Relationality Reimagined: Madeline Miller's *Circe* As Revisionist Myth

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The novel *Circe*, by Madeline Miller, introduces readers to a reimagined portrayal of the formidable Greek goddess of the same name who hosted Odysseus for a year on her island, Aiaia. This revisionist myth follows the arc of Circe's life over millennia and offers contemporary readers a heroine who is both timeless and specific to this moment in which humanity is reckoning with inherited hierarchies mirrored in classical mythology. Miller portrays Circe as the compassionate and reflective misfit daughter of an Oceanic nymph, Perse, and the sun-god Helios. Miller's Circe seeks companionship and kinship beyond the confines of a dysfunctional family in which she is bullied as often as she is ignored. Part of Circe's fate is to be exiled by her father Helios as punishment for her willful cultivation of the powers of witchcraft.

Once banished, Circe arrives to Aiaia unaccompanied by other immortals or mortals. However, she quickly notes that her new home is a place where she will not be alone; minerals, plants, and animals already inhabit the island. Though prohibited to leave Aiaia, Circe gradually finds companionship, purpose, and agency as she interacts with other beings around her. Ironically, it is through exile that Circe awakens to a sense of true belonging. Her transformation is a result of her forging a reciprocal relationship with the natural world, a relationship marked by a sense of rootedness and interdependence with her environment. Circe ultimately finds the courage to embrace love, vulnerability, and mortality due to learning to harness the power of the natural world as well as to yield to it.

The protagonist's inner world is mirrored in her relationship with nature, revealing a multi-faceted, nuanced study of mutuality and cooperation, a stark contrast to themes of competition and vengeance more commonly found in heroic epics such as Homer's *Odyssey*. Further, this retelling offers insights instructive to our

current era in which humanity is grappling with issues related to an ecological crisis created by human exploitation of the environment over the last several hundred years that threatens the survival of countless species, including humans.

In this era of human reckoning with past and present complicity in climate change, Miller's retelling contributes to a cultural shift necessary to heal a dualistic split between humans and nature, a cultural inheritance in western civilization for millennia. *Circe* introduces a type of homecoming different from that espoused by heroic tales in which the male hero's journey is marked by victorious domination over other humans and the natural world. While the arc of Circe's development includes a period of separation, which is typical of a mythical hero's journey, her exile immerses her in nature. She forges alliances with Earth others: animals, plants, rocks, air, and water.

Circe, as reinterpreted by Miller, can be seen as an archetype for modern-day cultural creatives and environmental activists working to shift entrenched cultural beliefs and habits related to commodification and exploitation of the natural world. This narrative challenges patterns of domination and anthropocentrism and offers imaginative pictures of unraveling and reassembling notions of human exile from nature. Not only can Miller's Circe be seen as a heroine, she can be regarded as an eco-heroine. Circe's mutually reciprocal partnership with nature is characteristic of an eco-heroine, an archetype put forth by contemporary Celtic mythologist Sharon Blackie.

Blackie, author *If Women Rose Rooted: The Journey of Authenticity and Belonging*, claims that women are particularly connected to nature, as revealed in Celtic cosmological narratives. Though Blackie's theory contains problematic elements of essentialism, her goal is worthy. Blackie seeks to empower women to reclaim their power through the mythopoetic tradition in order to become modern-day eco-heroines, emboldened to act on behalf of nature. She encourages women to claim a

sense of belonging to the natural world, which will then inspire and sustain an environmental consciousness. Sharon Blackie declares that eco-heroines are on a journey that "is co-creational at heart, focused on building relationships with other humans, with plants and animals, with the land itself" (370). To further her point about relationality, Blackie urges those on this journey to "Accept the help which is offered; make friends and allies wherever you can" (370).

As a *pharmakis* or witch, Circe engages in the alchemy of transformation. She recognizes that she must make friends and allies with the plants that comprise her pharmacopeia by positioning herself as one part of the ecological web of plant and animal life on Aiaia. Eventually, she realizes it is time to claim her connection to the plants on her island: "The flowers, when they saw me, seemed to press forward like eager puppies, leaping and clamoring for my touch. I felt almost shy of them, but day by day I grew bolder, and at last, I knelt in the damp earth before a clump of hellebore" (82). Circe tunes into the plant life before harvesting, which signals more respect than the more common extractive human-natural world relationships found in anthropocentric narratives. To have a goddess disclose feeling "shy" of an evergreen perennial is noteworthy. Similarly, kneeling to harvest the flowering plant is not only practical but also points to reverence.

Miller explores Circe's inner landscape to reveal multi-faceted motives, reflections, and regrets. She has the goddess narrate her own story, affording rare authority and agency to a female protagonist, thus marking a radical shift from the point of view typical in classical mythology. Miller describes her literary adaptation of Circe as *mythological realism*. Her explicit goal is to amplify "the female voice" to balance "3000 years of the male-hero tradition" (Plotz and Turrigiano). Miller's *Circe* serves as a cultural and literary corrective to patterns of domination as old as the warrior culture of ancient Greece. Miller foregrounds Circe's alignment with the natural world

in which plants, animals, and humans are bound by birth, life, death, and regenerative cycles.

Throughout the narrative, Miller interweaves images of the natural world to convey meaning. These symbolic, figurative references to the natural world are especially prominent in a pre-banishment episode involving the young Circe and her uncle, Prometheus. Prometheus endures excruciating torture following his transgressive act of tricking Zeus in order to give the gift of fire to mortals. Circe senses that Prometheus is different from other Titans:

> After all those hours at my father's feet, I had learned to nose out power where it lay. Some of my uncles had less scent than the chairs they sat on, but my grandfather Oceanos smelled deep as rich river mud, and my father like a searing blaze of just-fed fire. Prometheus' green moss scent filled the room (21).

Prometheus, who foreshadows Circe's desire to embed herself within the regenerative cycle of nature, is compared to a lush and earthy plant associated with forest and woodland. Linking Prometheus with the color green is fitting since it has strong associations with fecundity.

Additionally, Prometheus introduces Circe to a regenerative component of human mortality:

> "Will you tell me, what is a mortal like?"
>
> It was a child's question, but he nodded gravely. "There is no single answer. They are each different. The only thing they share is death. You know the word"
>
> "I know it," I said. "But I do not understand."
>
> "No god can. Their bodies crumble and pass into the earth…" (22)

The transient nature of mortality initially frightens Circe, but Prometheus introduces another equally powerful teaching to his niece: "Not every god need be the same," he said (22).

Circe's exchanges with Prometheus quicken new insights relating to the cold reality she endures. Life in her father's court, ensconced in "obsidian corridors," lacks relationship, "I was nothing, a stone" (23). In combination with Prometheus' ontological teaching, her newfound courage propel her to a new level of daring and can be seen as a catalyst for her quest to develop beyond her familial and familiar environments.

Her interactions with Prometheus embolden Circe and lead her to pilfer valuables from her father's treasury. These stolen goods are laced with symbolic imagery of the animal world: "golden cups shaped like the heads of bulls…bowls with swan-neck handles, a dagger with an ivory shaft carved like a lion's face…" (23). Thievery is an essential theme of this section of the narrative. Zeus dispenses harsh punishment to Prometheus for stealing fire from the gods and gifting it to humanity. Circe steals nectar from her father's banquet hall to offer some comfort to Prometheus. She then absconds valuables from her father's treasury.

Like her protagonist, Miller, as an author of revisionist myth, engages in a related type of thievery. Feminist poet and scholar Alicia Ostriker describes this type of theft specific to poetry and revisionist mythmaking: "A major theme in feminist theory on both sides of the Atlantic…has been the demand that women writers be, in Claudine Herrmann's phrase, *voleuses de langue*, thieves of language, female Prometheuses" (68). Ostriker applies Herrmann's phrase to female poets of the 1960s and 1970s, to demonstrate how their skillful use of language infiltrated "sanctuaries of existing language that protect and preserve constructs of gender-specific attributes" (71). Likewise, Miller successfully enters the patriarchal sanctuary of Greek mythology to steals images of Circe, before transforming them and then offering the

gift of the revised myth back to humanity. Similar to the poets who Ostriker refers to as "thieves of language," Miller "is using myth" for revisionist purposes: "that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible" (72).

Though immortal, Circe accepts her limited powers when it comes to nature. She learns that she will need to work *with* the natural world to harness the power of plant medicine: "Little by little I began to listen better: to the sap moving in the plants, to the blood in my veins. I learned to understand my own intention, to prune and to add, to feel where the power gathered and speak the right words to draw it to its height" (85). Circe is altered by becoming rooted in the place she inhabits. She engages her will to learn from the plants that she lives alongside. She walks among them, observing, and awaits their messages. She digs in the soil with her bare hands, getting blackened fingernails, symbolic of engaging in work uncommon for gods. She recognizes that engaging with the plant world yields power: "Then I learned that I could bend the world to my will, as a bow is bent for an arrow. I would have done that toil a thousand times to keep such power in my hands" (84).

Circe experiences regret related to previous uses of her powers of transformation out of spite or jealousy and eventually gains wisdom relating to the ethical use of this power, mainly associated with protecting the mortal world. Motherhood is a catalyst for further maturation, further metamorphosis. In the process of bearing and raising her son, Telegonus, Circe forms a loving attachment to a mortal being who is at risk for harm. Once Circe realizes Athena holds an intention to destroy Telegonus, to protect Odysseus from his fate to be slain by his own son, she allies with the natural world to protect her son from harm.

She binds Telegonus, a tenacious toddler, to her, carrying him on her while she gathers and works with the plants to weave a protective spell over Aiaia: "'Athena

would kill my child, and so I defend him,' I cried" (254). She climbs "to the highest peak" to cast two spells. The first forms a "great arc over the island," while the second spell is an "enchantment woven in the island itself, every bird and beast and grain of sand, every leaf and rock and drop of water. I marked them, and all the generations in their bellies, with Telegonus' name" (254). Circe creates a powerful alliance with the natural world to protect Telegonus from Athena's malintent: "If ever she did break through that smoke, the island would rise up in his defense, the beasts, and birds, the branches and rocks, the roots in the earth. Then we would make our stand together" (254). For sixteen years, Circe ensures the survival of her son by completing a multi-day process each month wherein she would "regather all those pieces of the island, beach and grove and meadow, scale and feather and fur" (255). Though Telegonus reaches maturity, neither he nor his father, Odysseus, avert their respective fates.

Following the death of Odysseus, Telegonus returns to Aiaia with Penelope and Telemachus, son of Penelope and Odysseus. This section of the narrative is the context for Circe's most significant transformation. Her loving relationship with Telemachus and the two daughters they share change Circe. She comes to see that the gods "are more dead than anything" (385). Immortality situates the gods outside the life cycles of the natural world. Circe eventually comes to experience a particular type of ennui, for as an immortal, she is out of sync with the cycles that surround her: "Everything was united by the steady rise and fall of nature's breath. Everything except for me" (286). Her relationship with the natural world and mortals gives her the courage to reject her transcendence and to embed herself fully in the web of life. She prepares a broth which breaks the curse of her immortality: "Of course my flesh reaches for the earth. That is where it belongs" (384).

In conclusion, Miller's revisionist myth, *Circe*, offers contemporary readers insight into the courage and compassion required to belong to oneself and to belong

to where one lives. By choosing to embrace mortality, she breaks the "chain of fear" embedded in the hierarchy of the gods. While sovereign, Circe does not seek domination over others. Instead, she stands as a symbol for interdependence, relationality, and embeddedness within nature. Miller foregrounds regeneration rather than domination; this inversion disrupts inherited ideas related to human domination of nature and comes at a time when humanity is grappling with record-breaking heatwaves, wildfires, and rising sea levels related to climate change.

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