to Tiresias in the underworld, the Sirens, Scylla, and the Cattle of the Sun, all episodes drawn straight from the Odyssey.

Another main story that Odysseus tells Circe is the cyclopes episode from the *Odyssey*. It is a very condensed version of events, skimming over the lengthy descriptions of the epic. Miller boils it down to the main plot points for her narrative: "The giant [the cave] belonged to, the one-eyed shepherd Polyphemus, returned and caught them…Man after man he gobbled down…" (278). This is much simpler language than how it appears in the *Odyssey*, but Miller's narrative is faithful. In the epic in Book 9. 320–330 it appears as: "…he lunged out with his hands toward my men and snatching two at once, rapping them on the ground…and ripping them limb from limb to fix his meal." It is much more gruesome in the epic. This story appears twice in Circe, first when Odysseus initially tells it to Circe, really only mentioning it in

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passing, and the second time, when Circe later tells the tale to Telemachus, Odysseus' son when he visits her island after the death of his father. As put forth by Adams and Cassidy, this iteration of the same story makes it clear that throughout Circe's long life, time is repetitive, and the future often echoes the past (although Adams and Cassidy relate the idea more to Circe's experience of motherhood).**** This version is a slightly more drawn-out telling, but it primarily serves the purpose of forcing Telemachus to reflect on the kind of man his father was. Miller again spins Odysseus' characterisation away from the epically heroic, choosing to make Telemachus see him as a man who made misery for other men. It is an interesting and unusual way to spin Odysseus, and it is one that provokes a rethinking of epic poetry in those who know the tradition, as well as a new representation of Circe that, as Preston writes, "makes these age-old texts thrum with contemporary relevance".*****

There are also many other myths included, such as the 'succession myth' of how Zeus overthrew Kronos, as detailed in Hesiod's *Theogony* or Apollodorus' *Library*; Hermes tells Circe many tales of mythological figures; gods such as Helios, Apollo, Athena, and Trygon make appearances; as well as any number of nymphs and naiads. The birth and childhood of Circe and Odysseus' son, Telegonus, also appears in the narrative, as well as Penelope and Telemachus visiting Aiaia after Odysseus' death, which does not appear in ancient myth as Balée details, but nevertheless is an excellent representation of these two characters that makes "emotional and artistic sense".****** *Circe* is a novel that explores many ancient mythological narratives, twisting them into a new light through the eyes of the powerful Circe.

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* Hovind, Stine-Mari, *Madeline Miller's "Circe": A Contemporary Version of Homer's "The Odyssey" and the Role of the Witch in Modern Feminism*, master thesis, NTNU open, 2022, 39–55 (accessed: February 15, 2023).

** Preston, Alex, "'Circe' by Madeline Miller Review – Greek classic thrums with contemporary relevance", *The Guardian*, 2018.

*** Hovind, Stine-Mari, *Madeline Miller's "Circe": A Contemporary Version of Homer's "The Odyssey" and the Role of the Witch in Modern Feminism*, *NTNU*, 2022, 39–55.

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**** Adams, Sarah LaChance, and Tanya Cassidy, “Introduction” in LaChance Adams et al., eds., *The Maternal Tug: Ambivalence, Identity, and Agency*, Demeter Press, 2020, 11–24.

***** Preston, Alex, “‘Circe’ by Madeline Miller Review – Greek classic thrums with contemporary relevance”, *The Guardian*, 2018.

****** Balée, Susan, “Ducks, Virgins, Snakes and Witches”, *The Hudson Review* 71.3 (2018): 603–612.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Achilles Aeëtes Circe Crete Cyclops / Cyclopes Daedalus Greek Gods Helios Iliad Immortality Minotaur Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Ovid Pasiphae Penelope Prometheus Scylla Telemachus Trojan War
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Emotions Humanity Identity Intertextuality Isolation/loneliness Love Magic Punishment Rape Tricksters Witch

Further Reading

Adams, Sarah LaChance, and Tanya Cassidy, “Introduction” in LaChance Adams et al., eds., *The Maternal Tug: Ambivalence, Identity, and Agency*, Demeter Press, 2020, 11–24.

Balée, Susan, “Ducks, Virgins, Snakes and Witches”, *The Hudson Review* 71.3 (2018): 603–612.

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