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“I Will Not Be Silenced”: Voice and Autonomy in Madeline Miller’s *Circe*

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Abstract

Adapted from an undergraduate thesis, this paper focuses on the concept of voice—the physical action of speaking or the inaction of staying silent—as a means of autonomy in Madeline Miller’s novel, *Circe* (2018). This paper follows the character of Circe as she learns to use her voice, using five categories to portray this vocal and autonomous journey. The categories of Silence, Whisper, Conversation, Assertion, and Shout trace Circe’s vocal levels as they correspond to her developing autonomy. She begins the novel as someone with no voice and no agency, but by its end, her voice grants her complete autonomy. This paper analyses journey, examining how it occurs and why it matters for Circe’s character.

Keywords: Voice, Autonomy, Madeline Miller, Gender, Mythology

Introduction

Few women in Greek mythology get the chance to speak for themselves. In her 2018 novel *Circe*, Madeline Miller rectifies this, giving her eponymous protagonist a voice and transforming her long-untold story into a declaration of female autonomy. The story follows the goddess Circe—the daughter of Helios—from her unhappy childhood through her exile on the island of Aiaia, where she hones her witchcraft and encounters Odysseus. The novel’s climax sees Circe declare freedom from exile and transform herself from a goddess into a mortal,

achieving her complete autonomy. As Circe learns to be her own person, her voice serves as both a key to and a mark for her growing agency. She begins the novel with no voice of her own, but by its end, she uses her voice to defy her oppressors and to tell her own story.

Circe's voice is her strongest tool to proclaim her growing autonomy; she learns to vocalize what she wants, declaring herself free of family ties and narrating her own mythology. According to Kristeva, the self is someone who can use the pronoun "I" to denote themselves and their actions (*Desire in Language* 87). Circe's entire story is told using this pronoun—albeit in past tense, until the final chapter where she switches to first-person-present tense. As the narrator, Circe metaphorically uses her voice to *tell* the story, but her voice also serves as the linchpin *for* the story. She learns her own autonomy by using her voice to declare her desires rather than embracing the protection offered by silence. Her voice also functions to cast spells and work transformations that allow Circe to break free of the gods' oppression.

While Circe's character uses her voice to break free of the oppression she faces within the novel, Miller's decision to use first-person point-of-view serves as a meta-reclamation of Circe's story from millennia of male storytellers. Pomeroy argues that "the mythology about women is created by men and, in a culture dominated by men, it may have little to do with flesh-and-blood women." (97). In narrating her own story, Miller allows Circe to take back her narrative, peeling away layers of translation and misogyny while giving readers an ancient story from a woman's perspective. Lefkowitz muses that "because [women] have a voice, they are able to speak not only for themselves, but for humankind in general" (*Women in Greek Myth*, 53). The nature of Circe's voice allows her to do both: the entire novel sees Circe learning to speak for herself, to tell her own mythology with the voice of both god and mortal.

The human nature of Circe's voice, contrasted with her status as a Titan goddess, is not exclusive to Miller's novel. In Homer's *Odyssey*, she is referred to as "beautiful, dread Circe, the goddess who can speak in human tongues" (Wilson 11.5-6). According to Yarnall, "dread goddess of human voice" is the most distinctive epithet for Circe (202). Miller intertwines this idea of a goddess with a human voice with Circe's character arc. Her growing power and autonomy are heavily linked with her voice, including the lack thereof in certain situations. As Circe becomes more autonomous, her voice gets continuously stronger until she is unafraid to use it boldly. In examining the important role Circe's voice plays within the novel, the growth her voice undergoes is best captured through five categories¹ that correspond with tone and volume of voice: Silence, Whisper, Conversation, Assertion, and Shout. Though volume levels escalate as they continue, Circe's vocal usage is byzantine, and her autonomy is not achieved linearly.

Silence

The first—and least autonomous—category is that of Silence, wherein the subject does not speak out, whether due to external forces or from fear of consequences. Growing up in her father's house, Circe learns to keep silent to avoid displeasing her family. Her siblings, Perses and Pasiphae, tell her that her voice is "screechy as an owl" and Circe's half-sisters suggest that "she could never speak again" (*Circe* 9-11). From childhood, Circe speaks as little as possible, keeping herself separated from her family to prevent their bullying. She spends hours at her father's feet, "silent so they would not notice and send me away" (17). This life spent being as silent and invisible as possible corresponds with the silence described by Belenky and her fellow

¹ Each category and definition is my own.

authors: “a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority” (15). Circe has no autonomy or identity of her own; she is Helios’ daughter—one of many—who simply drifts aimlessly through his halls trying to be as unobtrusive as possible.

This aimless existence persists after the departure of Circe’s closest brother, Aeetes. She narrates the experience stating, “I was a child again... my throat scraping with loneliness (*Circe* 35). Her description is a visceral response to being alone, but it embodies how Circe’s voice is tied to her sense of self. After Aeetes leaves, Circe stops talking; her entire existence is silence, waiting for others to speak, but never joining the conversation. Ironically, Godart asserts that this type of silence and isolation is necessary for self-fulfillment: “the possibility of self-actualization...rests on...the ability to endure solitude and the ability to listen” (“Silence and Sexual Difference” 17). Circe must endure this Silence so that she can create her own identity, rather than drawing from others. Living in Silence is excruciating for her, because she has not yet realized that her voice can exist for herself.

Before Circe can reach self-actualization through Silence, she befriends Glaucos, a mortal boy. Desperate for someone to talk to, she allows the line between her divinity and his mortality to blur until she believes themselves equal. This perceived equality enables Circe to offhandedly mention meeting Prometheus, Glaucos recoils from the knowledge that she is centuries older than himself. Seeing his horrified reaction, Circe plunges herself back into Silence. She *lies* to Glaucos, telling him, “I’m sorry. It was only a stupid joke. I never met [Prometheus], I only wished to. Never fear, we are the same age” (*Circe* 41). By lying to Glaucos, she is not physically being silent, but metaphorically she is silencing herself, hiding part of her

identity to avoid making Glaucos uncomfortable. This exchange is the first instance of Circe outright lying, though it is by no means the last. Notably, this lie works to silence Circe rather than to protect her like some of her later lies will. In telling Glaucos about Prometheus, Circe tries to position herself as a “creator of knowledge,” but doing so would take her out of the Silent category and the “receiver of knowledge” position Glaucos has placed her in (Belenky, et al 15). The terror Circe feels at the thought of having to endure more loneliness ensures that she will firmly entrench herself in the Silence, so long as Glaucos remains. Moreover, she willingly stays in this position, never again trying to be a creator of knowledge for him, “no matter how many fires I watched him make, I never spoke of my uncle again” (*Circe* 42). She does not speak of her uncle—one of the family members she had a positive experience with—simply to keep Glaucos’s friendship.

Circe continues endeavoring to keep Glaucos, first by transforming him into a god, and then later by transforming Scylla—whom Glaucos had wanted to marry—into the infamous monster, but after the havoc these transformations wreak, Circe confesses to her father. She tries to remove herself from the Silence, but her efforts are futile; Helios forcibly silences her for defying him. She remains silenced, even after Aeetes returns and corroborates Circe’s story, telling Helios that all four of his children with Perse can perform witchcraft. Helios confers with Zeus, and they decide Circe should be exiled, forcibly silencing her through separation. When Helios declares this punishment, Circe states, “I wanted to cry out, to plead, but my breath would not catch. My voice, ever thin, was gone” (76). She cannot speak at the horror of returning to that loneliness, but she *wanted to*. She wants to fight back against this judgement, but she is overcome with shock and fear. Naively, she believes that Aeetes will speak up on her

behalf, "Aeetes will speak for me, I thought. But...he only looked back with all the rest" (76). Circe finally realizes that she cannot rely on anyone else to be her voice: she must speak for herself. Before he leaves, Aeetes tells Circe "It is your own fault for confessing" (78). He does not realize that although Circe is being punished, she is clawing her way out of the Silence. She is no longer content to silence herself for the sake of others, but finding her voice is not without its own consequences.

Despite the intended punishment, exile allows Circe's autonomy to develop and grow. She learns to appreciate using her voice simply for herself, though her loneliness is mitigated by occasional visits from the god, Hermes, and from Circe's own pet lioness. After her pet's death and the end of her relationship with Hermes, however, Circe is once again alone. She does her best to avoid sinking back into the Silence: she sings to herself, remarking that "it was the best company I had" (190). One day, as she sings, sailors arrive on the island and Circe welcomes them. She gives them food and answers their questions, but once they realize that she is alone, they strike. "The man threw me back against the wall...I opened my mouth to cry out the spell, but he jammed his arm against my windpipe and the sound was choked off. I could not speak. I could not breathe" (195). Circe's rapist forcibly silences her, effectively rendering her powerless. Despite feeding the sailors magical drugs, without her voice to speak the spell, Circe can do nothing until the man finishes and loosens his grip. Then and only then can she cast her spell, "I drew breath, and spoke my word" (*Circe* 196). As she transforms the captain and his sailors she remarks, "he screamed, and his men screamed with him. It went on for a long time" (196). This screaming serves as poetic justice; even though the sailor's still have their voices, they are as useless as Circe's was. Though she takes revenge upon the sailors, Circe cannot

regain the bodily autonomy they stole. Aiaia was Circe's sanctuary from the Silence, a place where she could use her voice however she pleased, but in this attack the protection afforded by her magic was taken with her voice.

Whisper

Within the category of the Whisper, the subject is aware that they possess a voice, but they rarely use it for fear of retaliation or judgment. Occasionally, the subject will speak, but they are more comfortable listening to others. Circe transitions from the Silence into the Whispering through the punishment of her uncle, Prometheus. When the spectacle has ended and she alone remains in the hall, she speaks with him, describing her voice as "thin in the echoing room" (20). Prometheus opens his eyes at her voice but gives no further reaction to the sound. This lack of reaction emboldens Circe to feed him and ask about the mortals he defied Zeus for. Though brief, this exchange marks Circe's emergence from the Silence: she uses her voice to sate her curiosity. Despite her fear of being discovered, she speaks to her infamous uncle. Small as it is, this is Circe's first act in direct defiance of the gods: showing kindness to someone they condemned. Even this is described by Circe as "more than I had ever done in my life" (23). Through this act, Circe realizes that she does not have to live Silently. Her emergence is slow and painstaking, but she moves out of the Silence, becoming someone capable of Whispering. Her progress is often hindered, and she occasionally backslides, but from this moment onwards, Circe moves inexorably towards gaining her full autonomy, towards *having a voice*, both literally and metaphorically.

Circe stagnates at a Whisper for some time following the birth of her brother, Aeetes. Uncharacteristically, she speaks up and asks to raise him, which she is granted. They grow close and she notes that “he...did not flinch at my frail voice” (27). Though she has finally realized that she *has* a voice, it is still “frail.” As Aeetes grows, Circe lets him do the speaking for both of them. She attests, “Every moment he was with me, I felt a rushing in my throat, which was my love for him, so great sometimes I could not speak” (27). Her love for Aeetes prevents her from using her voice; she quiets herself so that she can listen to him. This nurturing, according to Rawlinson, has been a historical tactic used to confine women to the private-domestic sphere, where their voices are neutralized (*Just Life* x-xi). Circe raises Aeetes as her own child, but she comments that “even as a child, he seemed to understand what others did not” (*Circe* 28). She depends on Aeetes to share these understandings with her, using her voice as nothing more than a tool with which to speak to him. *Women’s Ways of Knowing* describes this predicament as a place of received knowledge, wherein “women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own” (15). With Aeetes there, Circe never strives to create her own knowledge. She trusts him to teach her what to say and how to think, and in doing so, she never breaks free from Whispering.

After Aeetes departs for his own kingdom, Circe remains in the Whispering by nurturing Glaucos. When she fears that she will never see Glaucos again, Circe asks her grandmother to help. Tethys makes Circe swear she will not sleep with him but grants her wish to bless Glaucos’ fishing nets. With Glaucos, Circe merely listens to his stories, never telling her own, but she still elects to speak up on his behalf to prevent herself from falling back into the Silence. After his

nets have been blessed, Glaucos thanks Circe, even when she tries to demur that all the power came from her grandmother. He unequivocally states, “you were the one who persuaded her” (43). In speaking up on Glaucos’ behalf Circe roots herself firmly as a Whisperer as well as Glaucos’ caretaker. Lefkowitz observes that the gods can and will feel emotional about certain humans, but that they do not try to make any sort of permanent changes in their lives (*Greek Gods, Human Lives* 83). However, Circe, deep in the Whisper, *does* try to change Glaucos’ life permanently, not because she cares for mortals, but because she is terrified of allowing herself to fall back into the Silence.

Realizing that Glaucos will die eventually and leave her alone, Circe conspires to change him into a god. Circe sees these actions as a way to avoid returning to Silence rather than anything defiant. If she succeeds, Glaucos will stay hers *and* she will be freed from her oath to her grandmother. She tries to transform Glaucos using *pharmaka*—herbs grown in places where the blood of the gods was spilled—though she does not know how the plants work. In a fit of rage, she tears up the flowers and suddenly understands that she must feed him the sap. This intuition removes Circe from her role as a “receiver of knowledge” and places her into the category of subjective knowledge, where knowledge is “subjectively known or intuited” (Belenky 15). After feeding Glaucos the sap, Circe commands his transformation, chanting, “your truest self. Let it be” (*Circe* 50). Though Circe is using her voice, it is used only for others, quietly. Once Glaucos metamorphosizes, she takes him to her family, armed with excuses, but no one questions them. Circe tells no one—not even Glaucos—her role in his transformation. As she laments, “I longed to tell him that it was I who had given him such a gift, but I saw how it pleased him to believe his godhead wholly his own and I did not want to take that from him”

(52). Even after *rewriting* Glaucos' fate in an act that only the most powerful gods could accomplish, she silences herself for him. She listens while he uses his newly divine voice to proclaim his own power. At this point, Circe is only just beginning to emerge from the Silence and its loneliness; the presence of Glaucos prevents that loneliness, so she stays at a Whisper.

Circe's exile allows her to break free of the Silence, but the Whisper persists through occasional visits from the god Hermes. During one visit, he explains why Circe's voice sounds so frail to the other gods: she has the voice of a mortal. He details, "Most gods have voices of thunder and rocks...to us, mortals sound faint and thin" (95). Circe is surprised by this revelation but observes that she also feels "something almost like recognition" (96). As her exile continues, Circe relies on Hermes for news—though she never fully trusts him. Between news and gossip, Hermes provides Circe with a warning about her voice. He tells her, "if you are ever among men...they won't fear you as they fear the rest of us" (96). Static within the category of a Whisper, this warning brings no significant change in Circe's life. She depends on Hermes, even learning the name of her own island, Aiaia, from him. Yarnall discusses possible derivatives for the name, one of which was from "Aiai," an exclamation of extreme distress (*Transformations of Circe* 202). While this name ostensibly comes from the exclamations of men as they are transformed into pigs, at this point in the novel, these infamous transformations have not yet happened. Rather, Aiaia's name embodies the distress Circe feels upon arriving at her island, under the weight of loneliness and the knowledge that she will never leave. Even alone, Circe has a voice to raise, and by crying out in desperation she avoids returning to Silence.

Though Circe occasionally escapes the Whisper on Aiaia, the birth of her son Telegonus, returns her to the category. She uses her voice to entertain Telegonus with stories of his father, Odysseus, but Circe sanitizes these stories, “I found myself hesitating, omitting, altering. With my son’s face before me, their brutalities shone through as they never had before” (*Circe* 273). As a result, Telegonus grows up believing his father is a noble hero. Afraid of what Telegonus will think of the truth, Circe quiets herself and simply tells him what he wants to hear. Once again, she silences herself to make men more comfortable. Rather than presenting Odysseus as the fabled “man of twists and turns,” Circe allows Telegonus to believe his father is an honorable man (Fagles 1.1). Throughout the novel, Circe has grown; at times she escapes the Whisper, but for the sake of her son, she places herself back into that category. She knows that she has a powerful voice, but she regresses back into Whispering because she is once again afraid of losing someone she loves.

Conversation

Though the categories of Conversation and Whispering are similar, a Conversational subject, still fearful of retaliation, will speak up anyway. Circe’s first emergence into the Conversation comes through the realization that Glaucos will eventually die. She asks her father if apotheosis is possible for mortals and is told, “you know it is not, unless it is in their stars already” (*Circe* 45). Circe approaches her *father* for this information and though she does not tell him *why*, she asks him all the same. She becomes more comfortable using her voice, even if only on another’s behalf. After speaking with Helios, Circe returns to her grandmother, again demanding help. Again, Circe is told apotheosis is impossible, but this time, she asks if there is any *pharmaka* that could change Glaucos. Immediately, Tethys tells her to “go from here, and

let me never hear you speak of that wickedness again” (46). She tries to silence Circe, to pretend pharmaka will not exist if they do not speak about it. In the scheming halls of Helios, power is held by those with information and those astute enough to find it; by asking, Circe is seeking information that could lead to another war between the gods. Circe’s focus is on Glaucos, not war, but she defiantly refuses to silence herself. Instead, she manipulates to get the information she seeks; dressing up and plying her uncles with wine and smiles, while questioning them to learn where pharmaka might have grown. Circe is not yet at a level where she will use her voice outright, but she is speaking up. She hides her intentions and speaks only to prevent Glaucos from dying, but she uses her voice to obtain something she wants.

This emerging voice almost regresses to Silence in exile. Terrified that more punishment is coming Circe states, “if anyone came, I would only be able to scream, and a thousand nymphs before me knew what good that did” (*Circe* 83). Though finally recognizing her own voice, Circe believes it useless without anyone around to hear. Her fear abates as time passes and she begins to claim the island for her own. Solitude becomes the grounds for the self-actualization Godart and Irigaray spoke of. As Irigaray argues, “to open up to the future, we must learn to listen in silence. And to do so, we must be capable of solitude” (*I Love to You* 116). Circe’s exile is different from her solitude at home because she stops relying on others to break it, and instead trusts herself to be alone. She uses her voice for her own sake, noting, “I sang, which had never been allowed before, since my mother said I had the voice of a drowning gull” (*Circe* 85). On Aiaia, Circe’s voice becomes something that exists for herself. She speaks and sings as much as she pleases with no one to silence her, but she remains in the Conversation because

she is still afraid to use her voice against those in charge; instead, she practices her witchcraft in solitude.

After a short while on Aiaia, this solitude is interrupted when Circe is summoned to help with the birth of her sister's child. Circe could reject Pasiphae's invitation, but she does not. By accepting, Circe is refusing to bind herself completely to the Silence and solitude of Aiaia, remarking, "this was a chance to show [Pasiphae] what I had become" (106). Upon her arrival, she learns the horrific nature of Pasiphae's child—the Minotaur—and uses her witchcraft to contain his bloodlust to only one season per year. Instead of being cowed by her sister, Circe forces Pasiphae to tell her how the Minotaur was created. When Pasiphae claims kinship through their witchcraft, Circe rebuffs her, declaring "I am not like you" (152). Though Circe is an exiled disgrace, she rejects Pasiphae on her own terms. Cut off from her family with no kingdom of her own, Circe has her voice, and she uses it like a knife, separating herself from Pasiphae. Her voice also kindles a short-term relationship with Daedalus. After her argument with Pasiphae he is waiting, and tells Circe, "Say but one word, and I am gone;" she tells him to stay (153). Daedalus places the power in her hands, and she chooses him. Circe voices her desires, but she does not try to change their situation. She can argue with Pasiphae, but she cannot change Daedalus' life nor her own. She remains in a middle ground with her voice, using it for her wants, but only going so far.

Circe remains in this middle ground of Conversation as ships continue coming to Aiaia—most of them filled with would-be rapists and other attackers. Unafraid to transform these men through witchcraft, Circe never tries to extend her power beyond the island. Another ship comes and she transforms its sailors, stating, "I did not wait anymore for them to...come at me.

I raised my staff, I spoke the word. They went crying to their pen like all the rest” (205). Nothing is different about this crew until another man comes looking for them, Odysseus, who makes pleasant conversation about his wife and his experiences during the Trojan War. Circe is intrigued by this prophesied sailor, who talks with her instead of challenging her. Eventually, she invites him to bed, boldly taking the opportunity to communicate what she wants. He consents but makes her swear on the River Styx not to harm him. Circe swears this willingly, using her own voice to bind herself. After they sleep together, Circe changes his men back into their human forms, inviting them to stay in Aiaia and “be welcome” (216). Odysseus becomes her companion, telling her of his actions in the war, practical and dishonorable though they were. After one such story, Circe thinks to herself, “good Patroclus...might have said, Sir, you are no true hero...You do no noble deeds in the gleaming sunlight. But...I knew what sort of deeds could be done in the sun’s sight. I said nothing” (222). Just like with Glaucos, Circe remains silent. This time, however, she does not allow Odysseus to *become* her own voice as she had with Aeetes and Glaucos. She understands that she cannot keep him forever and decides to enjoy his company while she has it. Circe remains Conversational because she is unafraid to ask for her desires, albeit none that instigate permanent changes. On Aiaia she is mostly left to her own devices but raising her voice too loudly and asking for the wrong thing could bring the wrath of the gods down upon her.

Her fear of the gods continues, especially after the birth of her son, Telegonus. Knowing that Athena will kill him if he leaves Aiaia and that Telegonus will try to leave, Circe does something dangerous. She breaks her exile and confronts one of the primordial gods, Trygon, to make a weapon from his poisoned tail. When she meets the creature, he speaks directly into

her thoughts. Despite knowing of this power, she confesses, “hearing that creature in my mind turned my belly to water” (291). Circe is terrified of her actions and this creature who can bring untold pain to even the most powerful gods. Though Trygon speaks into her mind, she must speak aloud, but he never tries to silence her as she does so. Instead, he listens while she pleads with him. By the end of this encounter, she emerges as the first person to successfully challenge him, earning a weapon of immense power. When she tells him that she “cannot bear this world a moment longer” he responds, “*then, child, make another*” (Circe 295). In learning to vocalize what she wants, Circe is given the power to remake the world. Despite this, she is not acting for herself, but rather for her son, to keep him safe while she remains in exile. She will use her voice to risk her life and her eternity for her son, but not for herself, not yet.

Assertion

In contrast to the self-sacrificing subject of the Conversation, at the level of Assertion, the subject is willing to raise their voice, though they still fear retribution. Circe reaches this level after transforming Glaucos, when she goes to Helios and proclaims, “I want to marry Glaucos. Will you allow it?” (55). Circe asks Helios’ permission, but prefaces with her own declaration that *she wants* to marry Glaucos; her father’s permission is secondary to her desires. Glaucos, however, repudiates Circe’s declarations of love. Believing Scylla the only obstacle to marriage with Glaucos, Circe transforms her as well. Unlike the transformation with Glaucos, Circe speaks no words at all, simply envisioning Scylla with “all her ugliness...revealed” (57). Her spell—though nonverbal—works, and Scylla is transformed into a rabid monster. When Circe hears of the carnage, she confesses to Helios before his court, professing “I used wicked *pharmaka* to make Glaucos a god, and then I changed Scylla...I did it selfishly, in bitter

heart, and I would bear the consequence” (63). Circe could have lived in Helios’ halls for eternity, and no one would have suspected her, but she confesses. She attests that the transformations are her own selfish doing. Despite having no reason to lie, Helios does not believe her, and grows angrier when she keeps insisting. His anger is not because he believes her, but because she publicly defies him. For this defiance, Helios lets his power loose, scorching Circe and everything around her. Finally, burnt beyond recognition, Circe falls to his feet and begs, “forgive me. I was wrong to believe such a thing” (65). Though she has reached the level of Assertion, her voice can only go so far; she must still face consequences for her words.

Circe maintains this Assertion despite its consequences during an encounter with her niece, Medea. By this time, Circe has spent many years in exile, occasionally visited by Hermes but otherwise alone. One night, a ship comes, bearing the taint of murder and seeking an ancient rite of purification. The laws of the ritual dictate that Circe cannot know who she is purifying or what they have done, “it was forbidden for me to question them...my part was only yes or no” (169). Rather than refusing them, Circe accepts their plea. After they have been purified, Circe learns they are Jason and Medea, fleeing from Aeetes after the murder of Medea’s brother. Circe prophesies that Medea will not be welcomed in Jason’s kingdom, that eventually he will scorn her. Though her voice had been silenced by the ritual, Circe now Asserts her prophecy, unable to stop, “my words were tumbling out, catching fire as they went” (178). She does not back down from her prophecy, even when Medea calls her existence “a living death” and angrily leaves (179). Not long after they depart, Aeetes arrives, demanding that Circe give Medea to him and threatening to punish her when he learns that Medea is gone.

Again, however, Circe pushes back, despite the consequences. She declares, “No. In Colchis you may work your will. But this is Aiaia” (182). For the first time Circe resists Aeetes, rather than caving to his will. Confident in her own power, she no longer lets him silence her. Through these Assertions, however, she loses her brother and the naive belief that he cared for her. Aeetes leaves in anger and Circe never sees him again. Even though Circe has learned to use her voice and to stand up for herself, she is still left alone and exiled on Aiaia.

Recognition of her own voice and power does little to assuage Circe’s loneliness, though she does not let the fear of this loneliness keep her from using her voice, even to end her relationship with Hermes. When Circe complains that nymphs are being exiled to her island, Hermes “jokes” that she should take them to bed and disregard any nymph’s attempt to run away screaming. At this, Circe immediately ends their relationship, declaring “I am finished with you. I have been finished a long time. Let me not see you again” (188). She knows that aside from Hermes’ occasional visits she is completely alone, but she is willing to endure loneliness to keep control over her own voice. She could have waved off Hermes’ remark, but she confronted him, ending their relationship. Hermes still comes to Aiaia, but the statement, “let me not see you again” ensures that he is never again in her presence. Even though she claims, “I could sense him just out of sight” Circe never physically sees him (188). In this, there is a mutual recognition: Hermes might be the more powerful god, but Circe is not someone to be trifled with. She holds enough power on her own to enforce her will, at least upon Aiaia.

Circe’s power extends not just to Hermes, but to other Olympians as well. When Odysseus and his men have been on Aiaia for a year, Apollo comes with a message for Circe to give. At first, he tries to silence her, stating “My brother warned me about your voice. I think it

will be better if you speak as little as possible" (237). Circe does not stand for this, declaring, "I will not be silenced on my own island" (237). She will neither let Apollo silence her nor will she silence herself for his sake. She has no control over his presence on Aiaia, but she refuses to let him have control over herself. There is little she can do however, when Apollo forces a vision upon her detailing how Odysseus needs to get home. After, Apollo tells Circe that she should be honored, because all his vessels "must have prophecy in their blood" (238). He overrides Circe's autonomy, forcing her to be a conduit for his prophecy. Powerful as she is, in this moment, Circe is simply something for him to use. Just as Apollo's most famous conduit, the Oracle of Delphi, merely served as a messenger from the gods, so does Circe. She has no power over the vision she is given, only whether to relay the message, which she does; she tells Odysseus everything he needs to know to get home to Ithaca. Once again, she chooses to speak, despite knowing what it will cost her; this time, she knows that she will not backslide into the Silence when he is gone.

Secure in herself, Circe remains at an Assertion after Odysseus' departure and faces pregnancy alone. She sends the nymphs away, declaring "this is for me" (*Circe* 248). Before, this declaration would have been ignored, but by now they know the things Circe's voice is capable of, so when she tells them to leave, they scatter. Both pregnancy and Telegonus' birth are excruciating for Circe, but only after Telegonus suffers several near-fatal "accidents" does she realize that someone is trying to harm her son. She confronts them head-on, proclaiming "you who would try to kill my child, come forth...and speak to my face" (256). Her command summons the goddess Athena, who demands that Circe hand Telegonus over, which she adamantly refuses. Circe reasons that Athena cannot kill Telegonus directly and vows to stop

her, naming herself Athena's sworn enemy. Though Athena is far more powerful, Circe asserts, "you do not know what I can do" (261). Far from being the silent figure at her father's feet; now, she is willing to challenge Olympians, using her voice as a weapon. Circe creates two spells to protect Telegonus and in enacting them proclaims, "Athena would kill my child, and so I defend him. Be witness now to the power of Circe, witch of Aiaia" (264). Not only has Circe's voice grown from something frail and thin into something so powerful it changes the world simply at its sound, but *she* has also changed. Athena had named her "daughter of Helios" and tied Circe's identity to her father (260). In casting her spells, however, Circe identifies herself as "witch of Aiaia," a title held only by herself, one she earned using her voice.

After Telegonus' disastrous attempt to meet Odysseus, Circe's voice remains at an Assertion, and she maintains her identity as "Witch of Aiaia." She is immediately suspicious of Telemachus and Penelope and wastes no time in confronting Telemachus about his intentions. She declares, "I know a son is bound to avenge his father's murder" to which Telemachus responds, "that only holds if he was murdered" (313). Though taken aback by this answer, Circe does not relax, stating "you should understand that any attempt to harm my son would fail" (313). Despite the emotional turmoil accompanying the return of her son, the news of Odysseus' death, and the meeting of Odysseus' wife and son, Circe is not overcome. She keeps her head and her voice, demanding answers from Telemachus. Upon giving these answers, Telemachus asks for answers of his own, for her to tell him about Odysseus. Circe divulges that "I did not even consider telling him the versions I told Telegonus, with their happy endings and non-fatal wounds. [Telemachus] was not my child; he was not a child at all, but a man full-grown, who wanted his inheritance" (335). Throughout the novel, Circe struggles with her voice

and allows herself to be silenced for the comfort of others. Here, with Telemachus, she accepts that she must speak her truths, no matter how painful they are. She tells him exactly the kind of man that his father was, not some noble hero, but a schemer who delighted in bloodshed. By this point in the novel, Circe understands the damage her censored stories caused, and she decides not to whitewash her tales as she had done for Telegonus.

Shout

The most autonomous vocal level is the Shout, where the subject will raise their voice regardless of any kind of retaliation. By the time Penelope and Telemachus come to Aiaia, Circe has finally reached this level. She demands to know why they came, learning that Penelope brought them to keep Telemachus safe from Athena. When Hermes comes a few days later, bringing news that Athena requires Circe to lower her wards, she appears to acquiesce, stating that the spells will take three days to undo. This is later revealed to be a lie to give Penelope and Telemachus the time they need to talk to each other. It is a testament to Circe's growth that she unashamedly lies to Hermes, an Olympian, without fear of retribution from the other gods. Telegonus worries that Athena will be angry when she finds out, but Circe responds, "these are gods. You must keep your tricks close or you will lose everything" (362). She has no intention of Athena finding out, but she is powerful enough to risk it. Circe no longer confines herself to silence or half-truths, instead, she fully embraces her role as a "creator of knowledge," choosing how to disseminate that knowledge (*Women's Ways of Knowing* 15). She accepts her own authority, above anyone else's; as she tells Telegonus, "my spells are governed by my will" (*Circe* 362). While Athena can demand that Circe take down the spells, Athena is powerless to remove them. Likewise, Circe can agree to this demand, but she can do so on her

own terms. Just like the spells themselves, Circe's voice functions as both an offensive and defensive weapon.

This idea of Circe's voice as a weapon is reinforced when she summons Helios to Aiaia. She demands an end to her exile, declaring "I am your daughter and would be free" (378). Helios tries to burn her as when she was a child, but Circe stands tall, threatening "I will see you torn down, Father, before I will be jailed for your convenience any longer" (379). The Silent Circe at the novel's beginning would have been terrified to experience her father's wrath the way she does here, but this Shouting Circe is not cowed. She knows the power her voice holds and is unafraid of any consequences it might bring. Ostriker asserts that "throughout most of her history, the woman writer has had to state her self-definitions in code form, disguising passion as piety, rebellion as obedience" ("The Thieves of Language" 69). Existence in code characterized Circe from the Silence to the Assertion; she always feared retribution. Now, she states her intentions boldly, proclaiming that to secure her freedom she will expose the Titan's treason to Zeus. In exile, Circe has grown infinitely more powerful as a witch, but spells and potions do not grant her freedom, rather her voice does. She demands freedom not just from Aiaia, but from Helios, stating, "I will do as I please, and when you count your children, leave me out" (*Circe* 379). Poetic justice shines as Circe uses her voice to sever the family ties that had bound her in Silence. Here, as the novel draws to a close, Circe does not merely ask for what she wants, but she demands it and disregards the consequences.

Though often presenting as something defiant, the Shout is also refusing to hide unsavory parts of one's own story. After negotiating with Helios, Circe and Telemachus take the spear of Trygon to confront Scylla. Once they are safe, she tells him her own mythology, of

Prometheus, Daedalus and Ariadne, even of Scylla and how she had created her. Eventually, Circe tells him her final story, “of the first men who had come to my island, and what I had done to them in return” (397-8). She bares her trauma to Telemachus and tells him of her own savagery, neither apologizing nor making excuses for it. When he asks why she told him, Circe responds, “I want you to have the truth, whatever comes” (398). Whether her story makes him run away or if he stays, Circe refuses to silence herself for the comfort of others. She tells her story unashamedly, knowing that whatever happens, her actions are her own. Though this confrontation is not as dramatic or god-defying as that with Helios, it is just as important. Circe is finally her own person with her own voice, unreliant on anyone else. She wants Telemachus to stay, but for him to do so, she needs to tear down all her barriers; he must know her, with all her faults and flaws. She cannot continue living a half-truth in regard to herself, and she is strong enough to endure Telemachus’ rejection, should it come.

Though not focused on anything Circe says, the last line of the novel nods to the importance Circe voice has played throughout. After having a vision of her future with Telemachus—her future as a human—Circe narrates, “All my life I have been moving forward, and now I am here. I have a mortal’s voice, let me have the rest” (405). Circe knows *exactly* what she wants: to be mortal and to spend her life with someone she loves as their equal. She explicitly makes the connection between the life that she wants and the voice she has always had. Though the last chapter of the novel has no dialogue, Circe’s narrative voice details her vision of the future and her reasons for transformation. Even without speaking, she remains at a Shout because she is willing to face any consequence to achieve her desires. She is no longer Silenced and denied autonomy; by the novel’s end, Circe is a fell witch with a powerful voice.

This identity does not change, despite her mortality, because this is *her*, not an identity based on anyone else.

Conclusion

In an age where the repackaging of mythological narratives is increasingly more common, Miller's novel serves as a reminder to critically examine these new-old texts. Examining the journey Circe undergoes as she learns to utilize her own voice is crucial for understanding the development of Circe's autonomy. In turn, understanding the development of Circe's autonomy allows a reader to understand her as a realistic character. For millennia, Circe has existed merely as a secondary character or as a literary trope. Miller's novel presents Circe as a woman who makes rash decisions, who wrestles with her guilt, and who ultimately decides who she wants to be.

When the reader is first introduced to Circe she is quiet and passive. When she shows kindness to Prometheus and tells him her name, she metaphorically raises her voice for the first time. After that point, though she often backslides into Silence or a Whisper, she moves inexorably forward until her voice is the final tool for the achievement of her autonomy. By the end of the novel—when she knows who she is and what she wants—she is unafraid to use her voice to defy her father and everyone else who would seek to control her. She explicitly ties the voice she has always had to the mortal she wants to be. Throughout the novel, Circe's mortal voice was a mark of separation from her family and the other gods, but every major occurrence relates to this voice. The novel's first-person point-of-view reinforces this vocal emphasis.

When Circe finally achieves autonomy, she uses her voice to become the person she *wants* to be.

Meta-textually, the novel serves as a bold reclamation of Circe's character. For millennia she existed as a secondary character in *The Odyssey*. Miller's novel allows Circe to tell her own story from her own perspective, providing sympathetic reasons for Circe's most infamous transformations. Instead of being a sadistic witch who transforms and slaughters sailors just for cruel pleasure, Miller's Circe is a woman trying to protect herself. *Circe* gives her titular character a chance to break away from the centuries of male storytellers and set the record straight. With this novel, Circe is allowed to exist as a person in and of herself, not just as a character in Odysseus' story.

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