Mired in Mud: Circe, Atwood, and the Female Mythmaker

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While innumerable authors and artists have reworked Homer’s Odyssey over the centuries, most have chosen to do so through male eyes. Margaret Atwood, however, has two volumes to her credit in which she does otherwise: her well-known 2005 novel The Penelopiad, which serves as Penelope’s testimony of her experience in Ithaca during the timeframe of her husband’s quest, and the poem cycle “Circe/Mud Poems” from her 1973 collection You Are Happy, in which Circe struggles with her own place in the structure of the male quest narrative.¹ Atwood may be better known for The Penelopiad, but her work in “Circe/Mud Poems” is far more incisive, carving out a feminine form that confounds the structure of the masculine quest narrative. Yet for all their power, the poems are just as convoluted as their muddy title suggests. Initially, Circe appears as the earthly feminine and Odysseus as the conquering hero, at odds in an unambiguous conflict. However, as the cycle continues and Circe surrenders to sexual union, Atwood implicates Circe in the violent the history of male conquest. Her Circe’s choices do not fit neatly into the rhetoric of second-wave feminism; in fact, the contents of the poems are deeply incomprehensible as an early feminist vision, for they actually complicate the Homeric Circe into a much more vulnerable and divisive figure.² Atwood’s Circe represents the

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¹ Coral Ann Howells. The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood.

² Reingard M. Nischik. Engendering Genre. (Ottowa: University of Ottowa Press, 2009). Nischik here discusses Atwood’s desire to distance her work from the feminist movement of the sixties and early seventies. Atwood admitted to reading
difficulty of heterosexual love within a world of ongoing gender war, a world in which a post-feminist society has not been achieved. She does not propose solutions or ignore the centuries of misogyny that cloud the Circe myth. Instead she writes a Circe who exists in a world that favors the conquerors, whose love for Odysseus implicates her in a system that has left her mired in centuries of mud. Like Adrienne Rich, Atwood has forsaken the attempt to speak in a masculine tongue and instead devises an alternative form, appropriating the ancient rhetoric of women as inherently mutable and shapeless to her own ends. Through her appropriation and formation of style, Atwood proposes a new form of feminine mythmaking in which woman is simultaneously both victim to the patriarchal history of myth and creator of an alternative feminine mythic narrative.

Circe’s most glorious and complete appearance in ancient literature is undoubtedly her appearance in the *Odyssey*. The Homeric Circe may be best known as the sorceress who can turn men to pigs, a talent that she demonstrates upon meeting Odysseus’ crew, but her significance goes far beyond her transformative powers (*Od. XI. 250-265*). She emerges within the text of the *Odyssey* as the central episode, as her interactions with Odysseus occur from the tenth to twelfth books within the twenty-four-book structure. Yarnall discusses this placement as a matter of her importance, noting that she “dwells at the core of the *Odyssey*, at the center of its central section, that part

the work of Simone de Beauvoir, but distanced herself from the rhetoric of producing idealized female characters. She did so because of her belief that feminism had not yet produced a “post-feminist world” and thus she wanted to depict the ambiguities she saw in the world around her.


4 Atwood also notably creates a twenty-four-poem cycle to mimic the structure of the *Odyssey*—an act of appropriation that should not be mistaken for structural aspiration.

bracketed by the Telemacriad and the return to Ithaca…” Yet despite her central placement, she is not seen through Homer’s narration but rather Odysseus’ subjective account, as he speaks of his travels at the court of the Phaeacians (Od. IX-XII). These two textual curiosities conflict slightly—if she is indeed powerful enough to signify the turning point in the epic, why is she only seen through Odysseus’ eyes? This contradiction plants a seed of conflict that will grow to influence the central question of Atwood’s “Circe/Mud Poems”: who is Circe without the story of Odysseus, and what are her powers? From the Odyssey one can at least infer that her union with Odysseus is an event of significance. Homer outlines Circe’s apparent modus operandi in Euroylocus’ speech to Odysseus, which details her enchantment of his crew into swine, but as Odysseus confronts her, her own reality changes (Od. X. 155-280). Hermes had prophesied to Circe that Odysseus would, in being able to resist her drugs, prove a uniquely challenging presence. When she fails to enchant him, she immediately understands his identity: “You must be Odysseus,” she proclaims, “the man of many wiles, who Quicksilver Hermes always said would come here” (Od. X. 352-353). This prophecy is a sign of inner life, of life before, yet it creates Odysseus as a powerful piece of her own identity, further confusing the situation. Joseph Campbell notes that Circe manages to exercise her dual talents for death and creation through her union with Odysseus, as she not only beds him but also leads him to the underworld. In defying her power initially, Odysseus lets her explore her abilities as a lover and fulfill her own personhood.

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6 Yarnall, 18.
Yet despite the importance of Odysseus to the Homeric Circe’s development, she is not covetous of his time or love. The depiction of Circe as needy, Circe as woman and not goddess, is not the invention of Homer, who in fact clearly emphasizes Circe’s utility in Odysseus’ quest. Homer’s Circe understands and accepts the impermanence of her union with Odysseus. When Odysseus wishes to leave, he asks her to “fulfill the promise you made to send me home,” implying that their relationship has always been built upon the premise of his eventual departure (Od. X. 503). Her reply is fitting: “My wily Odysseus—you need not stay in my house any longer than you wish” (Od. X. 510-512). Most crucially, she provides him with the tools to leave her, tethering a “ram and…black ewe” that he will need for sacrifice “by [Odysseus’] tarred ship,” to aid him in being able to reach Tiresias in the underworld (Od. X. 590-596). Upon his return to the island, they have one final conversation, in which she warns him of the obstacles ahead. Among other cautions and bits of advice to speed his journey, Circe instructs him in how to survive the call of the siren, telling him to “have [your crew] bind you…in the maststep” to hear the song while being restrained from leaping to his death (Od. XII. 50-60). In this way, Homer’s Circe does not create monsters, but instead protects Odysseus from their blows.

Ovid’s Circe, however, is a maker of monsters, and is monstrous in her love.\(^8\) It is strange that Circe, she of transformation, comes off so badly in The Metamorphoses, but Ovid does not hold her in high regard. He claims that “no woman or goddess is more susceptible to love than Circe,” and this love drives her to extremes.\(^9\) Unlike Homer’s understanding and eventually hospitable Circe, Ovid’s Circe is a lover driven mad. She

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\(^8\) Yarnall, 87.

turns Scylla, originally a beautiful young woman, into a monster due to her jealousy of Glaucus’ regard for her.\textsuperscript{10} When she is rejected once again by Picus, Circe transforms him into a bird, and subsequently wanders with such despair that she eventually “dissolved into water from her deep sadness, and she melted and slowly disappeared like a vapor on a gentle breeze.”\textsuperscript{11} All of these interactions are characterized by excess, be it excessive desire to possess a lover or excessive grief upon rejection. Thus, the Circe of Ovid appears more a caricature of female desire than an actual woman, longing to excess and leaving monsters in her wake.

Atwood draws on the Ovidian Circe as monster maker in “Circe/Mud Poems” just as she does the Homeric Circe. In one of the final poems, as Circe and Odysseus lay together in anticipation of his departure, Circe reflects:

> But it is not finished, that saga. The fresh monsters are already breeding in my head. I try to warn you, though I know you will not listen.\textsuperscript{12}

The “fresh monsters” that are breeding in her head raise a familiar tension: who is in charge of this narrative? A similar ambiguity exists in Homer, but there the answer is clear: the story is told through Odysseus’ voice, it is he whom we must believe, and Circe’s power is channeled to his advantage. But Atwood proposes a more tangled source of narrative power. Though Circe narrates, she must process the events of the poem as they come. Odysseus in the \textit{Odyssey} is afforded the distance of time in describing their interactions, allowing him the ability to reflect on their relationship and reshape it in

\textsuperscript{10} Simpson, 235.
\textsuperscript{11} Simpson, 243.
\textsuperscript{12} Atwood, 64.
retelling. Though Circe certainly perceives the events of “Circe/Mud Poems” from a strong and differentiated perspective, the present-tense of the poems lead to a feeling of discovery and rawness throughout: this is not a story she is recounting to a crowd, but living before the eyes of the reader, and the very act of reading the poems feels at times almost intrusive. Most importantly, her ability to “breed monsters” poses the question of whether Circe is curator and creator of the obstacles Odysseus must face. If she indeed breeds these monsters for him to battle, does she create and control the narrative?

Even if Circe does wield some ability to create narrative difficulty, whatever power she has coexists with her helplessness in the face of the flow of established myth. Circe laments before Odysseus’ departure: “Don’t/pretend you won’t leave after all: you leave in the story, and/the story is ruthless.”14 Thus Atwood’s Circe is both victim and perpetrator: she is devastated by the movement of myth, but also seems to possess power as a mythmaker (to make monsters, to make obstacles). To add another complexity: the cycle is both one of transformation and stasis. It begins and ends with poems describing the same landscape, which is unchanging in appearance—only in the end does Circe imagine a different landscape into being. The cycle opens with Circe giving a sparse description of a landscape that has become barren, focusing on her “forest of spines” and the “collapse of petals.”15 She does not surrender her words to the reader or to Odysseus, merely informing the second-person addressee: “You find what is there.”16 By the end of the cycle, Circe has become less untouchable and yields to description as she returns to the same landscape.

14 Atwood, 68.
15 Atwood, 46.
16 Atwood, 46.
Her shift towards vulnerability is not easily won: in the fourth poem, she describes her utter insularity by recounting an exchange with a lover, who is not identified as Odysseus and seems to precede his arrival: “Come away with me, he said, we will live on a desert island/I said, I am a desert island. It was not what he had in mind.” Circe is impervious to all romance, instead acting as a sort of consulting witch to the community, listening for the precious whispers of the earth. Yet the arrival of Odysseus shakes her, and their sexual tangling loosens and makes Circe yearn for the personal in a manner that her Homeric counterpart would not understand. In the final poem, which addresses the island once more, she reassesses her life.

There are two islands
at least they do not exclude each other.
On first I am right and the events run themselves through
almost without us.18

The first island is part of a narrative that plays over and over, “jerkier and faster,” inescapable.19 On this island, she is victim to the same story over and over, seeming to represent the endless retelling of her mythic legacy. The retelling or replaying of this story is beyond her control; she cannot stop it from persisting. But the second island, which has never come to pass, but exists all the same, is an island she imagines. Though it is winter on this island the trees are filled with apples, lovers lap snow from each other’s mouths as a communion and not a battle, the mud on the ground has nothing to do with the history of sexual conquest.20 The second island’s existence is the possibility of freedom from the narrative, the possibility of Circe being able to rewrite her place in the

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17 Atwood, 49.
18 Atwood, 69.
19 Atwood, 69.
20 Atwood, 69.
mythic tradition and displace the centuries of accumulated stories that doom her to be little more than a narrative device within a male quest. The option of the second island is a radical move on the part of Atwood, who uses the duality of the final poem as a proposal of the manner in which the modern female writer can add to the mythic tradition: possibilities and transformation must coexist with the structures which originally bind the story, as Circe’s alternate island cannot erase the centuries of stories that bind her to the primary island. Circe cannot erase her role within the history of conquest, but she can in fact imagine coexisting alternatives.

The act of inclusion, of both islands existing together, is a fascinating management of boundaries. The metaphysical coexistence of the possibility with reality can perhaps be understood through the lens of Anne Carson’s work on ancient female sexuality, “Putting Her In Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire,” which describes the Greek’s view of female sexuality and women as a pollutant. Woman is, in the minds of the Greeks, wet. Hippokrates notes that women flourish in the “wet and soft,” (Vict. 27). Heraklitos in turn declared that “a dry soul is the wisest and best,” making the female “wetness” a lower state of being (B118 VS). This wetness is also the root of female lewdness and promiscuity, and allows them to continue on with sexual intercourse in all conditions for all matters of time. Moreover, Carson notes, “Women Leak” (quite physiologically, but also metaphorically). The woman is not only wet, but also unbounded, polluted, and material rather than form. Aristotle notes that in the act of

22 (As translated by Carson)
23 (As translated by Carson)
24 Carson, 154.
procreation woman provides merely the raw material, and in the *Eumenides* Orestes argues that woman does not create child but rather it is the father who is the true parent (*Metaph.* 986a-22ff). Carson notes that myth also assumes that the female form is highly “pliant, porous, and mutable.” Women overstep boundaries (Pandora opens the jar, Psyche peers at her sleeping husband), as well as violate the masculine form (Gaia urging the castration of Cronus, Agave’s beheading of her son). Women are not governed by the same boundaries as men, for they themselves are boundless.

The supposed boundlessness of women frightened the Greeks, but is powerful as used by Atwood. Atwood appropriates the misogynistic rhetoric of women as shapeless and mutable in order to create a structure in which possibilities coexist with the prescribed structures, where Circe can be both a creator of alternative myth and victim to mythic narrative, all while still making a great deal of sense to the reader. And funnily enough, these contradictions give the collection a sense of weight and modernity. Atwood constructs a female victim who is at times deeply complicit in her victimhood in the midst of a gender war. *You Are Happy* is often featured in critical work along with Atwood’s earlier volume *Power Politics*, in which the heterosexual relationship is at times treated like a violent negotiation. The most famous line of the collection is this: “you fit into me/like a hook into an eye/a fish hook/an open eye.” Both Yarnall and Lauter raise this polyvalent line in discussing “Circe/Mud Poems.” The male fits into the female like a “hook into an eye”—we are to understand that they fit together when he is

25 Carson, 154.
26 Carson, 154
27 Carson, 155.
28 Howells, 46.
inside of her as neatly as the clasp that will not come undone. Yet the reversal of this perfection is swift. This ease, this perfection, is also an act of extreme violence. Still, the phonetic difference between eye and “I” further complicates the matter. Phonetically, the last line reads “an open I” as well as “an open eye,” and the openness of “eye” indicates a willing participation in this violent yet simple act. These lines are cited for a reason, as Circe’s sexual encounters with Odysseus recall a battle between new land and a violent conqueror. She begs him to “let go” as his “mouths [gouges her] face/and neck, fingers groping into [her] flesh,” when they kiss, and as he walks about the island she understands that he “claim[s]/without noticing it/you know how to take.” These interactions seem far more like the fish hook into the eye than anything else, but when Odysseus overpowers Circe’s talisman, a clenched fist she wears around her neck, she settles into openness, and they once more fit together like a clasp and not like a tragedy. Having been overcome by him, she gains a deep tenderness for the body that has overpowered her:

   Your body that includes everything you have done, that you have had done to you and goes beyond it this is not what I want but I want this also.31

Circe in this moment wishes to accept his body and the totality of sins it contains, all of its violence and danger, her prior insularity a thing of the past. Through Odysseus’ consensually ambiguous sexual behavior, something within her has loosened and shaken free, and this interaction is at the root of what leads to the possibility of the alternate island.

30 Atwood, 54-55.
31 Atwood, 60.
The tone of the cycle, however, shifts immediately. Circe, having learned
tenderness, then learns fear. She speaks of a tale told to her by travelers, about a woman
they had loved. They made the woman out of warm dirt on a nearby island, and took
turns fucking her. “His love for her was perfect…no woman since had equaled her,” the
men tell Circe, and she ponders this dilemma.32 “Is this what you would like me to be,
this mud woman? Is this what I would like to be? It would be so simple.”33 There is a
startling dissonance to this poem. It is recounted calmly, though it is a sort of ultimate
dehumanization of the female. Perhaps Atwood in her mud woman alludes to Hesiod’s
Pandora in his Works and Days, who was crafted out of mud as well (Op. 59-82).34
Pandora is simple, a vessel for the wreckage of mankind that contains no sense of
selfhood—the mud woman of Atwood seems just as hollow. Circe notices the stark
horror of the tale, for the poems that follow show her receding into herself, turning the
island to winter, but this moment is important: this is the moment in which she realizes
how simple it might be to surrender, to be a woman who is nothing more than a body, to
be a vessel and not a woman. How beautiful that simplicity might be, to not feel
overwhelmed with personhood. She cannot, however, mold herself into the mud woman,
and so Odysseus must leave, and she will continue on, alone. From this poem, it is
assumed, we get the duality of the title “Circe/Mud Poems”. Yet despite its striking
power, the poem doesn’t ultimately touch Circe, and it could be said that the “mud” in the
title refers not only to the mud of the song of the mud woman but also to the muddiness
of Circe’s origins and behavior.

32 Atwood, 61.
33 Atwood, 61.
Anne Carson notes in discussing women’s pollution that dirt is merely “matter out of place.” In the case of Atwood’s “Circe/Mud Poems,” we can view the misplaced matter or dirt as perhaps the moments in which Circe is won over by the forces that come to pillage her and her lands, the moments in which Circe accepts as well as defies the narrative of male conquest and adventure Odysseus physically imposes upon her form and property. One is reminded not of the feminists of the seventies when reading of Atwood’s Circe, but more recent third wave work, which has greater sympathy for the complexity of gender relationships and focuses not on behavioral ideals but instead on freedom of choice. The third wave 1998 cultural commentary *Bitch: in Praise of Difficult Women*, written by the mildly infamous Elizabeth Wurtzel, celebrates women who remain within male systems of power, albeit as the squeaky wheels. While Wurtzel does good work reclaiming figures such as the femme fatale, an archetype sometimes dismissed by feminists because of her intent to take advantage of established systems of power instead of dismantling them, Wurtzel’s best chapter in the work treats the murder of Nicole Brown by OJ Simpson. She is deeply sympathetic to Nicole, but also examines the decisions she made which tied her forever to her abuser. In discussing the Simpson case, Wurtzel uncovers our cultural fascination with bad love (violence as initiation, violence as a hex) and the perception that some women desire abuse; they are strong

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35 Carson, 158.
38 Wurtzel, 295-382.
enough to take it, they court it.\textsuperscript{39} The allure of violent love looms large, and even Wurtzel admits that she herself is ever so slightly under its spell: “In the fifties,” Wurtzel writes, “a bad relationship meant people killing each other; now it means people avoiding each other….as awful as it sounds, the deep engagement of this sick love seems comparatively appealing to me.”\textsuperscript{40} The violence between male and female that Atwood portrays as an inherent part of coupling seems abhorrent, but we have cultural understanding of its allure as well as its terror. Wurtzel and Atwood do not seek to glorify or celebrate the abuses perpetrated on the female form throughout history, and both work to identify alternate narratives. However, in giving voice to the complexity of gender dynamics that exist in a world where feminism has not resolved the centuries of inequality and abuse that govern culture, both women acknowledge that the reality of heterosexual relationships has failed to live up to the ideals of a post-feminist world.

Atwood’s complex gender relations confuse commentators, and some try to force her into specific labels against her expressed will. Madeline Davies points out that in certain ways Atwood fulfills the French-Algerian playwright and theorist Cixous’ wish of female writing born of the body, but Atwood has directly disavowed the critical utility of Cixous.\textsuperscript{41} Ellen McWilliams writes of Atwood’s appropriation of the bildungsroman in \textit{Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman}, but though such an analysis may typify her novels, “Circe/Mud Poems” does not appropriate genre but rather confounds

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  \item \textsuperscript{39} Wurtzel, 333.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Wurtzel, 397.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Madeline Davies. “Margaret Atwood’s Female Bodies.” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood} ed. Coral Ann Howells.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
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it.\textsuperscript{42} Sharing the same concerns as Adrienne Rich in her 1972 essay “When We Dead Awaken,” Atwood seeks not to steal pieces of the masculine literary tradition to embroider with feminine narratives, but strikes out on her own.\textsuperscript{43} While she may adopt the structure of the \textit{Odyssey}, Atwood does not seek to recreate the epic, but instead to formulate alternatives. The alternate island mentioned in the final poem is significant in its coexistence with the island depicted in the cycle. Carson writes of the ancient female as a destroyer of boundaries, or a creature who can defy boundaries, but these are misogynistic ancient conceptions of sexuality born of fear of feminine power. Atwood appropriates the conception of the female as boundary-breaker in her creation of the two islands in the last poem, turning the threatening boundlessness of the female into a source of power and identity. In doing so, Atwood has created a gendered literary form that exists in relation to a patriarchal literary tradition, but places itself outside of it in form and function. Circe’s alternative island, the island she can only conceive of but not live on, is one of equality and freedom from Circe’s mythological legacy, as well as the legacy of sexualization that governs conquest and the female body. And while this alternative opens up the possibilities of a feminine voice retelling and altering myth, it is clear that this alternative is an iteration that has not yet happened, separate from the dominant myth. Atwood utilizes the power and possibilities of the feminine, but even within her transformative prose, the systems that frustrate Circe’s power retain their strength.

\textsuperscript{42} Ellen Williams. \textit{Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman}. (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009).

\textsuperscript{43} Rich, 18-30.
Circe’s struggles engage a masculine structure in discourse, but they do so from
the outside. Homer’s Circe may participate in such a structure from the inside, but
Atwood’s Circe is not Homer’s Circe, despite the poem’s structural riff on Homer’s epic.
Her voice is her own, and her message is contemporary: in a war of the sexes, what does
your love for your enemy mean? Atwood’s Circe must relive the bitter reality of the first
island again and again, suffering the centuries of mythology that define her through her
utility to the male hero, and in light of this torment the possibility of the second island
may seem a cold comfort. Her refusal to break with the mythic legacy of the male hero
separates Atwood from the politicized rhetoric of her feminist fellows when “Circe/Mud
Poems” was published. The drive towards liberation and empowerment has little room
for the narratives of those who are still mired in the patriarchal structures that had for so
long defined their lives unless there is a hope of escape, of enlightenment and freedom.
But Atwood isn’t interested in the freedom, insularity, and subsistence that characterize
Circe in the early poems of the cycle. She is instead interested in the ways women
participate in and survive within the structures that dehumanize them, how love can still
exist within gendered warfare. Focusing on the female figures who are caught in the mud
of masculine narrative, Atwood posits that it is only through the muddiness of the past
and present that we can begin to imagine the possibilities of a better future, and that the
modern female mythmaker must look back as she moves forward.
Bibliography


