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Research Article

Decolonising the Feminine: A Critique of the Christianised Arc of Circe in Madeline Miller's *Circe*

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Abstract

Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) presents itself as a feminist retelling of the Odyssey, reimagining Circe as an empowered protagonist. However, beneath this retelling lies a deeper ideological structure shaped by Christianised epistemology, particularly the Christian redemptive arc. Circe's transformation from a feared witch to a self-sacrificing mother mirrors the moral trajectory imposed by Christianised narratives, where pagan figures are either tamed or redeemed through suffering (Spacciante 405). This paper also examines Circe through Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine theory, which critiques the patriarchal construction of female monstrosity (Creed 19). However, Creed's framework itself is bound within dominant Western literary tradition, which upholds binaries of the monstrous and the divine feminine, reinforcing the moralistic categorisation of femininity imposed by Christian doctrines rather than dismantling it. This paper argues that Circe, despite its feminist aspirations, participates in the same historical process that reshaped pagan myths to align with Christian morality—where powerful female figures are reimagined through a lens of sin, redemption, and domestication (Dhareshwar 121). The shift from Circe's non-moralistic portrayal in *The Odyssey* (Lattimore 151) to a self-sacrificing motherly figure in Miller's novel exemplifies the erasure of non-dualistic, pagan femininity (McClymont

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24). In contrast, Greek philosophical traditions such as Neoplatonism and Heraclitus' unity of opposites offer alternative conceptualisations of feminine power. Neoplatonism, particularly in the works of Plotinus, suggests an indivisible reality where opposites like creation and destruction, monstrous and divine, exist within a unified *one*, resisting rigid moral categorisation (Corrigan 26). Similarly, Heraclitus' philosophy challenges static binaries, asserting that opposing forces exist in perpetual flux and interdependence rather than as moral absolutes (Emelyn-Jones 92). This paper critiques the ideological constraints of Circe and argues for a retelling that resists the Christianised transformation of pagan myths. By engaging with both Western feminist theory and its constraints; and pre-Christian epistemology, this study highlights the limitations of Miller's Circe in its attempt to reclaim a lost voice while remaining within the confines of a deeply Christianised literary tradition.

Keywords: Circe, Christianisation, Monstrous-Feminine, Pagan Femininity, Neoplatonism

1. Introduction

Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) is praised for her feminist reinterpretation of Homeric mythology, reclaiming the voice of a historically "vilified" character. Circe, despite its feminist aspirations, belongs to a larger tradition of Christianising pagan myths, altering non-Christian deities and mythological figures using moralistic frames of sin, redemption, and domestication. This pattern of transformation aligns with the ideological shift that historically accompanied the spread of Christianity, where pagan figures—particularly powerful women—were either vilified as monstrous or tamed into moral exemplars (Dhreshwar 123). Miller's novel follows this course by portraying Circe's arc as a journey of atonement, where she gradually renounces her divine autonomy in favor of self-sacrificing motherhood. Rather than fully reclaiming her power, her transformation aligns with a maternal ideal, reinforcing traditional Christian notions of feminine fulfillment through care and sacrifice.

This paper argues that *Circe* is not merely a feminist retelling but a reiteration of Christianised mythological structures, in which female figures are assimilated into Western moral frameworks. Drawing on Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, which critiques how patriarchal narratives construct female monstrosity, the paper examines how Circe's transformation follows a redemptive arc that conforms to Christian moral dualism (Creed 19). This research would also criticise Creed's theory as it further reinforces the dominant Western literary tradition of "dualism" (Emelyn-Jones 93). The feminist frameworks employed in these retellings are inherently rooted in Christian ideological frameworks, resulting in an inherent epistemic bias. Additionally, the contrast between Circe's ambiguous, non-moralistic portrayal in *The Odyssey* (Lattimore 151) and

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Miller's *Circe* highlights the novel's participation in the ideological domestication of pagan female power (McClymont 23). The paper further engages with Greek philosophical traditions, particularly Neoplatonism (Platonius' *Enneads*) and Heraclitus' unity of opposites, as a counterpoint to this framework, demonstrating how these traditions offer a vision of feminine power that transcends moralistic redemption by embracing creation and destruction as interwoven forces (Corrigan 26; Kirk 93). This study critiques the ideological constraints of *Circe* and advocates for a reading that resists the Christianization of pre-Christian myths.

2. The Christianisation of Pagan Myth

The transformation of pagan myths to fit Christian moral frameworks is a well-documented phenomenon. With the spread of Christianity, many non-Christian deities and figures were either demonised or rewritten to fit Christian doctrines. Female figures in particular were either vilified as temptresses or witches—seen in the biblical portrayal of figures such as Lilith—or sanctified as maternal, self-sacrificing beings, as seen in the Virgin Mary (Carroll 18; Smith 30). The pattern of remoulding female figures as either monstrous or virtuous is not unique to religious texts but extends to literary reinterpretations of pagan myths, including *Circe*.

The historical process of rewriting *Circe's* myth illustrates this transformation. *Circe* is a vague character in *The Odyssey*, neither entirely wicked nor entirely caring. She is a powerful sorceress who transforms Odysseus's men into swine but later aids him on his journey (Lattimore 157). McClymont argues that *Circe*, unlike the stereotypical "wicked witch," is a complex figure whose magic does not serve as an instrument of pure malice (McClymont 27). However, as Hanna Zalewska-Jura notes, later interpretations of *Circe* framed her as a symbol of unchecked female power that needed to be controlled. By the Byzantine period, *Circe* had been woven into Rome's prehistory, repurposed as an ancestor of Roman civilisation and thereby assimilated into a patriarchal lineage (Zalewska-Jura 81). This adaptation mirrors a broader cultural trend in which mythological women, once independent deities, were absorbed into male-dominated genealogies.

Miller's *Circe* continues this tradition by depicting *Circe's* journey as a moral metamorphosis that is consistent with Christian doctrines. Her narrative arc is reminiscent of the bildungsroman, a genre traditionally associated with male protagonists in which the protagonist faces hardships that eventually lead to their acceptance into society (Spacciante 411). However, as Spacciante argues, *Circe's* development does not ultimately grant her true agency. Instead, she follows a trajectory that upholds the ideological structures of the patriarchal bildungsroman, culminating in romantic fulfilment and motherhood (Spacciante 412). In this way, Miller's novel presents a "Western" feminist retelling while reinforcing the moralistic and structural constraints of contemporary Western myth-making.

3. *Circe* as a Monstrous-Feminine Figure

Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* provides a critical framework for analyzing *Circe's* portrayal across literary traditions. Creed argues that myths are interpreted through the patriarchal

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lens that constructs powerful women as monstrous by associating them with transgression and the disruption of male authority (Creed 19). Circe's initial depiction in *The Odyssey*, where she embodies the monstrous-feminine archetype: a feared witch wielding *pharmaka* (magic) to alter men, thereby threatening patriarchal authority. However, Circe is not entirely "wicked"; her authority is unstable, and she ultimately aids rather than opposes Odysseus, reinforcing patriarchal structures rather than dismantling them (McClymont 27).

Creed's framework has significantly influenced modern retellings of female-centric myths, including Madeline Miller's *Circe*. While Creed reclaims the monstrous-feminine as a site of resistance, her framework remains bound by the very ideological structures it seeks to challenge, ultimately reinforcing the binaries it aims to dismantle (Creed 7). In *Circe*, the protagonist begins as a feared and ostracized figure, yet her journey follows a trajectory that leads to redemption through motherhood and domesticity, reinforcing a binary between monstrosity and divinity (Miller 322). This transformation mirrors Christian archetypes of the fallen woman seeking salvation, despite the novel's engagement with pre-Christian mythology. Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine challenges patriarchal narratives, yet Miller's adaptation, shaped by these same feminist literary traditions, reveals that the Western feminist frameworks employed in rewriting pagan myths remain embedded in Christian morality. As a result, female power is ultimately softened, and monstrosity is redefined through a humanizing lens (Creed 11).

Miller further reinterprets Circe's ambiguity through a moralistic lens that aligns with Christianized narratives. Her journey follows a pattern of atonement, culminating in the rejection of her past as a powerful witch in favor of domesticity and motherhood. The novel reframes Circe's magic as something she must learn to wield responsibly, a process that mirrors Christian narratives of sin and redemption (Lima 4). Lima argues that such reinterpretations of mythological women often reinforce rather than subvert patriarchal values, presenting female power as something that must be controlled rather than celebrated (Lima 6).

Circe's initial wielding of magic is depicted as isolating and dangerous, reinforcing the Christianized perception of female power as something requiring regulation. She describes her abilities in overwhelmingly negative terms:

"I had been born for a long time, but all my life had been murk and depths. It was not the kind of power that bore men up, but the drowning kind. And now I was weary of it" (Miller 248).

The metaphor of magic as a "drowning" force echoes Christian views of unregulated female power as chaotic, requiring purification through suffering. This pattern is most evident in Circe's final transformation. Unlike in *The Odyssey*, where she remains an immortal witch, Miller's Circe ultimately chooses to abandon her divinity and become human. While framed as an act of self-realization, this decision mirrors the Christian ideal of renouncing godhood in favor of humility and ethical development. Pre-Christian mythologies positioned gods and goddesses as forces of

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nature, unbound by human morality, yet Miller's adaptation shifts Circe into a framework where power must be relinquished for moral transcendence (Zalewska-Jura 77).

Thus, while *Circe* draws from *The Monstrous-Feminine* to reclaim female agency, it ultimately upholds the same binary it seeks to subvert. The novel's resolution does not dismantle patriarchal structures but rather reinterprets them within an ideological space shaped by Christian narratives of redemption and moral reconciliation (Miller 382).

4. A Greek Philosophical Critique of the Monstrous-Feminine

Barbara Creed's Monstrous-Feminine framework, while useful in uncovering patriarchal illustrations of female monstrosity, is nevertheless confined by the binary logic it critiques. Creed substantiates the binary of feminity--- the monstrous and sacred, strengthening rigid differences that mimic Christian moral dichotomies such as good vs evil, purity vs corruption, and creation vs destruction (Creed 26-27). This binary structure ultimately upholds a moralistic categorization of femininity rather than dismantling it. Greek philosophical schools such as Neoplatonism and Heraclitus' unity of opposites provide a more fluid understanding of feminine power that defies conventional moral categorisation.

Neoplatonism, as understood through Plotinus' *Enneads*, asserts that seeming opposites—creation and destruction, monstrous and divine—exist as interwoven manifestations of a single, transcendent whole (Corrigan 26-28; Plotinus 142). Rather than viewing the monstrous-feminine as a departure from the divine-feminine, Neoplatonism contends that both are representations of the same underlying nature, although viewed differently due to human limitations. In this framework, Circe's power is neither inherently corrupt nor in need of redemption but part of a continuous, indivisible reality.

Similarly, Heraclitus' "unity of opposites" challenges Creed's categorization by asserting that all forces exist in a state of perpetual flux and interdependence. Just as water both creates and consumes, the feminine cannot be confined to fixed moral categories of monstrous or divine (Heraclitus 88, Emelyn-Jones 93). Circe rather than fitting into the rigid binaries of monstrous and divine femininity imposed by Creed's framework, can be better understood through Neoplatonism and Heraclitus' unity of opposites as a process where these forces coexist dynamically, resisting moral categorization or hierarchical opposition.

By engaging with these Greek philosophical traditions, we can critique Creed's *Monstrous-Feminine* for inadvertently reinforcing the moralistic binaries it seeks to deconstruct. A more fluid and interconnected view of the feminine challenges Western frameworks shaped by Christian morality to classify power within rigid moral binaries, instead of recognising its inherent complexity.

5. Conclusion

The way *Circe* constructs female power demands a closer look at the theoretical frameworks we use to analyse it. While Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine provides insight

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into how patriarchal structures depict powerful women as threats, her reliance on psychoanalysis ultimately reinforces the very binaries it critiques (Creed 26–27). By framing female power as something that evokes fear, Creed’s model remains tied to Western epistemic traditions that define femininity in opposition to masculine order. This is particularly relevant in *Circe*, where the protagonist’s transformation from an outcast to a self-possessed figure still follows the familiar arc of redemption, a structure deeply embedded in Christianised moral dualism (Emelyn-Jones 93). A reading that solely relies on the monstrous-feminine risks reaffirming the same discourse that casts powerful women as either dangerous or in need of containment.

To move beyond these constraints, Greek philosophical traditions offer a more fluid and expansive understanding of Circe’s power. Pre-Christian frameworks like Neoplatonism and Heraclitus’ unity of opposites reject rigid moral categories, seeing transformation as a fundamental and natural process rather than something to be feared (Corrigan 26; Heraclitus 88). Unlike Creed’s model, which positions monstrous femininity as a reaction to patriarchal anxieties, these traditions recognize power—especially feminine power—as something autonomous and integral to existence through their understanding of dichotomies. Through this lens, Circe’s magic is not a force that needs to be explained in terms of male fear but rather an extension of her own being. Ultimately, *Circe* reflects both the possibilities and limitations of Western myth-making, which still relies on binaries of purity and monstrosity. While Madeline Miller’s retelling makes space for a more independent and complex depiction of Circe, it remains entangled in the same structures that have long defined female power through either suffering or defiance (Miller 321). A decolonial reading must step outside post-Christian frameworks, looking instead to traditions that resist moral domestication and affirm the fluidity of feminine divinity. Western feminist readings often overlook the ways in which non-Western traditions conceptualise power, limiting their analyses to frameworks that remain rooted in patriarchal anxieties. In contrast, Greek philosophical traditions allow for an understanding of Circe’s magic that is not bound by the opposition but rather by a continuous negotiation of transformation and self-actualisation (Corrigan 53). By engaging with these perspectives, we can move beyond frameworks that portray female power as monstrous or reactionary and instead recognise its autonomy as a vital, self-generating force.

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