Master's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

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Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018):

A Contemporary Version of Homer's *The Odyssey* and the Role of the Witch in Modern Feminism

Master's thesis in English Literature
Supervisor: Eli Løfaldli
May 2022

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Abstract:

The witch as a figment of popular culture has seen an evolution over the past decades, as the role of old and evil fairy tale villain has been slowly overtaken by the young and empowering witch represented in films, tv-series, and novels aimed at teenage girls and young women. One such novel is Madeline Miller's *Circe*, which is an adaptation of Homer's classic poem *The Odyssey,* told from the perspective of the titular witch Circe. Miller's novel quickly established itself as a bestseller and became a noteworthy illustration of the modern interpretation of witches and their role as a symbol in modern feminism, where they signify independence and empowerment. This thesis aims to examine Miller's novel in light of *The Odyssey*, as well as the witch character's role in modern feminism, the rising popularity of the witch as an inspirational figure for young women, and how Miller's adapted novel embodies all these elements in her reworking of Homer's classic.

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Introduction

Homer's *The Odyssey* has stood the test of time as a staple of storytelling, inspiring countless adaptations over the years. While these adaptations have allowed *The Odyssey* its longevity by making the general story familiar across generations and contributed to maintaining its relevance, the various iterations have also provided an interesting case for the value of target audiences. One example of an adaptation written for a specific target audience is Madeline Miller's 2018 novel *Circe*, which presents the narrative of Greek heroic tales from a female point of view by narrating the story from Circe's perspective. This approach to adaptation is a popular device for exploring different narratives in existing stories, especially in terms of capturing a new target audience, which in Miller's case means young women. *Circe* became an instant success, indicating the interest and desire among young, female audiences to experience positive portrayals of well-known female characters. In addition to the feminist implications of the female-centric narrative, *Circe* also represents the modern figure of the witch, a fairy tale creature that has experienced a shift in image as presented in popular culture for the past few decades, from a stereotypical villain to an inspiring role figure for teenage girls and young women.

One question is central for a thesis of this nature: why is Homer's *The Odyssey* still so relevant after all these years? Countless stories have come and gone since Homer created his poem more than two thousand years ago, yet *The Odyssey*, along with other Homeric works, such as *The Iliad*, are still easily identifiable in western modern society and culture. Further, *The Odyssey* is still very present in the public consciousness in various forms beyond the content of the poem. A simple search of the keyword "Odyssey", for instance, does not only lead to a variety of literary articles and pieces written by students and experts on the classical text, but also titles across a variety of fields such as "The odyssey of marine pharmaceuticals: a current pipeline perspective", "China's Space Odyssey : What the Anti-Satellite Test Reveals about Decision-Making in Beijing", and "Polio: The Odyssey of Eradication: A World Free of Polio?". The term "Odyssey" has transcended its original, literary origin, and is now commonly and freely used to refer to any kind of transformative journey, not restricted to the world of storytelling. However, along with its adapted meaning, the original meaning and work of *The Odyssey* has also maintained longevity in the minds of the public. As with the previously mentioned adaptations of Homer's *The Odyssey* across a variety of media and genres, the long-lasting impact of the Greek epic is also indicative of a very strong presence in the public consciousness.

In discussing the longevity of Homer's work, it is important to note that Miller's *Circe* is far from the first, or most well-known, adaptation of *The Odyssey*. As the story has survived more than two millennia while still maintaining popularity in its original form, it is evident that renewed interest could be gained from adapted works based on Homer's poem, keeping it in the public consciousness and maintaining its relevance. Arguably, *The Odyssey* has likely seen a cyclical rise and decline in popularity, as have most pieces of literature and culture which have stood the test of time, and over the past century it is possible to estimate where renewed interest has occurred. One such instance was in 1922, when James Joyce's famous novel *Ulysses* was first published. Joyce's novel, which features elements from Homer's poem placed them in a 20th-century setting, became widely popular, giving the broad concepts of *The Odyssey* renewed familiarity. In the latter part of the 20th century, film and television series became another source of relevance and resurgence for the Greek epic. The Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), as well as the episode "Tales from the Public Domain" from the popular television show *The Simpsons* (2002), are well-known examples, each incorporating elements of the original story in different ways. Kubrick's film, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, introduces original characters and settings, but unlike Joyce's novel, the film can hardly be described as an adaptation. The word "Odyssey" in the film's title, as in the examples of research papers stated above, simply refers to the epic and transformative journey the plot describes, drawing upon the iconography of the Greek epic. The Fox Network Series *The Simpsons* features a more direct adaptation in their season 13 episode "Tales from the Public Domain", in which the first third of the episode is set around the character Homer Simpson reading *The Odyssey* to his children. However, while the characters of the epic poem remain quite close to *The Odyssey* in terms of names and their function in the story, they are portrayed as characters from the show: Homer Simpson plays the role of Odysseus, the sirens are portrayed as his sisters-in-law, and Odysseus' crew consists of Simpson's colleagues. The episode follows the basic outline of *The Odyssey*, starting with the Trojan war, but some changes are made to fit the segment's 10-minute run-time, as well as altering the characters' motivations and actions to represent the characters they are portrayed as from the show. For example, the sirens attempt to lure Odysseys and his men by singing an explicit cover of Barry Manilow's "Copacabana", and upon finding that his men have been turned to pigs by a seductive Circe, Odysseus eats them after remarking on how much they resemble his friends. The episode also omits Odysseus' meeting with Calypso, the cyclops, and the Laestrygonians, and condenses his journey to Hades, making his epic journey far shorter. This episode of *The Simpsons* is a great example of an adaptation targeted towards a specific audience, as it

retained the characters, general plot, and setting of *The Odyssey,* all while altering the story to fit the medium, namely a rather short episode of television, and its target audience, which are the viewers and fans of the show. This target audience, which is likely familiar with the characters of *The Simpsons* due to watching the series*,* may not be familiar with the story of Odysseus and his journey to Ithaca; thereby, portraying the characters of the poem as characters from the show which the audience knows allows the viewer an efficient representation of the relationship between the characters. By portraying Homer and his wife Marge Simpson as Odysseus and Penelope, for example, the viewer is able to instantly recognize the relationship between the two without the episode spending time explaining their relationship in the original story. While these examples are far from the only examples which have aided in making *The Odyssey* the mainstay of storytelling it can arguably be described as today, they do serve as practical examples of its representation in pop culture. Stanley Kubrick won his only Academy Award for his movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *The Simpsons* is one of the world's longest running television series, having been aired since 1989. The role of popular culture as a signifier of what is being consumed by the public is a great indicator of the media diet of the general population, and when popular films and television series feature elements or references to earlier works such as Homer's epic, one may assume that this reminder aids in prolonging the life of the original work by re-introducing it to a contemporary audience.

This term, popular culture or "pop culture", will be frequently applied in this thesis, and is commonly used to describe the various pieces of media consumed by the general population, or simply "culture that is widely favoured or well-liked by many people." (Storey 5). The reason why this term is used is that the main topic of this thesis involves the role of witchcraft in modern feminism, due to the target audience of Miller's novel, and as popular culture is highly reflective of what media is being consumed en masse at any given time, it can be a helpful tool to observe how various movements are perceived, presented, and consumed. As an example, the influx of vampire-centric movies, tv-series, and novels following the popularity of Stephanie Meyer's 2005 novel *Twilight* illustrates the enormous impact Meyer's work had on popular culture by influencing the media produced and consumed in the following years. In the same manner, the popularity of witch-centric media aimed at teenage girls and young women, such as movies and television series, both reflect on the current popularity and demand, as well as contributing to increasing the popularity of witches by introducing them to a larger audience.

Few stories can claim the cultural impact and longevity of Homer's Greek epics,

which have been kept alive through retellings and adaptations since for more than two millennia. As times and trends change, the focus of these adaptations may shift and change to suit its contemporary audience, playing to the current social and cultural climate. In this, Madeline Miller's *Circe* highlights the titular character's story as told from her own perspective, shifting the focus from Odysseus, and portrays a more rounded and multidimensional witch than the reader would encounter in *The Odyssey*. In a time in which young women have grown up with films, television series, and mangas which have largely portrayed the witch as an idolized figure, the climate seems appropriate for Miller's redemption of the sorceress of Aeaea, providing her both with a voice and an audience who is willing to listen. As an adaptation, Miller's novel follows the popular trope of re-telling a story from the perspective of the villain, providing context and motivations for her villainous behaviours (McClymont 2), in addition to meeting her story with compassion and empathy.

As *The Odyssey* has seen countless translations over the years, there were many editions to choose from when deciding on the primary sources for this thesis. My initial pick was Walter Shewring's 2008 edition from the Oxford World Classics series, due to my own experience using this series in my academic research. However, I eventually switched to the Penguin Classics edition used in this thesis, translated by E. V. Rieu, after discovering that my original choice was a somewhat abridged version and contained less details than Rieu's version. Beyond the additional details provided in the Penguin Edition, the introduction by Peter Jones provided supplementary information and context. In the case of Miller's *Circe*, the edition used will be the United Kingdom first edition from 2018.

This thesis consists of four main chapters in addition to the introduction and final conclusion. The first chapter will present the theoretical foundation of this thesis, accounting for both the adaptational aspects as well as providing an insight in the rising popularity of the witch-figure as an inspirational figure for Miller's target audience, specifically young women. Introducing concepts by e.g., Roland Barthes and Linda Hutcheon, Chapter 1 will ultimately serve to provide the tools needed to perform the necessary analysis in later chapters. Further, the second chapter will introduce *The Odyssey* as written by Homer, with an emphasis on the character of Circe and her role in the poem. This section will go in-depth on the aspect of femininity in *The Odyssey*, highlighting Circe's function as a female counterpart to the Greek hero, in addition to exploring the descriptions of her magical abilities in the poem's afterlife. The third chapter, building upon the analysis of Circe as portrayed in *The Odyssey*, will showcase Miller's shifted narrative and modernized portrayal of the witch, as well as conveying the changes made between Homer's poem and Miller's adaptation. This chapter

will also provide a brief comparison to the portrayal of Circe in another modern work as a counterpoint to the positive portrayal of her witchcraft. Lastly, the fourth chapter aims to expand and elaborate on the concept of witches as inspirational figures in light of Miller's interpretation, and highlight the importance of Circe's sorcery by examining similar characters in other modern works.

Chapter 1: Adaptation and Theory

Regina Schober states that: "«Adaptation can be understood as processes in which connections are established between two different modes of representation" (Bruhn et al. 89). These modes can include mediums such as literature, film, music, and other works of art which may undergo alterations and changes before being presented in an adapted form. Culturally, adaptations are far from a modern phenomenon, as Joyce's adaptation of *The Odyssey* was published already in 1922, and, as Dennis Cutchins points out, most of the films winning the award for Best Picture at the Academy Awards since 1927 have been adaptations (2). However, recent years has seen an explosion in adapted content across television, music, and literature, which in turn has led to an increased interest in the field of adaptation theory (2). This expansion of interest has also meant that other derivative forms of literature are being examined more closely, such as the web-based medium of fanfiction. While different from the traditional forms of adaptation examined in this thesis, fanfiction contains many examples of applied adaptation theory as discussed in this chapter, allowing its place as a sort of sub-genre of literary adaptation. In addition, fanfiction highlights one of the purposes of adaptations, namely the opportunity to take a familiar story and altering it to achieve a new meaning. When examining an adaptation and comparing it to an original work, it is necessary to first understand the process behind adapting existing works into a new shape or form. In terms of literary adaptation, this chapter will explain terms such as transposition, commentary, and intertextuality, including how they are relevant to Miller's novel *Circe*, as well as discussing other relevant theories and techniques used in adaptation. The aim of this chapter is to create a foundation for later analysis by establishing various means of adaptation, examining the literary tools available for decoding the changes between two literary texts, and finally to provide an understanding of how the changes from original work to adaptation manages to alter meaning and context.

For this thesis, I seek out to determine the nature of the changes made between the two literary works *The Odyssey* and *Circe*, as well as the implications and characteristics of this particular process of adaptation. In order to fully comprehend the implications of *Circe* as an adapted work, it is therefore important to first examine what adaptation as a literary method entails. Linda Hutcheon describes the process, explaining:

> An adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This 'transcoding' can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story

from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation (8).

Hutcheon's description indicates that adaptation in its most basic form can be a re-imagining of a source material, which has been tweaked or manipulated to add or change context. As mentioned, a common form of adaptation is by changing its medium, for example from novel to film, and in certain instances the adaptations of this category become so popular that they overshadow the source material in terms of cultural impact. For instance, the musical *Les Misérables,* based on Victor Hugo's 1862 novel of the same name, was composed by Claude-Michel Schönberg in the 1980s and remains as one of the most popular musicals to this day. It is the longest running musical in London's West End, in addition to being adapted to a blockbuster movie in 2012, and has arguably overshadowed the original novel for a great portion of today's audience. However, while it is easy to see the advantages of adaptation from various mediums due to the organic changes and opportunities for storytelling this brings, it can be harder to identify the appeal of same-medium adaptations. For example, when performing a novel-to-novel adaptation, a challenge may be the creative process of altering the dynamics and perspectives of the story without making the adaptation unidentifiable from its source, while still changing enough for the adaptation to add a new dimension to the story. Julie Sanders argues that "adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text" (18). Commentary, applied here to describe the manner of using adaptations to comment on various issues such as gender roles or narrative in an original text, can exist in many forms, and is frequently used to challenge the audience, for example by providing critique of, or asking questions to, the original text. A popular method of adaptation is older stories re-told in a contemporary context, challenging traditional values and introducing modern social and political issues to an older work. Examples of this include the 2016 novel *Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld, which takes the characters and plot from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to a contemporary New York setting, creating a modern spin on the literary classic. Linda Hutcheon has famously noted that "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (7), and commentary is a form of insurance that such a replication does not occur, by taking something familiar and modifying aspects of if in order to provoke thought and questions from the reader.

When referring to adaptation in terms of literature such as novels and poems, the concept of intertextuality is unavoidable. As described by Julie Sanders, adaptation may be considered a "sub-section" (18) of intertextuality in that it examines the relationship between

various works of fiction, particularly those between an adaptation and its source. On the topic of intertextuality, Hutcheon writes: “Seen from the perspective of its process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsest through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation.” (8). An adaptation will frequently add an additional layer of meaning to the story, for example by telling the story from the point of view of a different character or placing the story at a different point in time, like in the aforementioned example of *Eligible*, and thus the result is a familiar story with a new dynamic. In relation to the longevity of original stories, such as Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Hall writes:

> It is the very endurance and survival of the source text that enables the process of juxtaposed readings that are crucial to the cultural operations of adaptation, and the ongoing experiences of pleasure for the reader or spectator in tracing the intertextual relationships. (25)

The popularity of *The Odyssey* through its multiple adaptations further feeds into the circle of allowing even more adaptations to be created, as familiarity can be an important aspect for created works. Hall argues that “The spectator or reader must be able to participate in the play of similarity and difference perceived between the original, source, or inspiration to appreciate fully the reshaping or rewriting undertaken by the adaptive text.” (45). When recognizing bits of the source material in an adapted work, it is easier to appreciate the changes brough on in the adaptation. It also provokes curiosity, caused by the idea that something familiar has been altered, which in turn may highlight the differences in meaning created by the adaptation. Further, Hutcheon describes adaptation, writing: “A process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective.” (8). As previously mentioned, adaptation of literary works entails a fine balance between imitation, or appropriation, and alienation, which implies changing a work beyond recognition. Adaptation is a manner of sharing stories, and the art lies in creating an adapted work that is still easily recognizable within its source while also providing a new interpretation and dynamic, for example for a new target audience.

Adaptation as a cultural phenomenon has seen a rise in popular culture for the past decade as media powerhouses like Disney has released a string of new movie adaptations based on their already existing animated adaptations of classical fairy tales and stories. Notable examples are *The Lion King* (2019), *The Jungle Book* (2016), and *Cinderella* (2015),

which are all new adaptations of previous Disney classics released for a new generation of children, as well as the adults who grew up watching the animated originals. In addition to changing the format of these new adaptations from hand-drawn animation to live-action and advanced CGI, the modernized adaptations also feature contemporary celebrities as actors and voice-actors, further adapting the new releases to a modern audience by using relevant figures to appeal to viewers. Among these new releases, some relevant adaptations are *Maleficent* (2014) and *Cruella* (2021), which in addition to adapting the story to a new format and audience changed the narrative of Disney classics *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *101 Dalmatians* (1996) by creating adaptations revolving around the villains of said stories. To compare these movie-adaptations to Madeline Miller's *Circe*, a common denominator is that all three are works which take a powerful, female character from a story in which they at some point serve as a villain, and provide them with a backstory and a storyline in which they are perceived as sympathetic victims of their surroundings. These films serve as a great example of how adaptation may be used to change the dynamics of an original story, highlighting the intertextuality and relationship between a source and its adaptation. After viewing either of the aforementioned movies, a rewatch of the animated originals they are based on will undoubtedly be impacted by the different perspectives provided in their respective adaptations, thus impacting the experience of watching the source material. The relationship between a source material and an adaptation may be unavoidable, but it is not necessarily one-sided. "When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works." (Hutcheon 6), indicating that it co-exists as a part of something rather than being a standalone work. While it is generally implied that one may enjoy an adaptation without being knowledgeable about the source material, one may equally enjoy the experience of consuming an adaptation or original work in light of the other.

One of the most prominent, modern examples of adaptations of Greek myth is Joyce's aforementioned novel *Ulysses*. Like Miller's *Circe*, *Ulysses* is based on Homer's *The Odyssey*, with the name Ulysses being a latinized version of the name Odysseus. However, unlike *Circe*, which takes place in the same setting as *The Odyssey*, *Ulysses* is a modern re-telling with references to its namesake, similar to how *Eligible* modernized the Jane Austen classic. This is just one manner of adapting older works – placing an old story in a new setting – but in adapting old and mythical stories, there are several approaches. Roland Barthes argues that "the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated" (Sanders 63), and it is true that mythical stories, especially those of a typical oral tradition, easily lend themselves to modification. Admittedly, *The Odyssey* does not fit perfectly into this category:

although Homer’s stories include creatures from Greek mythology and carry strong oral traditions, the written works are well recorded and functions more like a play or a fairy-tale than traditional mythology. Still, *The Odyssey* has spawned several new interpretations with Homer’s work forming the foundation, some more closely related to the source than others, and many within the genre of mythical and magical literature, such as fairy tales. One reason why literature based on myths and legends in particular lends themselves so well to adaptation is that the genre generally applies a variety of common literary tropes. When considering adaptation of myths and fairy tales in particular, Hutcheon argues that common denominators between an adaptation and an original work is not only its story, but also its “themes, events, world, characters, motivations, points of view consequences, context, symbols, imagery and so on.” (10). This does not mean that these all should remain the same – rather, it means that any one of the listed aspects can be changed in an adaptation in order to create a new dynamic. What this means in terms of fairy tales and myths is that their “traditional and easily accessible themes, such as quests, magical tasks, disguise and revelation, and innocence versus evil” (11) make for a grounded foundation which allows an adaptation to play around with the other aspects while still preserving key elements of the source. Another reason why these types of works are suitable for adaptation is the intertextual relationship between adapted works stemming from the original. In this, Sanders discuss the theory of Barthes, stating that:

> He invokes the specific example of a tree. Mentioned in a text, this undoubtedly stands for a tree in the literary context, a cross-cultural and cross-historical object, but it also becomes loaded with localized and particularized meaning according to its “social geography” as Barthes call it; the tree is “adapted to a certain kind of consumption” (109), as, indeed, are myths. This form of adaptation, relocation, and recontextualization proves an expansive rather than reductive mode for Barthes; he argues that myths “ripen” as they spread (149). (63)

As seen in Hutcheon’s aforementioned list of common denominators, relocation and recontextualization are presented by Barthes as aspects of adaptation. One of the easiest ways to re-imagine a story is perhaps by relocating the characters, thus creating a new setting, and thereby new challenges, for the story to engage with. The other aspect listed by Barthes, namely recontextualization, is a relatively broad term, which allows for many different variables of a story to be changed. For example, Madeline Miller’s *Circe* does not entail relocation, as its story is still set at the same time and place as *The Odyssey*, but it’s

adaptational qualities mainly stem from its recontextualization of the character of Circe.

Transposition is a common technique for adaptation and involves changing core elements of the story, for example format, such as novel to film, cultural location, or both. One may ask why Miller, in an attempt to create a contemporary portrayal of an ancient character, made the choice to keep Circe within her original historical and cultural setting rather than placing the story in a contemporary location and situation. Why not place the witch in a modern context? A possible answer to this is that by adapting the story within the context of her origins, Miller is able to portray Circe's full impact as a modern figure in an ancient setting, with every challenge her contemporary society would induce. Circe's character in *The Odyssey* is already fairly unique for her time, in addition to being of such importance to the story that changing or modernizing her setting could easily lead to downplaying her impact, both as a female character in a story written by and about a man, as well as her role as powerful sorceress. Thereby, limiting the character of Circe to her original setting and context implies that modernizing her character must be achieved through her own narration.

1.1 The Makings of an Adaptation

In referring to *Circe* as an adaptation of *The Odyssey*, I indicate that I consider Circe to be a re-telling of an existing story, modified and adapted to fit its new target-audience: young women. While Miller's *Circe* is predominantly a book about the titular character, including her life before and after meeting Odysseus, based on her life as depicted in Greek mythology, I argue that the novel is intertwined with Homer's poem to such an extent that it fits the criteria to be labelled as an adaptation. While it is almost certain that Miller drew inspiration from other sources of Greek myths, notably in her inclusion of Pasiphaë and the minotaur, such an integral part of *Circe* revolves around Odysseus' and his journey, including the creation of Scylla. Disney's aforementioned adaptation *Maleficent* (2015), for example, is built around a similar structure to *Circe* in that the titular character is given an establishing backstory which provides motivations and explanations for later actions, focusing only parts of their story on the connection to the source material. Further, as Circe is arguably one of the more notable characters in *The Odyssey*, the relationship between the witch and the hero is significant in both the original text and Miller's adaptation, impacting the entire latter half of

Circe and establishing it as an adapted story.

Adaptation as a literary device can be an interesting tool to play with dynamics within a story, especially in terms of taking a literary source as old as Homer's works and introducing it to a modern audience, adapting it to better fit into the contemporary literary scene. The term "hybridity", cited by Julie Sanders as the manner of which stories and ideas are "repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition" (17), discuss how the process of adapting literary tradition can bring a work of writing into a new era. The novel *Circe*, rather than repeating the tale of Odysseus, echoes its story from a new language and cultural location. Whilst the setting of the novel does not change from its origin, the setting and language of its audience has undergone a major shift - from predominately ancient Greek, oral tradition, to being printed in North America and read by primarily female readers, many changes are made to the story to account for this transition.

Before continuing the examination of the changes that have been made from *The Odyssey* to *Circe*, it can be interesting to question why Madeline Miller chose to create an adaptation of Homer's work in the first place. As previously established, mythology-based literature generally lends itself particularly well to adaptation due to a variety of factors. The themes and tropes used have long literary traditions, and thus are easily recognizable regardless of setting. Further, adaptation provides an opportunity to change, manipulate, or in any way alter the dynamic of a story by changing various elements, while simultaneously drawing in new readers by promising familiarity from a new perspective. While one reason for Millers choice to adapt the poem could be as simple as *The Odyssey* status as a cultural icon, making it appeal to audiences which are already acquainted with the story, another contributing factor could be that the story is told from a predominantly male perspective; the narrator, Odysseus, is male, and the poem was written by Homer, a man. This male perspective appears to frequently follow in adaptations as well, at least among the more well-known examples such as the aforementioned *Ulysses*. Thereby, Miller's action of taking a predominantly male-oriented, well-known story that features female characters and altering its narrative in a manner which tells the story from a female point of view leads to a shift in perspective, thus drawing in a new target audience.

There are certain challenges which are brought on by comparing an old work such as *The Odyssey* to modern, contemporary literature, yet one of the bigger challenges in terms of comparing Homer and Miller is that their respective works are written in completely different languages. Miller, who is an American novelist, naturally writes in a modern style of English, making her works easily readable for an English-speaking audience. In contrast, *The Odyssey*

was originally written in what is commonly referred to as Homeric Greek, and in order to be understood by a modern, English-speaking audience has to undergo translation. An additional layer of complexity in this matter is that *The Odyssey* has been a staple in classical literature for years, and, like the Bible, has seen many different translations and interpretations over the centuries. It is a natural consequence of translation that some content and context may be lost, and, depending on the translation that is being examined, meanings and wordings can change aspects and intentions from the original poem. Thus, any comparison between Miller's original novel and a translated version of *The Odyssey* can contain inaccuracies based on the individual translation, but such challenges are to be expected simply as a natural consequence of the process.

Despite the overwhelming male representation in translations and adaptations of Homer's works, Miller's *Circe* is not the first attempt at providing the classic poem with a female point of view. In his paper "Women Writers and the Fictionalisation of the Classics", Edwin Gentzler presents the topic of the first female translator of *The Odyssey*, Emily Wilson, examining her interpretation of Homer's poem as published in 2017. Gentzler writes:

> Wilson takes issues with such gender-conflicting stereotypes perpetuated in translation of male and female roles within the tale, as well as the passive, and often demeaning, characterisations of the women in translated versions. She cites traditional male translators characterising Penelope's maidservants, who allegedly had been sleeping with Penelope's suitors while Odysseus was away, at time referred to as 'sluts' and 'whores' by male translators. Instead, Wilson suggests they were young female slaves who had little or no agency to resist. (272)

As exemplified in Madeline Miller's 21st century explanation of Circe's actions and motivations, Gentzler describes Wilson's interpretation of power and agency in light of a modern world in terms of consent and vulnerability. In addition, the female point of view in a story which has frequently been told by men adds a different perspective to the role of vulnerable women as victims of power and position rather than willing and eager participants. Further, Gentzler explains:

> While prostitutes existed in Greek culture, these women were often trained in music and dance to appeal to the men. Female servants were at a level below and were frequently sexually exploited by the household men precisely because they were available and cheaper. (272)

Like Emily Wilson's interpretation and translation of *The Odyssey*, Madeline Miller's *Circe* takes Homer's original work and provides a retrospective look back in order to examine and re-define the events of the poem. Notably, the reason why Circe decided to turn Odysseus' men into pigs is never truly questioned in *The Odyssey* – it is simply an event that takes place, blamed on Circe's "evil heart" (Homer 132, lines 288-289) and villainy. Miller, on the other hand, attempts to explain the reasoning behind this action by using a scenario that, like Wilson's retrospective explanation of the servants as powerless and vulnerable, appears as both realistic and horrifying, as she is sexually assaulted by a group of sailors. Sexual assault as a motivation for the transformations makes the action seem less like an act of thoughtless evil and more like an attempt at self-preservation and revenge, which is a far more compelling explanation when reading the story from Circe's point of view. Further, author Tuhin Sen writes: "In the male-written and male-dominated accounts of the ancient world, we do not get access to women's feelings and desires, their struggles and anguishes, and their dreams and accomplishments." (43).

It is important to consider the feminist implications of *Circe*, especially upon considering the importance of Circe's womanhood in Homer's version of her story. The act of turning men into pigs, the phallic implications of her herding staff as described by Yarnall and McClymont, which will be further examined in a later chapter, as well as her role as a female counterpart to the hero Odysseus all suggest her gender is not only important to her character, but an essential part of her function in the poem. In an interview with author Madeline Miller following the release of *Circe* in 2018, she explains:

> Same thing with Circe: why is she turning men into pigs? She's so often portrayed as villainous, but once she and Odysseus come to an understanding, she ends up being one of the most helpful deities he encounters. I always thought she got a bad rep. Who was she really?

Miller's novel takes this vital aspect of Circe's character and allows it to be the centre of the narrative by explaining her thoughts and motivations, allowing the reader insight to her internal struggles. Sen points out Miller specifically as an example of a modern, feminist re-telling of classical literature, describing her novel as giving a voice to a female character which has been deprived by "male classical writers" (Sen 48). He argues:

> In Madeline Miller's acclaimed novel *Circe*, an ingeniously subversive retelling of Homer's *The Odyssey*, the eponymous spokeswoman Circe, the vilified witch of

Homer’s tale, both fumes over her unfair portrayal in the epic and mocks the Western classical literary tradition of demeaning the status of women. (48)

The mockery in question refers to the following passage from Miller’s novel, describing Circe’s reaction upon hearing her meeting with Odysseus as told by the poets and songwriters of her contemporary: “I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero’s sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep.” (Miller 181). This particular quote appears to acknowledge the contradiction of Odysseus and Circe’s first meeting as described by Homer and Miller, as *The Odyssey* describes the scene as following: “Whereupon I snatched my keen sword from my hip and rushed at Circe as though I meant to kill her. But with a shriek she slipped below my blade, clasped my knees and burst into tears.” (133 lines 322-323). As observed in both Miller and Homer’s stories, the relationship between the two characters is seemingly founded on a basis of mutual respect, yet this portrayal by Homer shows a submissive Circe throwing herself at the hero’s feet, begging him for mercy. Granted, this event is fairly unique in the story, as even after this act of submission Odysseus is wary of Circe and her powers, however the very act of kneeling before Odysseus, crying and begging, appears as somewhat demeaning and submissive act for a character as powerful as Circe. In her 2018 interview, Miller makes a comment on the impact of female narrative in terms of the agency of women, stating:

> In the ancient myths, either a woman is virtuous, and she dies tragically, or she has a little power and she's punished for it. Women are helpmates, they're wives, they're mistresses, and then they're dead. I wanted Circe to be about her growing up, the fullness of her life, and I wanted her to be arguing with Homer's version of her story. I wanted her to be pushing back and saying, 'That's what you said, but here's what I think.'

As an adapted work, *Circe* removes the humiliation and submission of women as a core element of heroic male storytelling by allowing them to tell their own story, as indicated in the quote above, and instead provides a new angle, shifting the dynamic to a female perspective. In giving the character of Circe a voice, Miller is able to question and challenge the portrayals presented in Homer’s narrative in a modern climate which may be more interested in the woman’s point of view.

The trend of media powerhouses like Disney adapting their own work to produce new movies based on stories the audience is familiar with is not limited to the medium of film-to-

film adaptation. As established by Dennis Cutchins, adaptations in a variety of forms have experienced a massive increase in popularity. Cutchins states:

> Adaptation studies continues to grow as a field, likely driven by the explosion of adaptive texts in practically every kind of art. At least a third of the songs on our playlists are 'covers,' or new recordings of older songs, and even ostensibly new songs often 'sample' elements of older songs. More than half of the plays on Broadway or the West End at any given moment are adaptations of films, novels, and television shows. Marvel's film adaptations of comic book storylines have owned the movie box office for the past ten years and are increasingly popular on television and streaming services. (Cutchins 2).

Adaptations are such a natural part of our media diet that it is easy to underestimate their immense spread and variety. For instance, it is easy to notice when Disney releases a new live-action adaptation of their animated classics, or when a famous musician produces a cover of a popular song, but some brands of adaptations are easier to overlook. One such brand of adaptation is fanfiction: a portmanteau of the words "fan" and "fiction", sometimes spelled as fan fiction, referring to works of literature made by fans of existing works, which takes elements of the story to create their own adaptations. These texts often feature characters from popular television series, films, and novels, one common example being the characters of the *Harry Potter*-series, and varies elements such as setting, relationship dynamics, or self-insertion of the writer into the story. What generally makes fanfiction stand out from other branches of adaptation such as the typical novels and films mentioned in this chapter is that the stories are generally written by amateur writers and published online for free, as opposed to traditional publishing. Webpages such as fanfiction.net and Archive of Our Own (shortened Ao3) are popular sites for this purpose, featuring millions of fan-written stories and poems. Despite these high numbers, fanfiction is still relatively unknown outside of fan-spaces, which likely aids in their lack of representation in studies about adaptation. According to *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader,* fanfiction being taken seriously as a form of literature is a decidedly recent phenomenon, especially in academic circles (19). Despite this, there are some who have examined fanfiction as a new brand of literature to be examined with equal respect and curiosity to traditional fiction. Hellekson and Busse writes "From its inception, fan fiction has always been multiple: entertainment and analysis, original and derivative." (20). Like Miller's adaptation of *The Odyssey*, which takes an existing character from an original work and re-telling their story, fanfiction frequently operates like professionally published derivative texts

in terms of transposition and intertextuality. While fanfiction is perhaps most known in fan spaces for being a vehicle of wish-fulfilment, notably by altering relationship dynamics between characters or self-insertion of the writer to create desired romantic or platonic relationships, the process remains similar to traditional adaptation as stated in the introduction to this chapter as "processes in which connections are established between two different modes of representation." (Bruhn et al. 89).

Returning to the topic of *Circe*, Miller's adaptation is decidedly female-centric: it revolves around a female character narrating her own story, told by a female author. Hellekson and Busse argues that fanfictions may be comparable to published derivative works such as *Circe* in providing commentary on subjects such as feminism, stating:

> Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1984), and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2008) all retell classic male-focused tales by foregrounding the female protagonists of *The Odyssey, The Iliad*, and *The Aeneid*, respectively. These retellings parallel the feminist focus of fan fiction: the authors all seek to modify and correct the vast number of texts still clearly geared to white men. (23).

The shift in Greek classics as presented in adaptations, including fanfiction, appear to comment on the manner in which female characters are portrayed by male authors, by providing a counter-narrative based on a female perspective. While this topic will be further examined in chapter 3 of this thesis, it is nonetheless relevant when examining fanfiction's role in adaptation theory as a tool for literary commentary.

The somewhat blurry lines between fanfiction and traditional adaptation seem all the less defined when looking at E. L. James's *Fifty Shades* trilogy. James's first novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, became massively successful after its release in 2011, selling millions of copies worldwide, in addition to producing various merchandise and a trilogy of film adaptations. What many did not know, however, was that the plot of the novel itself was based on an adaptation. According to Business Insider's 2015 article "'Fifty Shades of Grey' started out as 'Twilight' fan fiction before becoming an international phenomenon", James's novel was based on the works of Stephanie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* novels. It is easy to recognize fanfiction when sourcing it on a free webpage, however once the story becomes published, the distinction becomes less defined. Once a fanfiction is published, what differentiates it from typical literary adaptations? As stated, the two share significant common ground as derivative works, which takes elements from an original work and alters them to

achieve a new perspective, dynamic, or narrative. However, this does not mean that Madeline Miller's *Circe* can be considered fanfiction. The Oxford English Dictionary webpages defines the term "fan fiction" as:

> Fiction, usually fantasy or science fiction, written by a fan rather than a professional author, esp. that based on already-existing characters from a television series, book, film, etc.

A key difference between a traditional work of fanfiction and literary adaptations such as Miller's novel herein lies in the word "fan", as while a fanfiction, as stated above, is written by and for fans of the object of adaptation, Miller's adaptation of *The Odyssey* leads to a shift in target audience, namely by specifically targeting young women. A person who is familiar with Homer's poem may be further persuaded into reading Miller's adaptation due to familiarity, but understanding or being familiar with the source material is not essential to understand or enjoy the adaptation. In fanfiction however, the writers generally rely on the reader being familiar with the characters or setting the story is based on and can focus less on establishing characters in order to put more focus and emphasis on the plot. In addition, one is less likely to stumble upon fanfiction if not actively searching for it – unlike traditional adaptations in the form of movies, television series, or novels, which may be consumed easily among their non-adapted counterparts, fanfiction is usually found specifically in spaces, particularly webpages, where fans of the source material gather. This thereby leads to a natural limitation of the target audience for these types of written works.

There is also a more formal distinction between the traditional adaptation and fanfiction in terms of copyright and licensing, as older works such as *The Odyssey* belong to the public domain and therefore is free to utilize and monetize for the public, while newer works, such as *Twilight*, is still protected by copyright laws. To circumvent this, fanfiction-author E.L. James changed the names of the characters in her story which was later published under the title *Fifty Shades of Grey*, at which point the story had changed so much from its origins that it was no longer recognizable as fanfiction, nor even an adaptation. In a similar manner, Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*-novels have seen a variety of adaptations, including BBC's 2010 television series titled *Sherlock,* which was set in modern-day Britain. While this series was an adaptation of Doyle's characters and stories able to be sold and earn a profit, the numerous fanfictions the series fathered would fall under copyright laws and not be monetizable due to being based on the newer series as opposed to the older novels. While this distinction perhaps appears as a nit-pick, it can be helpful to distinguish literary forms in

legal terms to differentiate them beyond the limitations of theoretical comparison.

In short, adaptation means taking a form of media and re-shaping it, either to another form of media, such as novel to film, or by changing elements of the original to fulfil a new purpose. The aim of an adaptation may be to transfer a story from book to screen, changing the location or setting to re-imagine the story with new variables, or alter the narrative, for example by telling the story from a new perspective. In terms of Miller's *Circe*, the changes made to the original story allows a shift in target audience, notably by switching the narrative from a male to a female point of view. This specific method of adaptation is frequently referred to as transposition, as argued by Linda Hutcheon:

> Adaptation can be described as the following: An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, a creative *and* interpretive act of appropriation/ salvaging, an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work (8).

In this context, *Circe* fits into her criteria by being based on an old, well-known story that has been re-worked into a modern cultural context, without changing its time or setting. This allows the changes Miller has implemented from *The Odyssey* to stand out, as it is easily comparable and identifiable for someone familiar with the source material. By altering location and setting, the focus of the adaptation may shift or be distracted from less obvious changes, such as the behaviour and motivations of the characters, as there are simply more variables. When examining the methods and intricacies of adaptation, it may be helpful to examine genres of writing which are similar to literary adaption, such as fanfiction, in order to easily identify what differentiates an adaptation from other works of literature. Fanfiction, like literary adaptations such as Miller's *Circe*, is based on an already existing piece of media, for example a novel or a film, and takes elements like characters or setting to create a new story. The major differentiators between adaptations such as *Circe* and general fanfiction is that adaptations generally are more rooted in the story and plot of the source material, while fanfictions are more preoccupied with characters and settings. Additionally, fanfiction is generally limited to online publication and rarely makes it to traditional publishing in its original form. While *Circe* as an adaptation function as a standalone novel by not relying too heavily on the reader's familiarity with *The Odyssey*, fanfiction is generally dependant on the reader being well acquainted with the characters or settings presented, as they generally spend very little time on establishing relationships and developing characters. Schober writes:

> Adaptation processes always entail a creative act and interpretative act of (re)combination, since as soon as an adaptation has been created, it is automatically emancipated and disconnected from the source medium (89).

Unlike fanfiction, which generally remains dependant on the source material, literary adaptations such as *Ulysses* and *Circe* re-imagine the story of the source material into an original work. However, this emancipation does not mean one can exclude the intertextuality and relationship between an adaptation and the work it is based on. As stated, one may generally enjoy an adaptation just fine with no prior knowledge of its source material, just as one can enjoy an original novel or film without considering the adaptations they may have inspired. However, in being aware of the relationship between an original work and its adaptation, one is able to compare and experience the two in light of the other. For example, while one may enjoy watching Disney's *Maleficent* (2014) or Sleeping Beauty (1959) separately, experiencing them as two narratives of the same story allows for a more dynamic perception.

1.2 Witches for a New Demographic

When examining the general audience of Madeline Miller's adaptation, it becomes evident that *Circe* is popular among young women. A quick examination of the novel's *Goodreads*-page reveals that a majority of the reviews, which average on 4.26 out of 5 stars across more than 600 000 ratings, are written by users with female names and profile pictures of young women, supporting the indication that a large portion of Miller's audience consists of this demographic. The fact that an audience of young women would come to find Miller's work appealing should come as no surprise considering the themes and narrative presented in the novel, especially when combined with the popularity of witches, especially when presented as inspirational figures, as this thesis will examine further.

The witch as a mythical figure has been subject to a variety of literary and cultural iterations throughout the centuries. From a historical perspective they have been presented as healers, alchemists, and, notoriously, as companions of the devil and practitioners of dark magic, famously leading to the persecution and murder of thousands of women accused of witchcraft across Europe and America. In modern pop culture, witches have been portrayed as everything from evil villains, such as C. S. Lewis' tyrannical white witch in the Narnia series

or Roald Dahls' child-murdering witches from his popular children's book *The Witches* (1983), to heroes and role models in tv-series like *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2000) and Disney's *The Wizards of Waverley Place* (2007-2012), as well as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and movies like *The Craft* (1996). For young women and girls especially, the recent role of witches in pop culture is often presented as inspirational, with the witches in question frequently being teenage girls to whom the audience can relate – quite different from the old, villainous hags represented in traditional fairy tales. Further, television series like the early 2000s Saturday morning cartoon *W.I.T.C.H*, based on a manga of the same name, highlighted witchcraft as a source of power and sisterhood for teenage girls, a message that would be crucial for the role of witchcraft in modern feminism.

A modern tool for networking is through the internet and social media, where the spread of information and the forming of communities can be found across a variety of platforms. As of February 2022, a search the image- and video-sharing platforms Instagram and Tik Tok shows the hashtag "Witch" has garnered respectively 17,1 million and 13,6 billion results. On the smaller, blog-like webpage Tumblr, the topic "Witch" has 77 thousand followers, and on the forum-based app Reddit the subreddit WitchesVsPatriarchy, a feminist space for discussion about life as a woman, as well as witchcraft and the occult, has nearly half a million subscribers. As an increasing part of socializing for people of all ages takes place online (Vendetti 233), as do the witch community spreads its message across a variety of popular platforms, creating both smaller and larger communities with witch-positive content. However, this increased popularity is not limited to socializing, as in addition to the general reach of witch-content on social media platforms, e-commerce also both contributes and benefits from the popularity of witchcraft by producing and selling witch-themed merchandise. On sites such as e-retailer Etsy one may find witch-themed clothing, supplies such as tarot-decks and crystals, as well as books detailing anything from witchcraft-inspired practices to elaborate rituals and spells. Celestial symbols such as crescent moons and constellations, often western zodiacs such as Leo and Taurus, as well as tarot cards and animals frequently associated with the occult, such as bats and snakes, have become popular motifs and adornments on clothing and jewellery beyond niche and specialty shops, making an impact in traditional retail. Since 2020, global clothing retailers such as H&M and ASOS have produced and sold collections featuring slogans such as "With my Witches" and "Resting Witch face", demonstrating the reach and popularity of witches among their target audience of teenage girls and young women. The influx of witch- and witchcraft-themed clothing and merchandise aimed at women over the past 5 years suggest an increasing

demand, which arguably follows the general popularity of witches and witchcraft.

Many of these examples of witchcraft-themed works and merchandise are fairly modern, usually no older than from the early 1990s, and this might be due to the great influx of positive portrayals of witchcraft across platforms which began in this era. However, the increasing popularity of witches media is not without controversy. In discussing witchcraft as portrayed by popular media since the 1990s, it is impossible to ignore one notable example. Not only because of its immense popularity and influence, but also because of the criticism and controversy it provoked. In 1997 author Joanne Rowling, better known under her pen name J.K. Rowling, published a children's novel titled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. This novel marked the beginning of a series spanning more than two decades, featuring seven novels, eight movies, several video games and theme parks, as well as a global mania shared by children and adults alike. The characters portrayed in the series, particularly the titular main character and his two friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, embodied inspirational traits such as bravery, wit, kindness, and loyalty, in addition to being relatable to the target audience due to their age. Not only could children grow up alongside Harry, Ron, and Hermione over the course of the books and movies, but Rowling's stories combined a fine balance of fantastical life-and-death situations intertwined with struggles the audience could relate to, such as arguments and friendship, the awkwardness of dating, and serious issues such as abusive family situations and loss. For Harry Potter, magic and witchcraft become an escape from his miserable life, providing him with a new world in which he is finally in control of himself, and the power of witchcraft comes to represent hope and empowerment for many characters across the series.

Not only was the Harry Potter-series massively successful, as the books saw sales figures of around 500 million copies sold worldwide, but they also induced much criticism and were banned in certain communities for promoting and glorifying witchcraft to children. Notably, Alissa Wilkinson's Vox-article from 2018 titled "I didn't read Harry Potter when I was growing up. And I wasn't alone" examines the practice of religious communities in the US (such as the Jehovah's witnesses, as well as sub-communities of conservative Christians such as Evangelicals and Catholics), openly criticising the books, banning them for their members and their children. While J. K. Rowling's novels are by far the first or only piece of literature or media to be banned and criticised in religious communities, Rowling's series stood out due to the sheer scale of the opposition. Amanda Cockrell debates the reasons for why the Harry Potter-series in particular saw such scrutiny and outrage, asking:

> What is it about Harry Potter? What makes a fundamentalist American reading (or non-reading) public, who never got upset over the magic godmother in Cinderella, or Glinda the Good Witch of the West in The Wizard of Oz, or Gandalf the Grey, complete with magic staff and wizard's hat, in The Lord of the rings, book and films, draw the line at Harry Potter? (24).

The answer, she argues, is popularity. For a public that is largely used to witchcraft being presented as negative, with some exceptions stated above, the immense influence of Rowling's novels sparked a moral panic amongst parents. A notable example of this panic, as explained by Patricia Peters of the *American Library Association* (2017), is the 2006 Gwinnet County lawsuit following a call to ban Rowling's novels from school libraries, wherein a group of parents eventually took the lawsuit to civil court in order to achieve a ban, as well as the book burning initiated by the Christ Community Church in Alamogordo, New Mexico in December of 2001 (Peters). While witchcraft in popular media was far from a new phenomenon, including the positive representation present in Rowling's works, the global Harry Potter craze created an unprecedented influence and impact on children and young teens that is still visible two decades after the first novel's release. A trilogy of spin-off movies featuring characters and locations from Rowling's story is set to release its final third in 2022, and a highly anticipated videogame titled *Hogwarts: Legacy* is currently in the making, set to be released across a variety of platforms by the end of the year. The popularity of the *Harry Potter*-series is undebatable, and while it is challenging to estimate the exact impact and consequences Rowling's works have had on the public perception of witchcraft in popular media, it undoubtedly serves as a reminder that not everyone is comfortable with the changing perception of the witch, and that certain communities are still heavily against the normalization and positive connotations witchcraft has experienced since the 1990s.

Chapter 2: Homer's *The Odyssey*

Attributed to the Greek poet Homer, *The Odyssey* is an epic poem dating back to the 7th or 8th century BC, detailing the journey of the Greek hero Odysseus and his men as they return to their beloved Ithaca after the legendary battle of Troy. Their triumphant return home quickly turns out to be a challenging task, as they encounter the wrath of vengeful gods, powerful monsters, and alluring nymphs, leaving the hero and his crew away from home for nearly 20 years. His family on Ithaca, especially his wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, longingly await his return, fearing the worst as the island is flocked with suitors looking to replace Odysseus as king of the island. Finally, with the interference and aid of the Olympian gods which led Odysseus astray in the first place, he eventually returns home on his own, as all his men have been killed along their journey. He disguises himself as a beggar to hide his return, murders the suitors, and is finally reunited with his wife and son. Among the mystical and dangerous beings Odysseus and his men encounter along their decade-long journey is the mighty sorceress Circe, whose infamous potions and spells prove to be a real threat to the men. However, as opposed to many other dangers Odysseus encounters along his way, Circe goes from being a terrifying foe to being a powerful and valuable ally and friend, as well as Odysseus' lover.

Homer's poem, which is rated as one of the great Greek epics, was purposefully written to be read aloud or performed before an audience. Egbert J. Bakker refers to *The Odyssey* as an example of "traditional oral poetry" (51), signifying the importance of oral storytelling as a conveyer of mythos in Homer's time. Further, the traditional elements of *The Odyssey* continues in the plot of the story, which is centred around what Bakker refers to as the "returning husband" theme. He refers to this as a typical "folktale motif" (51), implying its common use in this genre of storytelling. Bakker elaborates, stating:

> *The Odyssey* has numerous features in common with the generic themes of tales that are attested in these regions: the returning hero comes back just in time, usually in disguise, to prevent his wife's marriage with a (usually malevolent) suitor; he is typically recognized first by one of his animals. Some of these stories come complete with a test of strength or skill. It is easy to see that *The Odyssey* contains many of these structural features; and it is quite certain that the poem draws on such folktales. (51)

As argued by Bakker, the traces of contemporary and traditional folktales and stories are evident in Homer's epic poem. It is also easy to observe that *The Odyssey*, as the name

implies, revolves heavily around the character of Odysseus, who plays the role of the returning husband in the motif Bakker identifies. However, Odysseus is far from the only character of importance in the story, and in the poem's afterlife, *The Odyssey* may well be equally famous for its villains, such as the cyclops Polyphemus and the sirens. These enemies serve to highlight Odysseus' strengths, notably his bravery, wit, and cunning, but also to draw attention to his flaws, such as his hubris. In some cases, he is even unable to challenge the monsters he encounters without divine intervention and guidance from the Olympian gods or other immortal beings that take pity on the travellers. One instance of a villain that is able to both signify Odysseus' personal strengths as well as proving that even he is no match for a divinity is the aforementioned Circe, the infamous witch and daughter of the sun, Helios. The character of Circe plays an impactful role not only as a temporary villain or a challenge to overcome, but also as a reflection and female counterpart to the character of Odysseus. Bakker describes Odysseus' character, stating: "The role that Odysseus plays in this tale may in fact be the hero's original identity of trickster, a protagonist who wins not by force or heroic might, but by guile and cunning." (51). Certain traits that are frequently associated with Odysseus and his trickster nature, namely his cunning and wit, are mirrored and represented in the character of Circe. While she is indeed described as a powerful and mighty creature, her power is not derived from physical strength or size, but her magical abilities and trickery. Despite being a lone woman, she single-handedly manages to bewitch and turn half of Odysseus' crew of men into pigs by luring them with spiked food and drink before performing her magic on them. She even attempts to capture Odysseus himself, but with the guidance of the god Hermes he manages to avoid the fate of his crew. Circe is a mysterious creature; initially a daunting enemy to both Odysseus and his crew, her magical abilities and valuable knowledge eventually becomes a real asset to Odysseus and his men in their restoration and journey home. There is also an undeniable sexual element to her character, derived both from her captivating beauty and from her role as a female counterpart to the poem's protagonist.

Upon her first mention in book 10 of *The Odyssey*, Circe is described as "a formidable goddess, with a mortal woman's voice." (128, line 137). As a daughter of the Helios, god of the Sun, and the granddaughter of the ocean himself, Pontus, it is perhaps natural for Odysseus to consider her a goddess, although she has later become better known as a sorceress or witch in the afterlife of the poem (McClymont 21). While her mother is a mighty nymph named Perse, Circe herself is referred to as identifying more with her father's godly decent than to her mother's nymph-heritage in terms of power and abilities. Yet, she

embodies some traits typically associated with the nymphs of Greek mythology, such as beauty and charm. The men describe her allure upon their first visit to her palace in the following manner:

> They could hear Circe within, singing in her beautiful voice as she went to and fro at her great and everlasting loom, on which she was weaving one of those delicate, graceful and dazzling fabrics that goddesses make. (Homer 130, lines 221-223)

Evidently there are ample traces of her nymph heritage, as she is described as both beautiful and appealing, which contributes to making Odysseus' men trust her - thus allowing her to enchant them and turn them into pigs. While at this point in the story Odysseus' men have encountered many dangers and are already on guard, they underestimate Circe and subsequently suffer the consequences. Only Eurylochus, the captain of the group, is hesitant to enter her home as he is suspicious of the powerful divinity, and he thereby escapes back to Odysseus and the rest of the men to warn them. There is little doubt that Circe is a powerful foe; the rest of Odysseus' men, who have already won great battles and overpowered countless enemies, do not even attempt to attack Circe using plain force or violence to avenge or save their comrades. Instead, Odysseus relies on the God Hermes to provide him with the tools and wisdom he needs to withstand her magic and bring back his men. The encounter with Hermes solidifies Circe's role as a villainous being, as the god refers to the witch's powers as "black magic" (Homer 132, line 290), warning Odysseus by stating: "Look; here is a drug of real virtue that you must take with you into Circe's palace; it will make you immune from evil." (132, lines 288-289).

With this advice the hero enters Circe's home, immune to her potions and spells. He observes her apparent delight in his company, yet is wary of her magic as she prepares his food and drink with her dangerous drugs. As she attempts her spell, proclaiming "Off to the pigsty, and lie down with your friends." (Homer 133, line 320), Odysseus raises his sword as if to strike her, thereby revealing that her magic has not affected him. The witch falls to her knees, begging the hero for mercy while shrieking that he must be a man of great power and strength to resist her magic. She says:

> You must have a heart in your breast that is proof against all enchantment. I am sure you are Odysseus, that resourceful man; the man whom the Giant-killer with the golden wand always told me to expect here on his way back from Troy on his swift black ship. But now put up your sword and come with me to my bed, so that in making love we may learn to trust one another. (133, lines 329-335)

Still weary of the powerful witch, Odysseus makes Circe swear an oath not to harm him or rob him of his “manhood” (133, line 341). After they have made love, Odysseus asks her to transform his men back into themselves, as he cannot enjoy her company as long as they remain in their new form. Circe obliges, and Odysseus and his men reunite, marking the beginning their comfortable and secure year-long stay on Circe’s Island.

While Circe never directly reveals her motive for performing her transformative magic on Odysseus’ men and attempting to doom Odysseus to the same faith, it would appear that the hero assumes it comes down to plain villainy. As stated, Hermes has already warned Odysseus about her evil tricks and black magic, but Odysseus himself puts an emphasis on the word “evil”, stating: “She prepared a brew in a golden bowl for me to drink and with evil in her heart dropped in the drug.” (Homer 233, line 312). From the hero’s point of view, the sorceress is like a spider, waiting for the next victim to walk into her net so that she may unleash her evil upon them. Among the first of Odysseus’ men to arrive on her doorstep, Eurylochus is the only one to escape after labelling the witch’s palace a “trap” (Homer 131, line 257), further suggesting that Circe plans to hurt them, ensnaring them with evil intent. A typical trait of Greek myth and epics, especially those revolving around mortal heroes, is that most divinities frequently perform cruel actions simply because it is amusing to them (Sissa and Detienne 15). There is a strong sense that mortals mean very little to divinities, as their fragility and mortality make them lesser beings. This sentiment is evident in *The Odyssey*’s description of other mythical beings, such as the sirens or the cyclops. They do not need a motive or a reason to kill – it is simply what they do. The same logic appears to apply to Circe, or at least it does according to Odysseus and Hermes’s impressions of her. She is a witch – therefore she is evil and performs evil deeds. However, the particular case of Circe becomes a bit more complex after she switches roles from being an enemy to becoming a helper. Her character is more dynamic than most of the beings featured in *The Odyssey*, as they generally serve a purpose of either being helpers, like the Phaeacians, or enemies, like the Laestrygonians. With the exception of the Olympian gods, who both help and sabotage Odysseus over the course of his journey, Circe is the only character to play a dynamic role, serving both as an enemy and an ally in the poem.

In terms of the divide between helper and enemy, Circe’s development as a character is both swift and full of contrast. From her debut as a intimidating villainess who transform seemingly good men into pigs for her own sick pleasure, to her own transformation into a generous host and worthy partner to Odysseus, mere hours pass in the story. Despite the fact that Odysseus and his crew spend many months on Circe’s Island of Aeaea, not much is said

about this time beyond the mentions of the great feasts and kind hospitality the men experience until they once again long to return to Ithaca. Upon asking Circe for help to return home, Odysseus is not met with a jealous woman who wishes to retain her new lover for herself, as he will later experience with Calypso; instead, Circe simply tells him: “heaven-born son of Laertes, resourceful Odysseus; do not stay on unwillingly.” (Homer 137, line 488). Further, she provides Odysseus with a detailed plan of how to continue his journey by venturing into Hades, communicate with the dead, and safely return to the land of the living. Their relationship is less emotionally intense than those he shares with his wife, Penelope, or the nymph Calypso, whom he encounters later in his journey – Odysseus’ and Circe’s relationship appears to first and foremost be a practical affair.

Both by providing a safe environment for Odysseus and his men to rest after their encounters with both the Cyclops Polyphemus and the Laestrygonians, and by offering advice and guidance for their journey home, Circe is a necessity for Odysseus’ journey to continue. Described as a powerful goddess, her excellence in sorcery initially terrifies the men, and even after she reveals herself as to be powerful ally to Odysseus and his comrades, there remains an air of mystery around her. Upon his departure from the Island, Odysseus observes: “Meanwhile Circe had gone ahead and tethered a ram and black ewe by the ship. She had slipped past us with ease; when a god wishes to remain unseen, what eye can observe his coming and going? (Homer 139, lines 570-573). Even Odysseus, the man closest to her, does not quite have a hold of her even after spending months as her lover. She maintains her role as a worthy and equal counterpart to Odysseus, despite the implications that she is in fact more powerful than him, exemplified by Odysseus needing the help of a God to avoid her sorcery rather than escaping purely by his own merit. Homer describes no sorrow from either person upon Odysseus’ departure, nor any passionate feelings during their relations.

The implications of Odysseus’ most notable counterpart within the entirety of *The Odyssey* being female are not insignificant. Judith Yarnall argues:

> Circe turning men to pigs is a signifier of a reversal of power (by gender) – the drug in the drink is what turns the men to pigs, but there is an emphasis on her herding staff. Yet because this moment illustrates more clearly than any other female dominance over the male, the rhabdos has come to seem potent, a symbol of phallic powers improperly assumed. (12)

In line with Yarnall’s interpretation, McClymont argues that “Circe’s wand is not necessarily magic but is more like a rod for controlling animals,” (23) suggesting that the effect of the rod

is less for “magical power as for dominance obtained over the male sex.” (23). Yarnall and McClymont both argue that the symbolism behind the “phallic” (Yarnall 12) rod is to exert dominance over males, reversing power according to contemporary gender roles and expectations of power. This brings up the impact of Circe’s gender in opposition to Odysseus, who in many ways inhabits traits typically associated with masculinity: he is strong, brave, and a natural leader, both as the king of Ithaca and during the crew’s long journey home from Troy. There are also elements in the poem that alludes to Circe’s womanhood, notably when Odysseus men first come upon her: “And now they could hear Circe within, singing with her beautiful voice as she moved to and fro at the wide web that was more than earthly – delicate, gleaming, delectable, as a goddess handiwork needs must be.” (118). Weaving, as Circe is doing in this situation, was commonly perceived as a domestic, and therefore female, task or pastime. It can be observed at other points in the poem, most notably with Penelope and Calypso, two of Odysseus’ other romantic connections, who are also frequently seen with their loom and shuttle. In addition to her weaving, her alluring appearance and beautiful voice are also noted as feminine and notable aspects of her person. McClymont states: “Even without magical drugs, a beautiful woman with an enchanting voice is still dangerous – remember the sirens?” (23), pointing out the inherent allure the female character has over Odysseus.

As a villain, Circe is not only opposed to Odysseus because of her gender, power or godly decent: in many ways, she is a female counterpart to his own cunning wit and bravery. This is reflected in her decision to help him after her failed attempt to turn him into a pig like she did to many of his crewmembers, signifying that he has outsmarted her and thereby earned her respect. Their relationship beyond this is not painted as a man having outsmarted or overpowered a woman, thereby leaving her submissive and obeying; rather, it reflects a relationship built on mutual respect. Unlike what the historical context and contemporary norms might suggest, upon defeating Circe, Odysseus ends up in her bed not as a victorious fighter claiming his prize, but because of Circe’s own desire to have him. By having Odysseus face an opponent that inhabits many of his defining traits as a character, the balance of having this opponent be female allows for a different take and expectation of power. As discussed in the previous section, their opposing traits associated with their respective genders serve as a contrast by showcasing the various outlets of power and strength as aspects of one’s character. Odysseus derives his power from his position, both as a powerful general during the war and as the king of Ithaca, while Circe derives her power from her magic. As a woman in a largely patriarchal society, Circe successfully manages to stand out in a position of power; not only

over the nymphs on her island, but also over Odysseus' men, who are well aware of what she is capable of doing if they step out of line.

While one might argue that Odysseus encounters many possible "counterparts" that could fulfil the criteria described above during his journey, there are many reasons to consider Circe as his truest counterpart. While certain notable opponents, such as Polyphemus and the suitors, appear to fulfil a similar role or inhabit some of the same defining traits as Odysseus, Circe is a counterpart due to their similarities in strengths and leadership. The cyclops Polyphemus, while being a powerful being and a ruler of land like Odysseus, is ultimately fooled due to his own simple-minded nature compared to Odysseus' wit. The suitors, who are in a literal sense trying to fulfil Odysseus' purpose after he has disappeared, are proven to be explicitly incapable at replacing him when they are unable to draw his bow. Regarding Circe, she mirrors Odysseus not in her position or place, but in her power and cunning wit. She has a commanding presence, and just like her male counterpart, her intricate trickery is an important aspect of her personality and part of what makes her endeavours so successful. Perhaps because of their similarities, as well as her proven powers, Odysseus shows a great deal of respect for Circe. He accepts her advice without question and trusts her guidance. Upon his final departure from Aeaea, after his voyage to the land of the dead, Odysseus is bestowed one final gift from Circe. "Then Circe, that formidable goddess with the beautiful hair and a woman's voice, sent us the friendly escort of a favourable wind, which sprang up from astern and filled the sail of our blue-painted ship." (Homer 161, lines 150-153). As a final goodbye, it is evident that Circe and Odysseus leave each other on good terms and as equals. The same cannot be said for other female characters Odysseus meets and shares a bed with along his journey, such as Calypso.

2.1 Calypso and Circe

Building upon the role of a female counterpart for the hero Odysseus, it is helpful to examine and compare how Circe and Odysseus' relationship stands out among the other women he encounters on his journey. By comparing two of Odysseus' love interests in *The Odyssey*, a notable point of interest is the dynamic between Odysseus and the nymph Calypso in contrast to his relationship with Circe. When the reader first encounters Odysseus in the poem, he is trapped on Calypso's Island of Ogygia, longing to return home to Ithaca and his people. As

opposed to his stay at Aeaea, where he was surrounded by his remaining crew and received much needed rest and assistance for his journey onwards, Odysseus' stay at Ogygia is referred to by Homer as an "imprisonment" (63, line 4), and as his remaining men has perished, his only company is the nymph herself. Calypso quickly develops unreciprocated feelings for the hero and is reluctant to let him go. In the same manner that Circe is a female counterpart to Odysseus, Calypso serves as an emotional counterpart to Circe's balanced rationality.

J.D. McClymont describes the difference between Calypso and Circe as opposing characters, arguing that:

> Calypso and Circe have contrasting characters, in that Circe appears less emotional. When Odysseus has to eventually leave her, she is sensible and practical about it, and does not, like Calypso, try to restrain him, or complain. (26)

As established in this chapter, the relationship between Odysseus and Circe appears as fairly balanced, while Calypso, on the other hand, plays the role of an infatuated nymph desperate to keep Odysseus by her side. Interestingly enough, as McClymont point out, Calypso is desperate despite Odysseus' blatant coldness and lack of interest in her, while Circe was seemingly apathetic about a man who had to be negged by his crew to leave. As described by Homer, Odysseus and his men are happy and content at Circe's Island of Aeaea; as they recover from their harrowing encounters with the Cyclops and Laestrygonians, the Island feels like a safe haven. Yet as they recover, they eventually grow restless in their comfortable surroundings and decide it is time to move on, and with the help of Circe to continue their journey, this organically concludes their stay on Circe's Island, as well as the relationship between the witch and the hero. When Hermes arrives at Ogygia, on the other hand, Odysseus is lonesome and miserable. He spends most of his time by the shore, "tormenting himself with tears and sighs and heartache" (65, line 81) desperately longing for his home and his family. As opposed to the safe and necessary comfort of Aeaea, Ogygia is a gilded cage where Odysseus stays not out of choice, but by fate. As Athena pleads to Zeus to release him, she claims: "He is left to languish in misery in the island home of the nymph Calypso, who keeps him captive there." (63, lines 13-14).

An interesting observation regarding Calypso's reaction upon learning that the gods will help Odysseus move on, or as she explains it; that they are taking him away from her, is the lack of care she has for Odysseus' own agency and preference in the matter. Athena explicitly states that the nymph holds Odysseus captive, and it is evident upon Hermes's arrival that he is miserable there. Yet despite his clear lack of interest in staying, as well as

him rejecting Calypso's offers to make him immortal, she is still livid with the gods for taking him away, like a child losing her favourite toy. Upon hearing Hermes's message of Odysseus' immediate return, she becomes angry, accusing the gods of taking her lover away from her out of their own wickedness. She says:

> And now it is my turn to incur envy of you gods for living with a mortal man – a man whom I rescued from death as he was drifting alone astride the keel of his ship, when Zeus had shattered it with his lightning bolt out on the wine-dark sea, and all his fine comrades were lost. But he was driven to this island by the wind and waves and I welcomed him with open arms; I tended him; I offered to make him immortal and ageless. But now, since no god can evade or thwart the will of aegis-bearing Zeus, let him go. If Zeus insists that he should leave, let him be gone across the barren water and good riddance to him! But I will not help him on his way, not I." (66, lines 128-140)

This emotional response is discussed by McClymont, who cites her "disrespect and resistance towards the gods" as "another bad side to Calypso's character" (27). Further, they claim Calypso "complains against divine interference in her fun and tells stories presenting the gods in bad light" (27), arguing that her negative attitude towards the Olympians contributed to portraying her negatively.

There are many surface-level similarities between Circe and Calypso: they are both divine beings and rulers of their own respective islands, they are both lovers and companions of Odysseus, and their introductions in *The Odyssey* is word-for-word virtually the same. When Hermes arrives at Calypso's cave, he describes: "Inside, Calypso was singing with her beautiful voice as she went to and fro at her loom, weaving with a golden shuttle." (64, lines 61-63). This is nearly identical to the description given by Odysseus' men outside of Circe's palace, who state:

> They could hear Circe within, singing in her beautiful voice as she went to and fro at her great and everlasting loom, on which she was weaving one of those delicate, graceful and dazzling fabrics that goddesses make. (Homer 130, lines 221-223)

However, aside from the obvious similarities, these two characters are wildly different, both in personality and as plot-devices in the story. Despite both of them being described as goddesses and nymphs, Calypso is portrayed as rather harmless in comparison to the sorceress, who was notoriously powerful in her magical ability. Their differences in terms of personality are also abundantly evident through their interactions with Odysseus,

demonstrated in their reaction to his departure from their respective Islands. As previously established, there is a foundation of mutual respect between Circe and Odysseus which is visible from their very first meeting, when Odysseus, with divine assistance, becomes the first man in the poem not to succumb to Circe's magic. This respect is lacking in the dynamic between Odysseus and Calypso, which aligns more with the traditional tale of a Greek hero and his nymph lover than the balance of two equally powerful forces. Calypso is deeply infatuated with Odysseus and desires him to remain on her island as her lover, yet the feeling is nor reciprocated. The moment Odysseus is told by Hermes to leave he is happy to do so, stating that "the nymph had long since ceased to please." (66 line 153).

The differences in personality between the two women also serves to demonstrate their respective brands of femininity, as each inhabits different traits which may be deemed positive or negative. Notably, the distinctive ways they approach their relationship with Odysseus is revealing in terms of their character, as argued by McClymont:

> A modern reader might view Circe's lack of Calypso's emotional sensitivity as a negative feature. Yet in order to understand how Homer sees this, we should perhaps look on Circe's temperament not with the viewpoint of a modern, used to romanticizing tragic heroines, but with the viewpoint of an ancient, for whom female emotion was a sign of weakness." (27)

Both characters are portrayed as inhabiting typical feminine characteristics, such as being introduced while weaving, which is typical of women in *The Odyssey*, however they express their feminine traits in different ways. Circe, as a counterpart to Odysseus, actually inhabits certain traits commonly associated with masculinity: she is headstrong, powerful, and a leader, able to garner respect both from her own nymphs and Odysseus' crew. These traits, however, are feminized when presented in the shape of the beautiful, female Circe, who also inhabits positive feminine traits, such as charm and sexuality, demonstrated when she asks Odysseus to share her bed. Calypso, as a stark contrast, has the defining trait of being overly emotional and irrational, clinging to Odysseus and offering to make him immortal despite his clear lack of interest in her. An interesting change which takes place between Homer's *The Odyssey* and Miller's *Circe* is that emotion, a negatively loaded trait, is transferred to the character of Circe in the 2018 adaptation. As Miller's story is built around the sorceress's narrative Calypso is not mentioned in the novel, however her unreciprocated love for Odysseus is somewhat replicated in the witch, who despite her nonchalant exterior is devastated to see the hero leave. In addition, Calypso's behaviour of openly disagreeing with

the Gods, while not a part of Circe's character in *The Odyssey*, is a prominent feature in Miller's version of her. This disdain of the Gods will be further elaborated on in the next chapter, but in comparing Calypso and Circe as presented in *The Odyssey* it is interesting to observe what traits Miller's character has adopted to suit a modern audience, who may perceive feminine traits in a different manner than Homer's contemporaries.

2.2 Circe: Sorceress, Goddess, Witch

Across *The Odyssey*'s many iterations, Circe has been labelled under a variety of names. As translated by E. V. Rieu she is called a goddess (Homer 128, line 137), while Miller's Circe labels herself as a witch (Miller 177). While these words all inhabit somewhat different meanings, they are frequently used in place of each other to refer to a woman of magical ability. In his book *The Witch: A History of Fear*, *from ancient times to the Present* Ronald Hutton writes:

> What is a witch? The standard scholarly definition of one was summed up in 1978 by a leading expert in the anthropology of religion, Rodney Needham, as "someone who causes harm to others by mystical means". (IX)

According to both *The Odyssey* and *Circe*, the character of Circe accurately fits this description by her act of transforming men into pigs. As Needham's definition does not take into account reasoning or justification for causing harm, the added explanation provided in Miller's novel does not exempt Circe from fitting into the category, no matter her purpose behind her actions. Further, Hutton writes:

> That is, however, only one current usage of the word. In fact, Anglo-American senses of it now takes at least four different forms, although the one discussed above seems still to be the most widespread and frequent. The others define the witch figure as any person who uses magic (although those who employ it for beneficial purposes are often popularly distinguished as "good" or "white" witches); or as the practitioner of a particular kind of nature-based pagan religion; or as a symbol of independent female authority and resistance to male domination. (IX-X)

Arguably there are traces of most of these definitions in Circe: she is a user of magic, at times in order to cause harm, and she does in many ways symbolize independent female authority.

While the latter point is especially prominent in *Circe*, I would argue that *The Odyssey* also portrays Circe as a symbol of female independence and "resistance to male domination" (IX-X). Homer describes Circe as a powerful woman who is not easily defeated, as even the mighty Odysseus requires divine assistance to resist her powers, and whose romantic attachment appears first and foremost as one of convenience. Notably, when Odysseus and Circe become lovers, it is on Circe's initiative, and even then, Odysseus requires her promise to not harm him as he is the vulnerable party in their encounter. To compare Circe to Calypso once again, the contrast between Circe's independence and lack of romantic attachment is highlighted as a counterpart to Calypso's desperate attempt to make Odysseus stay with her.

McClymont claims "Circe is the most well-known witch-figure in Greek mythology" (21), which is a bold claim depending on how one defines the term "witch-figure", considering the fact that both Hecate, a goddess of Magic, and Pasiphaë, famous for her curses as well as being Circe's sister in Miller's adaptation, are also famous examples. Nevertheless, it is an undisputable fact that Circe is one of the highest-ranking witch figures within the Greek Mythos, with a legacy that remains relevant to this day through portrayals such as Miller's novel.

Chapter 3: Madeline Miller's *Circe*

«When I was born, the name for what I was did not exist." (Miller 1). So begins Madeline Miller's novel, telling the story of the legendary Circe: a powerful sorcerer, terrifying foe, and companion to the mighty Odysseus. As the quote implies, Circe is an ancient being - her father is the mighty Helios, god of the sun, and her mother is the beautiful naiad Perse, daughter of Oceanos, god of all the world's oceans. The opening passage of *Circe* is retrospective, looking back to a time which has long since passed and further puts an emphasis on Circe's place in eternity. Like the famed poem *The Odyssey*, Miller's novel *Circe* is based on the titular character describing past and present events to the reader. However, a notable difference between the two is that the story of Odysseus' journey takes place across two decades, while Circe's story spans millennia.

While Circe was born into a world which did not yet acknowledge or have a name for what she was, it soon became evident that she was different from the traditional offspring of her parents. It is common in Greek mythology to assume that daughters of gods and lesser mythical beings such as her mother will also turn out to be of lesser power, such as nymphs, naiads, or similar variations. Sons, however, are frequently expected to take after their more powerful parent and become lesser gods or powerful kings, depending on their godly lineage (Miller 1). As evidence of this discrepancy, Circe's only sister, Pasiphaë, is destined to be a bride and thus sent away to marry Minos, the mighty king of Crete, while her brothers, Perses and Aeëtes, are both given their own kingdoms to rule over as mighty kings. Upon her birth, Circe's parents predict a similar, yet somewhat lesser, fate for her as for her sister: marrying a prince. Yet Circe never marries, nor does she get sent away to some foreign kingdom to serve a king or an emperor. Instead, she becomes a powerful and feared sorceress, whose feats and transformations become legendary.

A defining feature of Miller's *Circe* is the word empathy, which is rare for a creature of her standing. This aspect of Circe's character is a key trait of her modernization, as the witch in Homer's original context is portrayed as far less empathic, bordering on cruel. Further, while a reader may feel sympathetic towards the mortal Odysseus based on his many struggles and hardships in *The Odyssey*, both Miller's novel and her portrayal of the character of Circe are largely motivated by her own acts of empathy, and she is frequently punished for her kindness. She quickly differentiates herself from her godly peers, particularly because she experiences, and acts out of, empathy for mortals and gods alike. Further, the novel itself makes Circe out as a sympathetic character, far removed from the villain Odysseus initially

encounters in *The Odyssey,* mainly due to the contexts which are provided for her actions. Her actions are largely motivated by a desire to help others, and even her less redeemable deeds, such as transforming men into swine, are explained and provided with a motivation it is hard not to sympathize with.

Despite her sense of empathy, not all of Circe's actions in Miller's novel are selfless or rooted in a care for others. Two of her first and biggest feats of magic, specifically turning the mortal Glaucos into a god and the nymph Scylla into a deadly monster, are motivated by her own selfish desires. To begin with, her transformation of Glaucos is driven by her wish for them to be together and finally get married, which is impossible as long as he remains mortal. Circe is deeply infatuated with the mortal, prompting her first significant act of transformational magic motivated by her desire to be with him. Further, Glaucos is intimidated by Circe's divinity. When she mentions meeting the titan Prometheus he reacts with fear, as he is reminded of her immortality: "I reached for his hand. He yanked it away. "How can you say that? How old are you? A hundred? Two hundred?" I almost laughed again. But his neck was rigid and his eyes wide." (35). Transforming Glaucos seems to Circe as the only way the two can be together, complaining to her grandmother Tethys, matron of the world's waters, that it is unfair that he is mortal and that they cannot be together (36). However, after she succeeds in transforming him into a god, their romance does not continue according to her desire. As Glaucos, in his new and powerful form, loses all interest in her and instead pursues the beautiful Scylla, Circe in her jealousy attempts to sabotage their betrothal by cursing the nymph, transforming her into a hideous and deadly creature. Upon confessing to her father, Circe admits: "I used wicked *pharmaka* to make Glaucos a god, and then I changed Scylla. I was jealous of his love for her and wanted to make her ugly. I did it selfishly, in bitter heart, and I would bear the consequence." (53). Despite these obviously self-serving actions, it is difficult to condemn Circe for her selfish acts. Her upbringing as portrayed by Miller is filled with bullying, cruelty, and abuse at the hands of her family, such as her father burning her alive following her confession (53), and her brother Aeëtes abandoning her (29). These portrayals of abuse and neglect result in an empathic presentation of the hardships Circe encounters, as well as inducing a sense of justice when she eventually fights back against those who have oppressed her. Miller allows Circe to appear resilient yet flawed, as her sense of sympathy and kindness softens the sting of her seemingly cruel actions. Her desperation for love and affection follows her character throughout Miller's novel, providing the witch with a relatable trait many readers may identify with. In the case of Glaucos and Scylla, her infatuation and loyalty to the newly ascended god remains strong,

despite his immediate dismissal of her once he becomes powerful. After she has transformed Scylla and successfully broken the betrothal between the nymph and Glaucos, and the god has made it clear he will look among the nymphs for a new bride with no sign of sadness for the fate of Scylla, Circe still maintains hope that he will choose her: “I waited. I still hoped Glaucos would think of me. I would have married him in a moment.” (51).

Miller further humanizes Circe and her less favourable actions, such as transforming Scylla in a cruel act of revenge, by showing that the sorceress feels remorse for those she hurt. Not only does her transformation of the nymph lead to her own exile out of her father’s obsidian place to the island of Aiaia, which is the name of Circe’s island in Miller’s novel, but it is later revealed through the word of the Olympian god Hermes that Scylla has turned murderous. He tells her: “She eats sailors. Six at a time, one for each mouth, and if the oars are too slow, she takes twelve. A few of them try to fight her, but you can imagine how that turns out. You can hear them screaming for quite a ways.” (85). Their deaths weight on Circe, plaguing her conscience. She ponders: “Those men she had eaten were sailors as Glaucos had been, ragged, desperate, worn thin with fear. All dead. All of them cold smoke, marked with my name.” (86). The weight of those mortal lives follow Circe for as long as Scylla remains alive, both as the knowledge that her creation is responsible for countless deaths, but also more directly as people she care about, such as Odysseus and the creator Daedalus, must risk their lives at her straits. When Circe’s sister, Pasiphaë, is due to give birth, she summons the witch to assist her, ordering her men, led by Daedalus, to drive through the straits where Scylla resides in order to torment her sister. In an attempt to protect the crew on their journey to Crete and Pasiphaë, Circe prepares various mixtures and spells in an attempt to undo the curse which she used to transform Scylla, reasoning: “My father speaking our old hopeless law to Glaucos: no god may undo what another has done. But I was the one who had done it.” (97). However, her attempt is futile – not only is her magic useless against the creature, but she observes with her own eyes how the former nymph has lost all sense of humanity, having fully transformed into a terrifying creature that even Circe is virtually powerless against. Upon seeing the Cretan ship after its initial meeting with Scylla, Circe remarks: “I had seen the blood on the deck. They had been scrubbed, yet the blood had soaked deep. All that was left of twelve lives. My stomach twisted with guilt, as Pasiphaë had meant it to.” (Miller 94). The final line of this quote circles back to the topic of Circe’s relationship with her siblings, which, as established, is one of mockery and alienation. Pasiphaë is Circe’s only sister, a fellow woman in a world largely ruled by men, yet as evident in her acts of cruelty, this means little to her. After Circe arrives on Crete with the remaining crew following their

encounter with Scylla, Circe confronts Pasiphaë, saying "I am not your dog, Pasiphaë, nor your bear to be baited. I came to your aid despite all our history, despite the men you sent to your deaths. I helped you with your monster. I have done your work for you, and all you give me is contempt.". (126). The dynamic between Circe and her siblings, especially that between Circe and her sister, is indicative of her sense of loneliness and alienation, as not even her own family accepts her. This loneliness likely encourages her in pursuing relationships with mortal men such as Odysseus, Glaucos, and Daedalus, as she never quite fit in with her immortal peers.

As established, Circe performs several actions which could be classified as both selfish and self-serving. However, these actions are frequently punished in terms of providing her with further suffering, such as Scylla's transformation. In addition, many of her actions which are based on empathy and a wish to help are equally punished, or at the very least overlooked, such as her helping Prometheus when he was awaiting his trial for the criminal act of giving humankind the gift of fire. The titan, who is one of Circe's many uncles, is set upon a court of titans and gods – all of them his own blood – and publicly lashed while awaiting his judgement. Circe offers him nectar and comfort as he hangs from the ceiling, tortured and awaiting his punishment, but none of her kind even notice her absence. Her transformations of both Glaucos and Scylla are equally overlooked by the gods, who cannot fathom that she could possess the power to achieve such acts, until her brother, the King Aeëtes, is able to convince them otherwise and thereby provoke her punishment and exile to Aiaia. Upon asking her father why Prometheus was punished in the first place, he tells her: "Prometheus was led astray for his love of mortals." (13). To the gods and the eternal beings they keep in their company, mortals are lesser creatures whose lives are hardly worth the effort it takes to acknowledge them. Their lifespans appear like the blink of an eye to those that are immortal, and their inability to regenerate after sickness or injury makes them seem almost laughably fragile. However, it is this very fragility which made Prometheus, and later Circe, feel protective of and fascinated by them. Despite knowing that his fate will be cruel punishment for eternity, Prometheus defied the will of Zeus to bring the mortals the gift of fire. Circe, in the earlier centuries of her life, feels horrified over how willingly her father allows mortals to be slaughtered in his name just for the sake of his own ego, and is later haunted when she finds out about Scylla's murderous existence. Yet Circe's fascination of mortals is not entirely restricted to feeling sorry for their fleeting existence – all bar one of her lovers are mortals. While Circe finds their uniqueness appealing, most gods and beings of lesser power considered mortals to appear ugly and weak. She recalls:

> Once when I was young I asked what mortals looked like. My father said, “You may say they are shaped like us, but only as the worm is shaped like the whale.” My mother had been simpler: *like savage bags of rotten flesh*. (3)

Her most prominent lovers, aside from the Olympic god Hermes, are Glaucos, Daedalus, and later Odysseus, who unknowingly gives her a son. Rather than being repulsed by their weakness or lack of immortal beauty, Circe appreciates them for their human flaws and shortcomings. Her skin is unable to scar or scab, she will never age, nor can she get sick. To her, the world will just go on, which makes mortality seem like such a novel concept.

Circe is plagued by her mortal-like nature, and, as part of this, her naïveté and hospitality. Her brother Aeëtes scorns her for this, saying: “You always trusted too easily.” (65). She is miserable in the company of the nymphs sent to her island for punishment after her exile, so when a crew of sailors arrive on her island she welcomes them with open arms, relishing in once again being surrounded by mortals. However, as much as Circe is of godly decent, the sailors refer to her only as “lady” (161), and it is evident that they simply perceive her as such; not as a powerful witch on her island of exile, but as a lone and vulnerable woman to be taken advantage of. Circe’s acts of goodwill and hospitality towards these sailors are punished when they sexually assault her in her own home, injuring her so much that if she had not been immortal, they would have killed her. In her desperation, Circe resorts to her first and most notoriously dangerous spell: turning a man into his true self, which in the case of the sailors were all pigs. Shortly prior to the sailors’ arrival, Circe ends her relationship with Hermes as she can no longer stand him. After complaining to him that the gods have begun using her island as a dumping ground for their ill-behaved daughters, Hermes suggests she should take advantage of the situation by taking the newly arrived nymphs to her bed, prompting the following exchange:

> “That is absurd,” I said. “They would run screaming.”. “Nymphs always do,” he said. “But I’ll tell you a secret: they are terrible at getting away.” At a feast on Olympus such a jest would have been followed by a roar of laughter. Hermes awaited now, grinning like a goat. But all I felt was a white, cold rage. (158-159)

As stated previously by Circe, “That word, nymph, paced out the length and breadth of our futures. In our language, it means not just goddess, but bride.” (1). Not only are they women in a patriarchal hierarchy, which robs them of opportunities and hereditary rights, but they are perceived as less than their male counterparts, and certainly less powerful than a god or a goddess. While men in Circe’s time could be heroes, women, even those of godly decent,

were perceived as trophies to be won or prizes to bargain with. To the sailors who arrive on her island, she is not a powerful enemy – she is an easy target. As Circe herself observes: "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, and that was all that mattered." (170). Their assault on her is the final straw for Circe, who is no longer willing to be overlooked or punished for her womanhood. During her assault, her sister's words ring through her mind; "You have been tame your whole life, and now you will be sorry." (164). Even after she has transformed and slaughtered her assailants, part of her is carrying a child-like hope that her father will comfort her, be outraged over the injustice she has suffered, or in any way show his support for her. However, as she already knows deep inside this does not happen, and once again she is reassured that the only one who can protect her is herself.

After the incident, more and more sailors set foot on the island of Aiaia, as it is named in Miller's *Circe*. The sorceress questions the reason for the sudden influx of visitors, speculating:

> They came, I cannot say why. Some revolution of the Fates, some change in trading and shipping routes. Some scent upon the air, wafting: *here are nymphs, and they live alone*. (168).

As mentioned above, unprotected nymphs were by many considered fair game, especially for those who had not yet understood the power and determination of Circe. The incident with the sailors were both the final straw and only the beginning, as this marked the start of Circe as a perceived enemy to many. In *The Odyssey*, the crew's first meeting with Circe leads to half of Odysseus' being turned to pigs, as the men put their guard down when they realize that she is a seemingly harmless woman. While Circe remains a villain in *The Odyssey* for a very brief time before becoming a powerful ally and trusted lover, the backstory and context provided in Miller's *Circe* makes her acts of magic both understandable and redeemable. She is not portrayed as an evil sorceress who willingly lures men to her lair with her charms so she can transform them for her own gain, but rather appears as a woman who has faced centuries of oppression and has decided to protect herself and the nymphs in the best way she knows how.

Circe's encounter with the sailor marks the beginning of what will become her trademark act of magic, namely her habit of transforming any man who washed up on her island into a pig. It is this fate which awaits half of Odysseus' crew in *The Odyssey*, and so it happens in Miller's re-telling as well. However, in contrast to her introduction in Homer's poem, Miller provides the audience with a context which makes the audience more likely to

understand why Circe transforms seemingly innocent men, making the act seem somewhat less cruel. Miller's portrayal of her experiences makes her following actions appear as somewhat justified, as if she can take revenge on all the injustice she has endured and suffered thus far through transforming the sailors. There is a shift in Circe after this, and her former kindness and hospitality has been overshadowed by a cynical coldness. As she observes the pigs in her pen she notes:

> They moaned and squealed, and pressed their snouts to the earth. We are sorry, we are sorry. Sorry you were caught, I said. Sorry that you thought I was weak, but you were wrong. (171).

At last, her transformation into the villainous sorceress Odysseus first encounters in *The Odyssey* is complete. Circe has finally begun to expect the worst from everyone, as opposed to the hopeful optimism and passive acceptance she has exuded until this point. The empathy that made her stand out amongst her godly peers is gone, and she appears more than ever as some malevolent, godly, and uncontrollable sorceress.

When Odysseus at last arrives at Circe's door, half of his crew have already been turned to pigs and shushed away to the pen, like many before them. She invites him in, expecting the behaviour she has become used to from her male guests: counting her treasures, gluttonously feasting on behalf of her hospitality while commanding her around like a simple servant, and assuring themselves that she is under the protection of no man (177). Yet Odysseus surprises her. Upon taking his seat before her hearth, he makes a comment on the brilliant design of her loom, a gift from her former lover Daedalus, then further disarming her by talking about his wife, remarking on her cleverness and complimenting her. They converse further, and Circe's guest reveals a level of humility and insight she did not expect from a man of his standing. He also reveals his cleverness: he never drinks from the cup of wine she gave him. When questioned about his lack of drinking he excuses himself by claiming that he is easily distracted, but it quickly becomes evident from his seemingly cynical questioning that he is there to find his men and is aware that something must have happened to them. At this point there is no longer any point in pretending, and Circe confronts him: "“You have not drunk,” I said. “That is clever. But I am still a witch, and you are in my house.” (177). To which he responds, “I hope we may settle this with reason”. (177). Odysseus reveals that Hermes, her now estranged former lover, has provided him with the herb moly, thus making him immune to her magic – although in his wariness of the trickster god, he has still avoided sipping her wine. Their first meeting leads to a truce, as Circe takes Odysseus to bed on the

condition that she will not use her magic to harm him.

So begins Odysseus' prolonged stay at Circe's Island of Aiaia. As indicated from their very first conversation together, Circe and Odysseus are great partners in conversation, challenging each other and sharing their experiences. A sense of trust quickly develops, and Circe agrees to set his crew free from her magic and transform them back to men. From then on, Odysseus spends his days working with his men and repairing their ship, but the evenings and nights he spends with Circe, sharing stories and making love (185). While Circe has not shown any particular fondness for mortals since her encounter with the sailors, it would appear that Odysseus serves as a representation of all the things she used to find fascinating about mortals, most notably their uniqueness. To Circe, part of his charm is that unlike her first lover Glaucos, Odysseus is not fazed by her godliness. He knows from the first moment what she is, and he is used to being in the company of divine beings. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, this familiarity, he treats her with a sense of respect Circe is not used to, neither from men nor from gods. Odysseus is one of the first to approach Circe as a powerful sorceress with immense power, solidifying her place as a legendary divinity. During the first meeting, Circe tells him: "Most men do not know me for what I am." (179), to which he responds, "Most men, in my experience, are fools." (179).

Eventually, the time shared by Circe and Odysseus comes to an end. After spending three seasons on her island, Odysseus' crew have recovered from their injuries and have grown restless, eager to return home to Ithaca. Circe is unhappy, displeased by the idea of losing her companion and taking farewell with Odysseus, as she has grown fond of him. Like her former lover Daedalus, Odysseus fascinates her by his complexity. She even compares the two, stating that what miracles Daedalus was able to work with iron and wood, Odysseus may do with men, forging them to suit his vision. He is a great leader and powerful warrior, yet he recognizes Circe's power instead of overlooking it due to her female form, like so many before him. However, as Apollo arrives to Aiaia with a prophecy for Odysseus' journey onwards, she knows he was not hers to keep, and she provides him aid and guidance for him and his men to sail away once again.

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' departure from Aiaia seems a practical affair, removed from emotion. One day he decides it is time for him and his men to leave, and Circe accommodates his wish without further objection, apathic to see her lover leave. This event unfolds somewhat differently in Miller's *Circe*, as the sorceress is heartbroken that the mortal man she has come to know must leave, even alluding to her "Crying for the loss of half my soul" (205). While she obviously knew he would not stay forever, the threat of loneliness after

enjoying the company of Odysseus and his men for three quarters of a year is devastating. Her initial reaction to him asking her to leave is anger, stating "Then go. I am a host, not a jailer." (202), as if challenging him to leave her and prove how little she is worth to him, yet despite her feelings she is able to pull herself together enough to provide him with aid and guidance. *The Odyssey* portrays the scenario with far less emotion, as Homer's Circe is presented as some stoic and unfeeling sorceress, whose relationship with Odysseus is a strictly practical affair and thus making his departure less dramatic. Not to say that she is described as neither cold nor cynical, however she does give of the impression that Odysseus is simply a fun plaything to have during his stay, rather than a long sought-after companion worth weeping over. As a contrast, Miller's Circe has developed strong feelings for the hero, likely intensified by her loneliness. While both portrayals display the relationship between Odysseus and Circe as one based on understanding and respect, Miller's novel provides a backstory and context to Circe which makes it seem almost impossible for her not to grieve losing her companion. Finally, as an unknowing Odysseus and his crew sail away from her island for the very last time, a small part of the hero remains on the island. Circe, who has carefully crafted and dutifully taken a potion every moon since her first meeting with Hermes so as to not bear his child, stopped drinking it since the beginning of his preparations to leave. In her desperation to not go back to the loneliness she experienced before his arrival, Circe is carrying his child, hoping it will give her life a new sense of purpose, and in some way allowing him to live on with her.

Madeline Miller's *Circe* describes the story of a divine sorceress who learns fend for herself in any way possible, while finding her strength and autonomy in her witchcraft. In her earlier days, her naiveté and trusting personality provokes some defining events and moments for her, notably due to men taking advantage of her and her blind trust. First, through her mortal lover that she turns into a god, and later, as the sailors she offered hospitality assault her (164). Even her own family take her for granted and are outright cruel to her, and the gods of Olympus seem determined to intertwine with her existence. As her character develops, even her more villainous actions are explained and justified, such as her habit of transforming men into pigs being the result of her finally taking revenge on a world out to get her. Her presentation/representation in Miller's novel is easy to sympathize with, especially due to her early existence being particularly filled with cruelness from her divine relatives.

One of her more distinguishing features that makes her different from her godly peers is her empathy and care for others, exemplified early when her father Helios takes her flying across the sky and reveals that royal astronomers are frequently killed if he is earlier or later

than their timely predictions. While Circe is horrified at the thought of mortals losing their lives, Helios simply states that they deserve it, saying "Helios the sun was to no will but his own, and none might say what he would do." (8). Later, her sympathy and care for mortals allows her sister Pasihaë to take advantage of and manipulate her, threatening to harm her men if she does not obey. Circe's alienation from her divine beings is complete when she is exiled on the Island of Aiaia, where with the exception of a few nymphs and the occasional visit from Hermes she is left alone. It is also her she truly is able to hone her craft, and notably perfect the skill which would become her signature and make her legendary – turning men into pigs. Yet, Miller writes a character which is so easy to sympathize with that even her crueller acts may be justified. The injustice, unfairness, and cruelty she experiences throughout her life could break a lesser person, so when Circe eventually snaps into a cold and cynical pattern it appears as an act of self-preservation. The novel *Circe* succeeds not only in providing insight and redemption for someone who is commonly considered to be a villain, but also in describing the story of a lone woman facing the injustice in a patriarchal society, thus making her story relatable across time.

3.1 Differences between *The Odyssey* and *Circe*

While *The Odyssey* and *Circe* have a great overlap in setting, characters, and plot, the latter has some deviations from the original story as a natural result of being an adaptation. Most obvious among these differences is that *The Odyssey* revolves around Odysseus and his journey, featuring Circe only as one of many characters he encounters along the way, while *Circe* could pass as the opposite, having Circe as a protagonist and Odysseus as a supporting character. This discrepancy impacts the portrayals of both characters in their own stories due to the change in narrative, as parts of *The Odyssey* and the entirety of Circe is narrated by their respective titular characters. With *Circe* being an adaptation of *The Odyssey,* the latter will be referred to as the original work during the following examination and comparison.

In terms of smaller and less impactful changes, there are a few worth mentioning for clarity. For example, in Rieu's translation Homer names Circe's Island "Aeaea" (Homer 157, line 10), while Miller refers to it as "Aiaia" (Miller 82). This simple change may be chalked up to a difference in translation, as the former is taken from ancient Greek and the latter is a Romanised version, or it may be a stylistic choice on Miller's part in order to modernize the

story. Fact of the matter is that the spelling makes no crucial difference, as both names evidently refer to the same island. In terms of smaller changes to the characters themselves, *The Odyssey* describes Circe as having a beautiful voice, adding to her allure and divinity, while *Circe* puts an emphasis on how unusually unpleasant it is. Upon entering her home, Odysseus' crew remarks "They could hear Circe within, singing with her beautiful voice" (Homer 130, line 211), creating associations to the charm of a siren's song. In contrast, Miller repeatedly emphasize on how Circe's voice is unusually disagreeable for an immortal, especially for one of nymph-blood. Her siblings remark that "Her voice is screechy like an owl" (Miller 6), and the Olympian god Apollo tells her: "My brother warned me about your voice. I think it will be better if you speak as little as possible" (200). While this change, like the previously noted example of the name of Circe's Island, may seem like a superficial and strange choice, further examination indicate that it may be an example of a small change with a somewhat significant impact. While Miller makes it obvious that Circe's voice is unpleasant to divinities, mortals appear to find it rather comforting. Prometheus tells her she has the voice of a human, which makes her less intimidating than her godly relatives (Miller 82), and similarly, *The Odyssey* has Odysseus alluding to her having "a woman's voice" (Homer 160, line 151). Arguably, it would make no difference to *The Odyssey* if Homer had elaborated on whether her voice was human-like or just vaguely like a woman's, but in *Circe*, her human voice serves as yet another connection to her beloved mortals, as well as a form of alienation from her divine peers.

With some small exceptions, such as the variations in language in the aforementioned translation of Circe's Island, most changes made between the original and Miller's adaptation either provides context or dynamic, or completely alters the intentions behind certain actions. Upon reading *The Odyssey*, it may not seem noteworthy that Hermes shows up to aid Odysseus before his meeting with Circe; after all, he is far from the first Olympian to help Odysseus throughout his journey, and it would make sense that the god known as a trickster (Miller 177) would know how to avoid the magic of a witch. In *Circe*, however, Hermes is Circe's former lover, who warns of Odysseus' arrival to her in a prophecy. Not only does this change explain how Hermes would know how to help Odysseus, as he is intimately familiar with the witch and understands her workings with magic, as well as anticipating what she would attempt to do to him and his men, it also underscores his lack of loyalty to Circe. Like many divinities portrayed by Miller, Hermes is ultimately only loyal to himself and his own interests. Not only does he use the knowledge he has acquired through the relationship with Circe against her, but he has foreseen the meeting between the witch and the hero, meaning he

has some personal interest in the event. While this change does not play a significant role in the plot of either *The Odyssey* or *Circe*, it does add an interesting dynamic within the relationship between Odysseus, Hermes, and Circe, notably by highlighting the blasé manner in which Miller's gods meddles in the affairs of their subordinates.

Similarly, changes in Miller's adaptation which provides an additional layer of context to Circe's general story is the different portrayals of her living situation. In *The Odyssey* there is a sense that Circe is a somewhat solitary creature who willingly avoids the company of others, finding her island of nymphs and wild beasts as a suitable and comfortable place to reside. Miller's *Circe*, on the other hand, goes to a great length in describing her initial loneliness after being placed on Aiaia, factoring in another significant change: she had no agency in her choice of residence, as she is exiled for her witchcraft and disobedience. While various Greek myths and literature portray Circe and her place of residence, including her reason for living there, in different manners, Homer's *The Odyssey* makes no mention of exile, nor any indication that she is not there of her own will and agency. Miller's version of the story, building upon her descriptions of the politics of Greek divinities, portrays the witch as a victim of the power-play between the titans, notably her own father, and the Olympians, as her exile is meant to appease those who fear her abilities. Prior to her solitary punishment, loneliness follows Miller's portrayal of Circe already from birth, as she struggles to fit in among the nymphs and gods of her father's palace. She is plagued by rejection: her siblings endlessly mock her, her father banished her from his halls, and her first love, Glaucos, leaves her to be with Scylla after she made him immortal. Only her brother Aeëtes had served as her companion, eventually leaving her behind in favour of his new kingdom. Prior to meeting Odysseus, Circe ponders: "After all, I had been alone my whole life. Aeëtes, Glaucos, these were only pauses in the long stretch of my solitude." (Miller 97). The contrast between Miller and Homer's portrayals of the witch is stark: the Circe Odysseus encounters in *The Odyssey* appears as a care-free ruler, content with her residence and the company of the nymphs who serve her, while Miller's version of the witch is traumatized by her lack of community and support. This fundamental difference also serves as the basis for the different portrayals of the relationship between Circe and Odyssey, which despite the lack of variation in terms of actions and events tell two very opposing tales of emotion and infatuation.

As mentioned in chapter 2 of this thesis, *The Odyssey* describes Odysseus' departure from Aeaea and Circe as an amicable event; the two lovers part with no significant or emotional consequence, distinguishing the witch from the more emotional and dependant Calypso. Notably, the entire relationship between Circe and Odysseus as described in *The*

Odyssey appears to be one of mutual benefit rather than romance or infatuation, as there are few depictions on their interactions beyond their initial meeting. In contrast, Miller's version manages to portray a fairly different scenario without discrediting or majorly changing the events of *The Odyssey*, simply by re-imaging the events from Circe's point of view. Action-wise, Odysseus' departure in unchanged from its original form in *The Odyssey*: the men grow weary after a year of comfort and long to return home, and so Odysseus speaks with Circe, who provides help and guidance for their journey onwards. The difference, however, lies in the narration of Circe's thoughts and emotions during this time. As *The Odyssey* is largely told from Odysseus' perspective, the reader relies on his descriptions of events and subsequent reactions from the people around him, which lead to the portrayal of a Circe who seem rather unaffected by Odysseus' departure. In Miller's version, however, the witch has caught feelings for the mortal, leaving her devastated when his time on her island is up.

The first indication of Circe's romantic interest in Odysseus appears shortly after their first meeting, as he tells Circe the story of their misfortune on their journey home. Circe observes: "Disaster upon disaster. Yet he had walked into a witch's house, even weary as he was and raw with grief. He had sat at my hearth showing no hint of anything but charm and smiles. What resolve that must have taken, what vigilant will. But no man is infinite." (Miller 182). His exhaustion and bravery appeal to Circe and her sense of empathy, and she remarks that "This is something torn that I can mend." (182). As apparent in her guilt over transforming Scylla and her concern for her uncle Prometheus, Miller's Circe embodies an abnormal amount of empathy for a divinity, and as further evident in her infatuation with Glaucos and Daedalus, this empathy extends to a romantic preference for vulnerable mortals. Where Homer is vague with the details of relationship between Odysseus and Circe, Miller describes many of their discussions and interactions, portraying Circe's gradual development of romantic interest. She is pained upon hearing Odysseus speak of his wife with unwavering love, describing that "The words slid into me, smooth as a polished knife." (194). Circe describes their mutual amusement at each other's company as follows:

> The world was made of mysteries, and I was only another riddle among the millions. I did not answer him, and though he pretended frustration, yet I began to see that it pleased him in some strange way. A door that did not open at his knock was a novelty in its own right, and a kind of relief as well All the world confessed to him. He confessed to me. (191)

While this passage indicates some form of mutual fascination and attraction, Miller maintains Circe's air of mystery towards Odysseus, aligning with the description of her character in *The Odyssey*. When Odysseus first asks the sorceress to stay at her island for a month as his soldiers heal, Circe reacts with immediate joy, yet decides to conceal her delight from him. "A burst of joy, like honey in my throat. I kept my face steady though." (185). Miller describes Circe's inner feelings as passionate and strong, yet her portrayals of Circe's actions remain vague, meaning that the depictions of the interaction between the two as described in *The Odyssey* remain accurate. Further, as explained previously in this chapter, the parting of ways for Circe and Odysseus is described as far more emotional from Circe's point of view in Miller's re-telling.

With the establishment of Circe's feeling for Odysseus, as well as her reluctance in expressing them, their uneventful goodbye is not the end of their relations. As he is a mortal, Circe is aware of his limited lifespan, despite her wish to have him stay: "I had once told Daedalus that I would never marry, because my hands were dirty, and I liked my work too much. But this was a man with his own dirty hands." (193). In anticipation for his departure, Circe therefore allowed herself to bear Odysseus' child without his knowledge, a son who she would give the name "Telegonus" (215). While her son I still growing inside her, she tells him: "Your father said once that he wanted more children, but that is not why you live. You are for me." (210). Thus, another connection between Odysseus and Circe which is not present in *The Odyssey* is established by Miller. While Telegonus is not a character created by Miller, as he appears in certain Greek myths and legends along with other possible offspring of Circe and Odysseus, he is not mentioned by Homer. Thereby, Miller's choice to include one of their mythical children assists in establishing both Circe's emotional connection to Odysseus, in addition to highlighting her growth as a character.

While certain changes from original to adaptation serve mostly to provide and elaborate on context, certain changes are able to completely alter the meaning and intention behind certain aspects of the story. A minor example of this is Circe's wild animals which roam her grounds, as the reason for their existence is somewhat different. In Miller's *Circe*, the titular character has an affinity for animals, allowing her to understand them as well as making them understand her. She summons a wild lioness as her familiar, which wilfully follows her without causing harm to her or her other animals. This connection with animals is frequently presented as positive in literature, conjuring association to Disney-princesses or fairy-tale heroines, as well as expressing an image as kind and caring. Circe is able to fend off a raging boar using only her words, and her wild beasts serve only as protectors to the nymphs

which eventually join her. However, *The Odyssey* did not lay the groundwork for these positive connotations, as Homer originally presented the animals roaming her island as a signifier of her power and villainy, as the beasts that surround her are little more than bewitched zombies. Odysseus' men remark: "Prowling about the place were mountain wolves and lions that Circe had bewitched with her magic drugs." (Homer 130, line 211). Gone are the positive connotations associated with animals keeping one's company of their own will, as Homer presents the presence of the animals as a form of villainous slavery. Circe's animals are no longer a source for company and protection, but a mindless herd held in an unnatural state by her sorcery in an attempt to intimidate and frighten any visitor to her island. Yet these are not the only animals in the story of Odysseus and Circe which undergo a change of intent: the infamous pigs, for which Circe became a legend, undergo a similar process to that of the wolves and lions. In Miller's version, they serve as a sort of redemption on Circe's behalf. As established, Circe's role as a villain in Homer's *The Odyssey* is heavily based on her untameable powers and ability to, as well as habit of, turning men into pigs. While there is arguably some existing symbolism in pigs being the animal of her choosing, it becomes even more obvious as her reasoning is explained in Miller's *Circe*. As stated previously, Circe's transformational magic is rooted in turning a creature or being into their true self. Although, there is some evidence that Circe is subconsciously able to impact the spell based on her own feeling, such as her succeeding in turning Glaucos into a minor god while summoning his true form. Similarly, while Scylla was already a vicious and mean creature, her transformation into a ravenous sea-monster was likely influenced by Circe's anger and jealousy towards the nymph. During Circe's first instance of turning a crew of men into pigs, it could be easy to argue either way why they would turn into pigs as their true form: on one hand it is not uncommon to refer to men of a predatory and overtly sexual nature as pigs, but on the other hand this may also be why Circe could have subconsciously steered their transformation towards pigs. No matter the reason behind the choice of final form for the transformed sailors, Miller's *Circe* makes it easy to understand and forgive Circe for this act, as it can easily be explained as an act of self-defence and preservation after her final breaking point. Without this context, the Circe portrayed in *The Odyssey* does not have the luxury of a redeeming backstory or explanation. Instead, she appears as some divine punishment, dooming men who have done no wrong but arrive on her island and be invited into her home - in fact, Rieu's translation of Homer's *The Odyssey* the god Hermes specifically refers to Circe's powers as "evil" 132, line 89). By providing a context for the initial transformations, as well as providing a more forgiving explanation for the choice of animal by implying she is simply

turning the men into their true selves, Miller is able to re-define the intention behind what is arguably Circe's most well-known act of magic. During the long list of hardships Odysseus and his men undergo on their decades long journey home to Ithaca, their encounter with Scylla and Charybdis is but one of many with fatal consequences. After their prolonged stay at Circe's Island, it is once again time for the crew to return to their ship and take the oars - however this time, their ship must pass through the dangerous straits where the horrendous monster Scylla resides. A minor change between the original story of *The Odyssey* as written by Homer and Miller's adapted work is that Charybdis, the terrifying monster resting opposite of Scylla, has been left out of the adaptation and reduced to just a whirlpool, making the dilemma of choosing to sail closer to either monster irrelevant. The monster's absence is addressed as her location is briefly mentioned in passing by Hermes, who states: "On one side a whirlpool that sucks down ships and fish and whatever else passes. On the other, a cliff face with a cave for her to hide her head. Any ship which could avoid the whirlpool is driven right into her jaws, and so she feeds." (85). Notably, there is also a significant change in dynamics between Homer's original and Miller's adaptation regarding Scylla's origins. In *The Odyssey*, Circe tells Odysseus: "So drive your ship past with all your might, and call on Cratais, Scylla's mother, who whelped her into the world to be the bane of mankind." (Homer 160, lines 125-127). Like most monsters in Greek mythology, it is alluded that Scylla has been born by other immortal creatures, although her father is not mentioned by Homer. However, this explanation for the monster's existence is completely changed in *Circe*, where the titular character herself is responsible for the murderous creature. This alteration from the original provides Miller's version of Circe's character to carry a great burden of guilt, as her care and empathy for mortals weigh on her spirit with every man Scylla kills. It also adds an additional layer of pain when Circe says her goodbye to Odyssey, knowing that he and his crew that she has gotten to know over many moons must cross the territory of a monster she is responsible for, knowing well that not all of them will make it out alive. In leaving Charybdis out of the adaptation, the aforementioned dilemma presented in *The Odyssey*, namely Odysseus' choice to sail closer to her maw and risk that the entire ship and all the crew will be swallowed by her enormous maw, or closer to Scylla, and practically guarantee to lose between six to twelve men, is erased. This serves to intensify the consequences of Circe's actions and guilt; if Odysseus and his men had the same options as they had in *The Odyssey* and chose to sail closer to Charybdis, Circe would arguably be less at fault should their men perish. By forcing Odysseus, a man Circe desperately cares for, and his men to risk their lives to her creation, Scylla once again becomes a symbol of guilt and shame for Circe. While the biggest and most

obvious change Miller has made to Homer's poem is arguably the shift in perspective, many of the smaller adjustments amount to an equally effective transformation of the story. Notably, the story behind Scylla serves both to highlight Circe's powers as a witch, and her empathy as mortals are killed as a result, differentiating her from the unwavering villain Odysseus first encounters in *The Odyssey*.

3.2 Witches as Empowering Figures

As shown in both *Circe* and *The Odyssey*, a witch is a woman who is powerful without the influence of either money or men. Witches derive their power from magic or ritual, which suggests that in order to achieve success in witchcraft one is first and foremost reliant on oneself and one's ability to learn and exercise discipline. A witch is successful by her own merit, and for a generation of women who have grown up consuming media such as films and series in which witches are presented as inspirational, powerful, and independent beings, Madeline Miller could tell the story of Circe to an audience which is likely more interested in a woman's point of view. As previously discussed, *The Odyssey* portrays Circe's powers as a threat: she uses her magic to transform his men into pigs for no other reason than their own misfortune, and despite her being a lone woman they need the help of a divinity to leave an encounter with her unscathed. Miller's take on the character of Circe carries a clearer resemblance to the witches of the popular culture of the 2000s, in that her magic and powers enable her to take control of situations that are rigged against her. When she cannot be with the mortal man she loves, she uses magic to turn him into a god so that they can be together properly. As she is assaulted by a group of sailors in her own home, she refines a spell which turns them into pigs, saving herself from further violence. Miller makes Circe a witch who develops her magic and spells as a necessity, thereby gaining power as a woman in a patriarchal society where brute strength is the highest indicator of influence and power. Wendy Griffin quotes the self-proclaimed witch Mageara, who argues: "female power isn't about power over, it is power to do, power to be." (41). This message is an inspirational interpretation on the belief that witchcraft is a manner of achieving independence and greatness as a female, as it reinforces the idea that achieving power can be an act of self-liberation.

This thesis is not meant to focus predominantly on feminism or the appeal of

witchcraft to young women, but it is important to acknowledge these aspects as they are both relevant to Miller's adaptation of *The Odyssey.* Having previously discussed the changes which can be implemented from an original work to an adaptation, examining the effect of these changes in terms of additional ideological meanings can be helpful in terms of understanding the appeal to a new target audience. Notably, it is important to understand why the character of Circe still appeals to audiences several millennia after her first appearance in literature and oral storytelling, as well as understanding how and why her role has changed over the years.

When Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* was published in 2018 it became an instant hit, securing a spot as number 1 on the *New York Times's* best seller list and winning several literary awards, such as best fantasy novel by the *Goodread Choice Awards* and book of the year by both *The Washington Post* and *Entertainment Weekly*. In addition to garnering the approval of literary critics, the book has also been huge commercial success, having sold over 1 million copies worldwide during its second year and having garnered 18183 5-star reviews at the online retailer Amazon as of February 2022. As previously established, the story of Odysseus and his men detailing their heroic and tragic journey home to Ithaca has been around for more than two thousand years, seeing a variety of translations and adaptations which have told the story in new and different variations and across different forms of media. While many of these adaptations have been widely popular, such as the aforementioned novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce, few have managed to rival Miller's adaptation in terms of influence and reach. This begs the question: why did *Circe* become so popular? One argument is that Miller's novel provides a modern and female-centric narrative in terms of redeeming a female character which has been a vital part of the story since the very first iterations of Homer's poem. By giving Circe a voice and examining the character in a world with different expectations and norms for female representation and gender roles, the motivations and actions of the character as told by Miller provides an interesting and female-centric perspective to a story which has mostly been concerned with its men. Sen Tuhin writes:

> Reading myths from a female perspective essentially has the profound potential not only to reveal how much the traditional mythical literary texts written from a male perspective contribute to the suppression of women, but also challenge the androcentric premise of these cultural texts. (46)

The novel *Circe* stands out not only because of its highly awarded prose and familiar content, but because of the perspective it provides. By challenging the narrative of *The Odyssey* and

allowing a female character to tell her version of the story, the story is inviting to a whole new audience that is interested to hear what the woman has to say.

Chapter 4: Witchcraft and Women

Throughout this thesis there has been an emphasis on the female-specific aspects of witchcraft, such as the appeal to young women, and the discussion surrounding female-centric, witch-oriented texts and media. The reason for this is that witchcraft, despite being technically accessible to all genders, is commonly considered to be very female-centric at its core. While mythical male figures with magic or demonic powers are referred to by a variety of terms, such as wizards and warlocks, women are usually all placed under the umbrella term of "witch", despite the fact that these terms all have different meaning. Witches and wizards are now terms that are commonly used to refer to respectively female and male users of magic. This distinction is exemplified in J.K. Rowling's aforementioned *Harry Potter* novels, featuring the magic school named "Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry" (Rowling 8) which, as the name implies, separates the two terms as the names for magic users of male and female gender. In addition to this distinction, witchcraft may appear explicitly female due to the number of famous female witches in mythology and literature, such as Morgan Le Fay of Arthurian legend, who was the famed nemesis of the male wizard Merlin (Larrington 7), as well as Homer's own Circe. In the past century, movies and television series have also brought even more famous witches to the public's attention, such as the iconic Wicked Witch of the West in various movie adaptations of L. Frank Baum's The *Wizard of Oz,* and Disney-villains such as *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula and *Sleeping Beauty's* Maleficent. While the latter examples are relatively modern, they both seem to build upon and further strengthen the idea of witchcraft as essentially female.

In addition to the fictional female witches of mythology, literature, and film, there is a more dire connotation to the gendered aspect of witchcraft in a historical context. The discussion of women and witchcraft is incomplete without a mention of the infamous witch-hunts and witch trials of Europe and Northern America, in which people were tortured and murdered on accusations of witchcraft and dark magic. While there is evidence that men were prosecuted and murdered on charges of witchcraft, the overwhelming majority of the victims of the witch-hunts were women (Oldridge 248), a fact that has further aided in solidifying the connotations to the word "witch" with women. In reference to the witch-hunts across Europe in the late Middle Ages, Darren Oldridge writes: "The best modern estimates suggests that three-quarters of those executed for witchcraft in Europe were women, though the figures varied considerably from place to place." (248). Even larger were the percentage of women in England, as specified by Marianne Hester:

> Significantly, the witch-hunts were mainly directed against women. In England more than 90 per cent of those formally accused of witchcraft were women, and the few men who were also formally accused tended to be married to an accused witch or to appear jointly with a woman. (Hester 108)

Further, Hester claims:

> The witch-hunts entailed the prosecution, imprisonment and execution of thousands of people, almost exclusively women, in England alone. Not only were the vast majority of the accused women, but they tended to be a particular group of women: age, marital status, kin relation to other 'witches', economic status, liaison with the Devil, and sexual 'deviance' all being important factors. (Hester 3)

To many, such as Hester and Oldridge, the hunt and persecution of witches appear as a war on women, especially those who did not align with societal norms, notably in areas regarding sexuality and modesty (3). The shadow of these witch-hunts has not only followed the idea of the witch in a modern context, but has also been a persistent topic within sub-groups of feminism. Zwissler asks: "Who were the executed witches whom feminists remember today?" (180), drawing upon the solidarity and sympathy towards the female victims of witch-persecution.

Today, the term "witch-hunt" is frequently used in politics and news-media to describe a collective attack or harassment, as repeatedly exemplified in the fallout of the Harvey Weinstein arrest and following Me Too campaigns. The *Oxford English Dictionary* webpage defines the term "witch hunt" as "A campaign of persecution by a group or person in a position of power against a person or group considered to be undesirable by virtue of their views or activities" (Oed.com). This modern meaning of the word and its usage in cases surrounding the Me Too movement is described by Adrienne Harris in the following manner:

> The objects of the hunting are men, the assault for which we see many versions of backlash (small and large) is upon men and often by extension Eros in general and male sexuality in particular. And in this current discourse, the witches are quite clearly the witchy women calling out men regarding sexual overtures. (2)

Further, she argues:

> Historically, in witch-hunts women were the witches under pursuit and likely to be drowned or burned at the stake when apprehended. The attack was usually undertaken

> under religious orthodoxy and usually by men. Curiously, or not so curiously, we have flipped the genders and here the contemporary 2018 witchcraft is nasty women coming after men. (2)

Harris highlights that in this modern, Me Too centric definition of the term "witch-hunt", women are still being targeted despite the reversal of gender in terms of prosecution. The term carries connotations to the hysteria and lack of justice observed during the witch trials of Europe and North America, thereby de-valuing the credibility of the accusers coming forwards in these modern witch-hunts. While the reversal of gender could mean a reversal of power between the accuser and the accused, Harris argues that the term is still used to reflect negatively upon the women who accuse men of sexual misconduct by painting them as "nasty women" (Harris 2).

Witchcraft, as argued in this chapter, is not only a source of power and independence for women, but also a symbol of women suffering at the hands of society, which has solidified the figure of the witch in modern feminism. Historically, events such as the witch burnings across Europe in the late Middle Ages, as well as the infamous Salem Witch trials in the US, have cemented the ties between women and witchcraft, as an overwhelming majority of the victims of these witch hunts were women (Oldridge 248). Further, the gendered term "witch" carries dire connotations to the horrors of their persecution, a point frequently brought up in feminist discourse. Madden allude to the words of Carol F. Karlsen, writing: "Only by understanding that the history of witchcraft is primarily a history of women can we confront the deeply embedded feelings about women among our ancestors" (xiii).

4.1 Witchcraft and Female Sexuality

In describing witchcraft as a source of power and independence for women it is necessary to address its connotations to female sexuality, notably as presented in literature and pop culture. For instance, the sexual aspect of Circe's character is described in various manners by both Homer and Miller, perhaps most prominent in her pursuit of Odysseus as a lover, but also through material symbolism. As discussed by Yarnall and McClymont, Circe's herding staff may be perceived as a phallic symbol, expressing the reversal of power and gender roles in Circe's power over men. In addition, Circe's choice to turn the men into swine, as explained by both Miller and Riordan, may be perceived as a symbol of their uncontrollable desire

towards Circe. This latter example is explained fairly in-depth in *Circe*, as Miller provides the sorceress with a motivation and reason to transform the men in the first place, while Homer's implications are less obvious. However, as opposed to the vague suggestions regarding the infamous pigs, Homer does put an emphasis on the aspect of Circe's sexuality in the first encounter between Odyssey and the witch, when she swears an oath not to harm his "manhood" (Homer 133, line 341) in return for taking him to bed. The fear expressed in this oath encapsulates the fear of sexual and powerful women, such as that of Circe, and is one of the main themes of Stephen King's 1974 horror novel *Carrie*. King's novel details a teenage girl's developing sexuality and puberty as her telekinetic powers grow increasingly stronger, creating a symbolic bond between her evolving womanhood and her powers. Further, the novel portrays the chastising of young women who behave outside of social norms and conventions in communities.

The story of 16-year-old Carrie White begins on the day she experiences her first menstruation, which to her mother's despair is a sign of her transformation to adulthood. On the very same day, Carrie realizes she is able to move things with her mind, a power known as telekinesis (King 6), immediately drawing the connection between her first sign of maturing into a woman and her discovery of her powers. This is specifically noted to be connected in the book: "Both medical and psychological writers on the subject are in agreement that Carrie White's exceptionally late and traumatic commencement of the menstrual cycle might well have provided the trigger for her latent talent." (11). When referring to the "traumatic" (11) experience, King is specifically referring to the fact that Carrie is completely oblivious to the fact that she has begun menstruating. Instead, she believes that the blood means she is dying (6), as her religious mother has deliberately withheld all information of female puberty to her daughter as she believed only sinners will be affected. Carrie's mother, Margaret, appear to subscribe to the belief that normal bodily functions for females is seen as unclean and sinful, believing that she could hinder them from occurring by sheltering her daughter. Hester writes: "Women's sexual functions are generally seen as 'impure' and negative and to be controlled" (45), describing a key topic in *Carrie*. For instance, Margaret refers to breasts as "dirty pillows" (King 36), claiming that only those of sin will develop them, in addition to her claim that Carrie would not have begun menstruating if she had remained "pure" (65).

The novel juxtaposes the relationship between witchcraft and religion, personified in Carrie's mother, Margaret, who is a fundamentalist fanatic. Carrie's mother punishes her with religion and prayer, frequently locking her daughter in a closet to pray for hours when she has done anything she deems as sinful, such as beginning her menstruation (67). When Margaret

learns of her daughter's developments she begins to pray, saying: "Show her that if she had remained sinless the Curse of Blood never would have come on her. She may have committed the Sin of Lustful Thoughts." (65). The topic of female sexuality in relation to religious values, while too extensive to cover in-depth in this thesis, is deeply rooted in the sexualization of witches. Where there have been attempts at controlling female sexual expression and liberation, those who defy it have been ostracized and punished, as exemplified in the witch hunts of the late Middle Ages. Marianne Hester writes: "Witch-hunting is woman-hunting or at least it is the hunting of women who do not fulfil the male view of how women ought to conduct themselves." (112). The female outcast, who refuses to fall in line with the norms and expectations of society, are frequently deemed dangerous and unpredictable. For instance, Circe is alienated from her godly peers in Miller's *Circe*, and Carrie White is mocked for her otherness in King's novel. Circe is an independent woman, who lives in the company of the nymphs and wild animals who serve her. She has no husband or long-term male companion upon Odysseus' arrival, nor is there any other male master of the house, as would be common in the setting of the story. The sexual relationship between the witch and the hero is not initiated by Odysseus, but by Circe, on the condition that she will do him, and his manhood, no harm. Like Carrie White, Circe is dangerous despite being a lone woman, and both characters represent an unpredictability due to their refusal to follow the norms and expectations their contemporary societies expect from them. As previously stated, one of Hutton's definitions describe the witch figure "as a symbol of independent female authority and resistance to male domination" (x). While the domination in Carrie's case is not derived from a male, as she is primarily submissive to Margaret, her defiance and authority against her oppressor has her labelled as a witch by her own mother (115), who perceives her defiance as a sign that her daughter has turned evil, repeating the sentence "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (175).

In addition to the allegory of female sexuality and the figure of the witch as a symbol, Carrie's gender is detrimental to her story. Madden writes: "Carrie's gender is crucial to her position within the suburban community of Chamberlain, as her femaleness is used to paint her as a literal witch, a "monster" of key significance in the darkest annals of American history" (18). Further, it is implicitly stated in the novel that telekinesis, such as the powers Carrie is in possession of, is a genetic trait which only ever develops in females (120), and she discovers her powers as a direct result of getting her first menstruation. As Margaret ponders on her daughter's development, she says: "First the blood, then the power." (176), highlighting the intently female aspect of her witchcraft. As established in a previous chapter,

Circe's gender is also one of importance in both *The Odyssey* and *Circe* due to her role as his female counterpart.

A common symbol in King's *Carrie,* as well as the story of Circe, is the role of the pig, directly and metaphorically. While the pig is a symbol of uncleanliness and sin in both novels, Miller and King portrays these traits from opposing perspectives. In Miller's *Circe*, the pig serves as a representation of male lust and gluttony, functioning initially as a punishment for men who committed sexual assault. In *Carrie*, the pigs represent society's view on developing female sexuality and non-conformity in women as outrageous and dirty. When Christine Hargensen plans the cruel prank of drenching Carrie White in pig blood on prom night, she notes: "Pig blood for a pig." (157), signifying her assessment of Carrie as a person. In both *Circe*, *The Odyssey*, and *Carrie*, the pig is used for punishment, although the victim and the perpetrator vary. Notably, Miller is the only example in which the punishment appears as somewhat justified, as Circe is shown as taking revenge over someone who has wronged her. In *The Odyssey* and *Carrie*, however, the pig is used to punish the protagonist for seemingly unjust reasons. As established in *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' men who are transformed into pigs by Circe seemingly based on nothing but the witch's cruelty, while Carrie's is the victim of a vengeful classmate who dislikes her for being different. In either case, the role of the pig is to signify the perception that someone is wrong or detrimental.

4.2 Circe in other Iterations

Aside from Madeline Miller's female-oriented re-telling of Circe's story, other adaptations of *The Odyssey* have presented the character of Circe in various manners. Rick Riordan's mid 2000s hit series of pre-teen novels, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, contains a loose adaptation of *The Odyssey* in the series' second book, "Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters". As with the previously described examples of Roald Dahls' *The Witches* and C. S. Lewis *Narnia* series, witches in children's books were still frequently based on the traditional fairy-tale villains during the 20th century. However, the publication and subsequent popularity of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series in the 1990s marked a shift in the association between witchcraft and villainy, as the image of witches portrayed as evil old hags in children's literature seemingly diminished along with the rising popularity of the cool, young witches in media aimed at teenage girls. In this, "Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters" is an effective

meeting point between witch-characters as villains and inspirational role models for kids and teens. Like Madeline Miller's version of the powerful witch, the version of Circe encountered by Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase in "Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters" is appealing, dangerously charming, and incredibly powerful.

Percy Jackson and the Olympians is a pentalogy of novels published between 2005 and 2009 centred around the journey of teenager Percy Jackson, whose father is the Greek god Poseidon, as he navigates life among the creatures and deities of Greek myth in a contemporary 21st century setting. His companions are Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena, as well as Grover Underwood, a satyr and protector of demigods like himself and Annabeth. The series became an instant success, with *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* selling more than 1.2 million copies following its release in 2005, and in 2010 was adapted into a movie directed by *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* director Chris Columbus, featuring accomplished actors such as Pierce Brosnan as the centaur Chiron and Uma Thurman as Medusa. Like Madeline Miller's *Circe,* the *Percy Jackson*-series features Greek myths and stories, such as *The Odyssey*, adapted to suit its target audience and provide entertainment. In terms of differences, however, Riordan's story is set-in modern-day America, as opposed to Miller's historical setting in ancient Greece, and the fateful journey of *The Odyssey* featured in the second novel takes place in the Bermuda Triangle located in the North Atlantic Ocean, including Circe's Island of Aeaea. As part of its modern setting, Circe's palace has been transformed into a luxurious spa, staffed by nymphs in fashionable uniforms and crowded with exotic animals lounging around the pools and saunas among unsuspecting female guests. Circe, who goes by the name of C.C., is not immediately identified as the witch of Homer's poem, yet the parallels between Homer and Riordan's adaptation are many. As in Homer's tale of Odysseus' meeting with Circe, Percy Jackson of Riordan's novel also receives aid from Hermes in the form of multivitamins, fulfilling the purpose of the moly-herb by allowing him to escape the effect of Circe's magic. However, he does not take the vitamins before his encounter with the witch, thereby allowing her to transform him into a guinea pig under the guise of giving him a makeover. Circe states: "You, my dear, need to unlock your true self!" (Riordan 165), reflecting on the intention behind the transformative magic of Circe, similarly to how it was explored in Miller's adaptation. In his new form he observes the contrasting manner in which Circe approaches his female companion Annabeth, who is unaware of her friend's fate. An interesting twist Riordan brings to the classic story of Circe is by allowing her to interact with a mortal woman, while simultaneously differing from Miller's *Circe*, which features some female interactions, by directly portraying the appeal of Circe's power to

a young woman, who she does not transform into an animal – rather, she invites her to join her. Annabeth, an ambitious and bright teenager, is tempted by the sorceress and her promises of greatness, as Circe tells her: “You, my dear, have the makings of a sorceress. Like me.” (Riordan 171). As this encounter between Annabeth and Circe occurs in the latter half of the second book in the series, Riordan has had plenty of opportunity to highlight that Annabeth, despite her young age, is unusually intelligent and knowledgeable, which then serves to further emphasise on how tempting Circe’s promises must be for Annabeth to ignore the warning signs, such as the disappearance of her friend Percy, and genuinely be tempted to join the sorceress. Circe tells her: “We are not so different, you and I. We both seek knowledge. We both admire greatness. Neither of us needs to stand in the shadow of men.” (171), thereby strengthening the idea that sorcery and knowledge is a valid way to power for women in male-dominated societies.

Another change in Riordan’s re-telling is that Percy, the male hero who initially fulfils the role of Odysseus, is replaced by his female companion in the final act of Odysseus and Circe’s first meeting. As he is trapped in a cage with the other men Circe has transformed into Guinea Pigs, Annabeth is the one to take Hermes’s multi-vitamin, protecting her from the sorceress’s magic, and challenging her with a sword, mirroring Odysseus’ first encounter with Circe in *The Odyssey*. However, the similarities end there, as the fight between the two ends by Annabeth dumping the rest of the multi-vitamins into the cage of Guinea Pigs, turning them back into men who subsequently chase the sorceress away in the hunt for revenge. As opposed to both *The Odyssey* and *Circe*, Riordan’s novel portrays Circe solely as a villain, giving her no possibility for redemption. Upon revealing her identity as a witch to Percy, she tells him:

> “Men are pigs, Percy Jackson. I used to turn them into real pigs, but they were so smelly and large and difficult to keep. Not much different than they were before, really. Guinea pigs are much more convenient!” (Riordan 169)

This statement, while loosely mirroring the original Circe in *The Odyssey* by suggesting her choice of animal is caused by a general disdain for the male gender, solidifies her role as evil in Riordan’s interpretation. Unlike Miller’s attempt at justifying Circe’s trademark act of magic as an act of self-preservation and taking back control after an assault, Riordan makes no attempt at giving Circe a redeemable reasoning. Her modern resort-like palace is filled with women who has washed up on her shores, many of them in training to become sorceresses like herself, yet every man, no matter his character, is sentenced to a life as a

critter. While Riordan has clearly altered aspects of Circe's story to be both modernized and age-appropriate for young teenagers, it is interesting to examine how Circe, while fulfilling the role of a villain, still is shown as appealing to young women with ambition, with statements such as "The only way to power for women is sorcery." (172).

Despite the fact that Miller's *Circe* and Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters* were published 12 years apart, both came out in the 21st century and serve as a good example of the difference between a modern adaptation and a contemporary adaptation. While the latter came out first, published in 2006, one could make the argument that Circe is portrayed as more villainous due to being closer in time to the trope of witches as villains in media aimed at children and young teenagers – however, it is also plausible that Circe is simply a minor character in the novel and therefore has been reduced to a villain as her impact is simply too minor in the story to require more dimension. In terms of modern as opposed to contemporary, the modern elements of Riordan's re-telling of *The Odyssey* include a modern setting in early 2000s North America, where Circe's Island features a helipad and top of the line yachts. Miller's *Circe*, which was published in 2018, retains the ancient Greek setting of *The Odyssey*, but may be considered contemporary in terms of its shifted perspective and modern examination. Riordan's novel is modern, as it takes Homer's ancient poem and places its content within a contemporary context. Miller's novel is contemporary, as it examines and old story in an old setting with contemporary eyes and a fresh perspective, specifically a female-oriented narrative.

While it may appear strange to compare a work of fiction written for children and young teenagers to a novel meant for young adults due to the natural differences their respective genres bring, it can still be interesting to examine the role of a character in her various iterations published during the rising popularity of witches as inspirational icons. In *Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters*, Circe is specifically shown as appealing to Annabeth, a teenage girl, demonstrating exactly the appeal and temptation I have attempted to describe in this chapter. Riordan's Circe sees potential in young women and offer them a chance to advance and rise above their peers and achieve empowerment through skill and knowledge. With this she also offers a community of like-minded young women who will accept Annabeth as their own, a form of sisterhood many young women could be tempted by. In terms of differences between Riordan and Miller's portrayals, the biggest deviation is that Miller's novel is narrated by Circe herself, thereby allowing her motivations and inner thoughts to be revealed to the audience. She is a sympathetic character, someone who performs evil actions but is still portrayed as someone to root for because the audience is able

to understand her reasoning and motives. In Riordan's novel she is a villain, an obstacle to be cleared on their way to a destination. Her character is not treated with sympathy or given any background beyond what the characters in the novel are able to describe. Regardless, this is not to say that Rick Riordan's interpretation and presentation of the character of Circe is bad, or even wrong: it is simply different, an interpretation suitable for the environment and target audience of his adaptation.

4.3 Elements of Horror

Despite the portrayals of the independent and empowered female witch discussed in this thesis, the witch as a character remains diverse in popular culture to this day. Beyond the large number of idealized and positive witch characters, there is still a number of portrayals which adhere to the negative connotations and stereotypical role derived from fairy tale villains that witches have been known for throughout the centuries, beyond literature and media aimed at children. Well-known examples of witches portrayed as terrifying villains to an adult audience include the infamous 1999 movie *The Blair Witch Project,* which inspired two sequels titled *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* in 2000 and *The Blair Witch* in 2016, as well as *The Conjuring* (2013), and Robert Eggers' 2015 film *The Witch*. All belonging to the genre of horror, these films feature various portrayals of the witch-figure as evil, mysterious, and rooted in black magic, frequently as a contrast to Christianity.

While all these films in some way revolve around the witch as an integral part of their plot, Robert Eggers' film stand out by making the witch a developed character rather than a plot-device, as one of the main characters ultimately seals a pact with the devil, becoming a witch herself. *The Witch* provides a dynamic interpretation of the symbolism surrounding the Satanic witch, playing on the temptation of witchcraft for young women in addition to portraying the evil of the craft, notably by showing a witch murdering an unbaptized baby as part of her magic ritual. Set in 1630s New England, the film builds upon the motif of Christianity against witchcraft, invoking the Northern American witch hunts of the era, wherein none of the sides are portrayed as purely good or purely evil. The protagonist, Thomasine, is the eldest daughter of a deeply religious family who are plagued by illness, death, and bad omens, for which Thomasine is frequently blamed. As portrayed in King's *Carrie*, the parental-figures of the female protagonist are deeply religious and unhappy with

their daughter and her apparent display of witchcraft. Whenever unexplainable events occur, such as the disappearance of Thomasine's baby brother Samuel, they blame their daughter and accuse her of being sinful.

A common topic in both *Carrie* and *The Witch*, and to some degree the portrayal of Circe in *Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters*, is the juxtaposition of witchcraft as terrible, unnatural, and evil, while simultaneously being a tempting path for women, with a promise of independence and power. Carrie White uses her new-found powers to take revenge on those she felt treated her with cruelty, most clearly by murdering her own mother, while Thomasine was treated horribly by her family, including being sexualized by her own brother, and finds an escape through the power of witchcraft, going against religious upbringing. Circe, as portrayed by Riordan, tempts Annabeth with a promise of power and ambition, yet is defeated after using her powers against Percy, posing a threat for the protagonist of the story. Further, the temptation in these examples seems connected to the aspect of female sexuality and development, as discussed above, in part due to the age of the girls. Thomasine, Carrie, and Annabeth are all teenage girls undergoing various stages of puberty, and they are suddenly being viewed as sexual objects by the people around them as a result. The biggest perpetrator of this in Carrie's case is her mother, who, as discussed, is terrified that the boys at Carries school will attempt to sleep with her or lead her to sin. For Thomasine, her own brother is caught peeking at her chest as she undresses, which McGill claims leads to him experiencing "erotically charged reverie" (74), and she is subsequently blamed for being sinful. To a lesser extent this scenario also applies to Annabeth, as Percy, upon seeing her dressed up and wearing makeup for the first time, observes:

> Worst of all, she was wearing makeup, which I never thought Annabeth would be caught dead in. I mean, she looked good. Really good. I probably would've been tongue tied if I could've said anything except *reet, reet, reet*. But there was also something totally wrong about it. It just wasn't Annabeth. (170)

The common thread of witchcraft being alluring to girls and young women who are undergoing changes beyond their own control is treated as both positive and negative, depending on the genre and aim of the story. In horror, this allure is frequently depicted as negative and dangerous, as observed in *The Witch*. Even in the latter passage, which is taken from a book aimed at children and teenagers, Circe's attempt at convincing Annabeth to join her ranks as a sorceress is treated as bad and dangerous. This negative depiction is further underlined when Percy and Annabeth manage to escape her island, leaving her at the mercy of

murderous pirates.

The positive portrayals of witches in modern media and pop culture have seemingly not managed to overwrite the negative connotations or the dark history of the witch figure. Still an effective villain, the female witch will frequently carry traces of the inspirational aspect seen in modern depictions of the witch figure concealed as a dangerous temptation, luring young women into the hands of the devil and black magic. This allure is frequently treated in various media as negative, as a manner of losing good women to evil, yet it is also a portrayed as a way to empowerment in more feminist works of fiction, as demonstrated in Miller's *Circe.*

Conclusion:

This thesis set out to examine and analyse Madeline Miller's *Circe* in light of its inspiration, Homer's *The Odyssey*, while examining the changes made to suit the novel's target audience. As a feminist re-telling of a classic story, Miller's adaptation quickly rose to popularity among young women, and due to the contemporary topics and themes discussed in the book it could easily be enjoyed by an audience unfamiliar with its predecessor. The method of re-telling a well-known story from the perspective of a different character has seen a rise in popularity over the past decade, exemplified by Disney's female-centric films *Cruella* and *Maleficent.* Like *Circe*, these films shifted the narrative of its original story to focus on the villain, providing a redeeming and sympathetic portrayal to its audience, with the result of renewing interest in opposing narratives, such as that of Odysseus and Circe.

By beginning this thesis with an introduction to relevant adaptation theory, a framework for later analysis was created. Understanding the core concept of adaptation before performing an analysis of *Circe* as an adapted work proved useful in terms of grasping the extent of Miller's changes, especially in terms of understanding the impact of what she did not change, such as the setting and location. By placing the character of Circe in her original, ancient Greek setting, the timelessness and relatability of her struggles, such as being an outcast and experiencing sexual violence, was further emphasized. Miller's portrayal of Circe's hardships, despite being portrayed as seemingly realistic for the setting, are described in such a manner that modern readers easily can identify with the inner thoughts and workings of the witch. As the section regarding adaptation listed well-known examples of adaptations which had undergone a similar treatment to Miller's in terms of narrative shift, the popularity of this method was demonstrated. In targeting a new audience, Miller applied a trendy concept, specifically the redemption of a villainess, to Homer's classic, reviving interest for a modern audience who had already proven to be perceptive to this method of adaptation.

Homer's portrayal of Circe is superficial, as the story is told from the perspective of Odysseus. Her actions are never questioned or explained, and she reveals little about herself according to his descriptions. In relation to her act of transforming Odysseus' men into swine, it appears as though both Odysseus and Hermes assume her reasoning is due to her "evil heart" (Homer 132, lines 288-289). As a contrast, Miller's depiction of this event is explained by a former experience, namely the sexual assault at the hands of the sailors, which provoked her reaction, creating a far more sympathetic reasoning for her behaviour. The relationship between Odysseys and Circe unfolds differently in Miller's adaptation as well, as Circe

develops deep feelings for a man she knows she cannot have, and thus allows herself to bear his child without his knowledge. Circe's appearance in *The Odyssey* is fairly brief despite being an important part of the story, yet the witch still manages to develop as a character, from villain to ally. This development does, however, weaken significantly when comparing it to her transformation at the hands of Miller. A significant aspect of Circe's character is her role as a witch, which Miller's adaptation emphasizes through her upbringing and struggles. Her first acts of magic both lay the foundation for her perceived talent of transformational magic, for which she would become famous for, in addition to directly resulting in her exile. Circe finds her strength in her powers, which leads her to finally being able to confront her father, knowing that the rumours of her magical abilities give her power. Circe's biggest act of transformational magic is herself, as Miller describes her journey from scared and passive to empowered and independent.

While the figure of the witch has seen both positive and negative portrayals over the years since Homer's Circe was first introduced, Miller's version of Circe aligns perfectly with the empowered and inspiring witch, popular among her audience. The inspirational witch, as I would come to understand from my research and own experience, serves as a role model for the modern woman or teenage girl, idolized and with inspiring traits. The inspirational witch is often young, beautiful, and successful, either in magic or in more relatable aspects of her life, such as at school or in her career. Her empowerment is directly connected to her magical abilities, as demonstrated in Miller's *Circe*, providing her with a sense of independence. This type of witch is frequently observed in media aimed at teenagers and young women, and beyond the literary instances such as *Circe* includes the aforementioned series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and season three of Ryan Murphy's television series *American Horror Story* (2011-) titled "Coven" (2013). In addition to the aspects of independence and empowerment through magic, witches such as Circe has also come to represent a freedom of sexual expression. As exemplified in chapter 4, the connotation between witches and sexuality have existed for centuries, with modern audiences being increasingly familiar with the positive portrayals of this concept. In this, the sexual portrayal of the witch, wherein the witch functions as a symbolic portrayal of the sexually liberated and expressive woman, is frequently portrayed in media that is aimed at a somewhat more mature audience than its strictly inspirational counterpart. An obvious example of this is Circe, who takes initiative in inviting Odysseys to her bed, but Stephen King's *Carrie* arguably falls under this category too, as the protagonist discovers her powers as she matures and begins to rebel against her mother's Puritan values. While this portrayal of the witch is frequently connected to the

aforementioned inspirational variation, in part due to the generally positive and empowering portrayal of their sexual openness, it is also connected to the sexualization for the observer. The objectification of the sexualized witch is a fantasy in which the character of the witch is visually appealing and sensual, but lacks agency in their story. These two variations of witches and their sexual expression may also be perceived as a heterosexual female and male interpretation of the witch as a sexual creature, where the one idolizes their sexual freedom while the other objectifies for their own pleasure. Regarding the heteronormative media, Madden writes:

> Within this hierarchy, woman is already monstrous and inferior to man by sheer virtue of her sexual and physiological deviation from the male norm. Witches, on the other hand, embody the ultimate male fear: uncontrollable females who, endowed with unholy powers, threaten to break free of the margins to which they must be confined. (15)

The term "uncontrollable females" (15) seems largely applicable for the witches examined in this thesis, and Miller's Circe most of all.

By introducing a comparison to King's novel *Carrie*, it was easy to identify and examine the connection between witchcraft and female sexuality, as well as the portrayal of the witch as an outsider. A large portion of Circe's struggles, as well as her eventual empowerment, comes from being different than her peers. In terms of Miller's new audience, the theme of loneliness and alienation in literature is both common and relatable for a large portion of young women, and Circe's journey of using her powers to carve her own way in life fits the inspirational portrayal of the witch figure in modern media aimed at women. The aspect of relatability, both in Circe as character and the hardships she endures, is introduced by Miller based on the very brief portrayal of Circe as described in Homer's *The Odyssey,* interpreting the character for a new audience.

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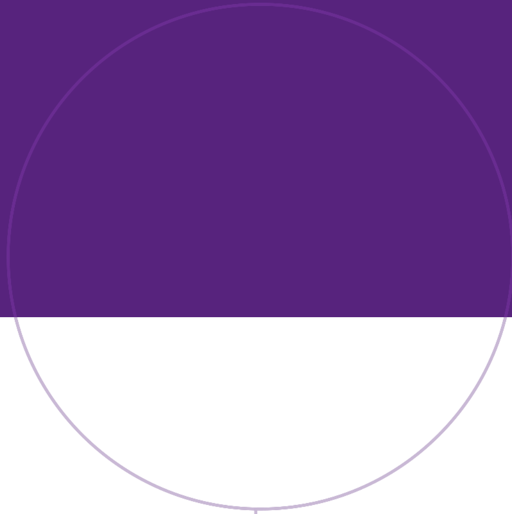

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