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Proposed research question: **“How has Circe been presented and perceived through art, myth and history?”**

In Homer’s ‘the Odyssey’, Odysseus (or Ulysses if you’re Roman) gets stranded on the island of Aeaea (an imaginary island often located East of Greece), home of the enchantress Circe; daughter of Helios and either the Ocean Nymph Perse, or Hecate, goddess of witchcraft, the crossroads and the night, different versions of the myth state different parentage. Circe has been depicted as a minor deity, a powerful sorceress, and an object of desire in various retellings of the myth through literature, art, and modern media. Circe has even become her own archetypal icon, inspiring many other characters in stories up until the 21st century and quite possibly will continue to do so after. Although not limited to the arts, in becoming the Archetypal witch, Circe has also become an inspiration for modern movements regarding feminism and witchcraft.

Myth

My first keyword is ‘Myth’. To me, the definition of ‘myth’ is a traditional story which explains natural phenomena or supposed historical events, often it is a story with religious or sacred meaning such as those in the Bible or the stories of Greek Mythology. Judith Yarnall in her 1994 book ‘Transformations of Circe’ defined myth as “A symbolic narrative that is flung out like a life preserver from the collective psyche toward a phenomenon that it does not understand and yet cannot avoid addressing.” (Judith Yarnall, 1994). Here the collective Psyche being another way of describing Carl Jung’s theory of the collective subconscious.

Using patterns and symbolism from mythology the psychologist Carl Jung devised a system of archetypes. Archetypes are images or roles that Jung theorised came from humanities collective unconscious mind (think of a ‘hive-mind’ connecting everyone’s subconscious), for example icons or characters such as the mother, the king, or the hero. He also believed “There is good reason for supposing that the archetypes are the unconscious images of the instincts themselves, in other words, that they are patterns of instinctual behaviour.” (Jung, 1959) as an example the protective instinct would manifest as a war deity such as Ares or a cultural hero, and the maternal instinct would become the mother of the pantheon or even the queen of the gods such as Hera. He used myths to back up this theory, however, although the archetypes do relate to the human experience and this theory makes sense he mainly used mythology derived from Indo-European cultures (Celtic and Norse for example) as a basis to back his theory as they follow those similar Archetypal patterns as opposed to those of Egyptian mythology or Indigenous belief systems which often have their own unique structures.

Circe doesn't necessarily fit into one archetype but instead becomes her own. She is the alluring enchantress or even the femme fatale when wary sailors find themselves on her shores, and she lures them deeper into the island where they are caught in her spells. She is also a teacher, the hospitable hostess and with her love of turning men into beasts you could argue she is also an early mad scientist.



Fig 1: "Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus", John William Waterhouse

In this painting by John William Waterhouse (fig 1) we see Circe scene as described in the Odyssey welcoming Odysseus and his men, offering them the potion which would turn them into animals. We can see items used in ancient Greek rituals such as the tripod burning sacred herbs and the chalice used to drink from, Circe is also holding her staff / wand in a commanding and regal manner. In the mirror we can see Odysseus, unaware that the plants scattered around the floor are the ingredients Circe has used to poison the wine she is offering him and his crew.

It is disputed on whether some myths actually happened and whether or not the characters are real, or who their real life counterparts are. This is due to early writers, story tellers, and historians blurring the lines between Myth and Reality. A good example of this occurs in many of the influential roman households, with Emperors and Nobles claiming ancestry from gods and mythological heroes such as Achilles and the mythical founders of Rome; Romulus & Remus. Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic Historian and writer (1179-1241) recorded Norse mythology in the Prose Edda, taking inspiration from the older Poetic Edda and interpreting it for the new Audience. The Poetic Edda was a recorded collection of the songs and poems of Scandinavian and Icelandic myth, and the Prose Edda was his interpretation. He wrote the Characters and events to be interpreted as an historical account, such as Odin and the Aesir tribe travelling north from Greece where they settled in the lands of the Vanir tribe. Many of the Scandinavian kings claimed ancestry from Odin as Myth and history were seen to be one and the same. Myths are always being retold and changed with some aspects being added or forgotten about all together, and they have played a fundamental part in

shaping society and world views. Joseph Campbell said that “Myth is much more important and true than history. History is just journalism and you know how reliable that is.”

Power

My second keyword is power. There is no doubt that Circe has been shown as a powerful and iconic character throughout history and mythology, and it is this power that has captured people’s attention and cemented her place in the history of witchcraft.

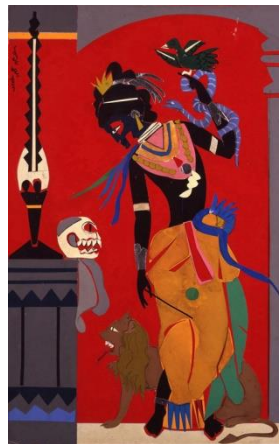


Fig 2 ‘Circe’, Romare Bearden 1977

This illustration by Romare Bearden (fig 2) imagines Circe as an African woman as opposed to the usual European woman we usually see. It’s a contemporary illustration that has abandoned the soft tones and male gaze of the renaissance and Victorian depictions; it is more surreal and abstract with powerful colours and portrays Circe in her role of a dangerous witch, shown alongside snakes, lions and a skull; symbols of strength and witchcraft. There are aspects of Circe’s myth that we don’t typically see depicted in art. She was a divine being, daughter of the sun god himself, and she spent her entire immortal life mostly isolated from the rest of the world with no one but the island Nymphs and travellers she transformed into animals. She was a powerful sorceress who would lure travellers to her island with her voice, just like the Sirens, and she would then trick them into drinking wine poisoned with a transformative potion which would turn them into the beasts she kept on her island. She also has knowledge on the underworld which she uses to help Odysseus on his path home. These aspects are quite dark and aren’t necessarily shown in classical art, which favours a softer more idealised and approachable Circe. Circe was not just a side character on Odysseus’ quest; she is her own character with a separate history going back to the goddess cults before ancient Greece (Yarnall).

Today witchcraft has had resurgence with many people picking up old traditions and bringing them into the contemporary world creating brand new religions and even political movements. “Show me your witches, and I’ll show you your feelings about women” is a quote from Pam Grossmans book “Waking the Witch” (2019). She then goes on to say that the witch is the perfect symbol for

women's oppression and liberation. This can mirror societies' view of Circe quite easily, depending on the societal attitudes of the time Circe was either seen as an evil woman or empowered witch.

"Hex the Patriarchy" is a phrase which can often be seen at protests and women's marches, even with celebrities such as Lana Del Rey encouraging us to hex Donald Trump. This wasn't a single event, the new witch movement would call for the hexing of many public figures accused of assault and predatory behaviour such as the likes of Brett Kavanaugh. "interest in witches as a symbol of power has waxed and waned in 20 year cycles... surges line up with periods in which women feel politically disenfranchised" (Elizabeth Krohn to Quartz, 2019). The witch has become a symbol of resistance and protest in the modern age, but this isn't necessarily a new thing. In 1899, folklorist Charles G. Leland published 'Aradia; Gospel of the Witches'; a supposed ancient text given to him by an Italian Witch named Maddelena. Although the authenticity is disputed, there is no doubt that it is made up from fragments of myth and folklore. If it is authentic, it would mean that since the middle ages witchcraft has been used by the disenfranchised against those who would oppress them. The Narrative of the supposed gospel opens with the goddess Diana (Roman equivalent to Artemis) speaking to her daughter Aradia and telling her to teach the people how to poison the lords and bind their oppressors (Leland 1899).

With these traditions the image of the "witch" and definition of the word has changed to simply mean someone who follows alternative spirituality. The pointy hats and green skin has pretty much been abandoned and generally witches now look like regular people both in literature, the arts, and now everyday life with the invention of modern Witch religions and political movements.

Transformation

My second keyword is transformation, taking inspiration from Circe's habit of transforming man to beast and the different roles she has been cast in.



Fig 4 "Circe," John Collier, 1885

Transformation is a big part of all aspects of life, including the creative process and spiritual/mythological aspects. The Roman poet Ovid wrote the 'Metamorphoses' meaning book of transformation. Within the book he chronicles many of the ancient Greek myths with a transformative nature; from Zeus turning Io into a cow, to Circe turning man to beast, in the Odyssey she is hospitable to Odysseus' men but tricks them into drinking a transformative potion and herded them into enclosures and pens as they slowly transformed into pigs. She is also portrayed in a very

jealous light when she transforms Scylla into the monster she is now. Her island home was also populated by numerous wild beasts such as lions and wolves, who may have been travellers she ensnared and trapped on her isolated Island. Throughout all retellings and versions of Homer's Odyssey, Circe has always had the power to transform one thing into another.

Throughout history Circe has been portrayed and interpreted in different roles, such as that of the powerful witch or even the somewhat fetishized enchantress. In figure 4 we can easily see Circe being portrayed as someone to be desired, focusing on her allure and beauty alone and leaving out her power and significance. This became a pattern with artists catering to the male gaze and purely showing her as the femme fatale. During the middle ages she was mostly portrayed as a temptress who leads men astray, she had become the stereotypical evil witch (Boccaccio). However, in later years the existence of witches was questioned and witches, such as Circe, were described as delusional. It is also important to remember that Circe had always been associated with such plants that were believed to be used in witchcraft, such as plants in the nightshade family and datura. All plants are highly poisonous and can cause delirium and hallucinations. It is also thought by many medical historians that the literal transformations from human to beast in the Myth were meant to be taken as metaphorical and referred to the intoxication these plants cause, this is due to the use of a plant mentioned in the myth known as "moly" to counteract Circe's poison, although we don't know for certain which plant this is, it is often thought to be snowdrop which has an anti-intoxicating effect (Plaitakis, 1983).

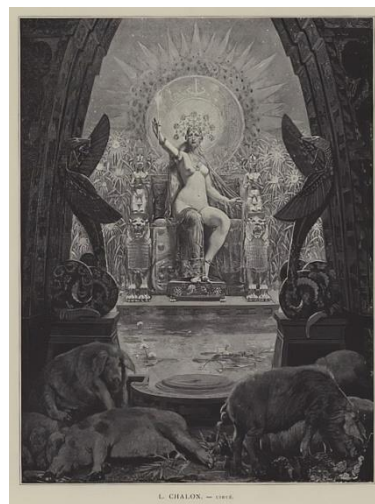


Fig 3, 'Circe and her pigs' Louis Chalon, 1888

In most retellings and representations it is easy to forget that she is meant to be descended from the Sun god, Helios. This Art Nouveau illustration by Louis Chalon (figure 3) shows this aspect of her character, but at the same time paints the subject in a more exotic light. Within it there are references to many cultures from ancient Egypt to those from Central America (Aztec, Mayan), ancient cultures where the sun was sacred and seen as a deity. In the majority of illustrations Circe appears as human; Chalon's illustration shows her as more than that. From what we can see in all her incarnations we can tell that she is a character which has been the muse for many artists through time. She also reflects the attitudes of that time particularly how women were viewed. "What we know for certain – what Western literature attests to – is her remarkable staying

power...These different versions of Circe's myth can be seen as mirrors, sometimes clouded and sometimes clear, of the fantasies and assumptions of the cultures that produced them" (Yarnall).

Whilst looking into these key words a better understanding of the underlying themes within Homer's Odyssey was gained and an understanding of how the character of Circe has been an inspiration for countless artists through time. But with this she also captured the social attitudes of the time, and often just being painted as an 'object' of desire, so here we see misogyny and the male gaze thrown onto the character, however if you put all the depictions together you can see who the whole character of Circe is.

"How has Circe been presented and perceived through art, myth and history?"

Where does she come from? What is Circe's origin story?

How has her image changed from the first depictions on Greek vases to contemporary illustrations and how has it reflected current societies' views?

How have male artists depicted her compared to how female artists have?

Who is Circe today? What has she influenced?

How is she seen today in regards to modern witch traditions and political movements?

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